

ANALYSIS OF SOME OF THE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE  
TO MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Problem

Marriages which last full term are becoming increasingly less prevalent in modern American society. The rate of divorce has steadily increased throughout the last decade. From 1961-1967 the percentage of divorced individuals in the total marriage population has increased from 23.2% to 25.6% (U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, 1967). When this figure is increased by the number of desertions (3% of all marriages), marital murder, and the approximately 15-20% of all marriages that are judged unhappy (Saxton 1968: 303-304), one observes a rather significant number of dissatisfied marriages in American society. These figures point to a seeming inability of a large percentage of people to live together in marriage.

In studying the interactional problems created by marriage, one sees many of the interactional problems of man in society, and in studying how these problems can be resolved in marriage one can offer solutions for the "larger" problems of man. One might assume from the divorce statistics that a sizeable population never finds consistent satisfaction in the area of intimate human interaction.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is: (a) to explore conflict resolution in marriage; (b) to gain a greater understanding of the problems that face married couples when they come into conflict; (c) to delineate those factors conducive to constructive conflict resolution behavior. From this can come

the means to explore methods of counseling marriage partners to handle their conflicts more efficiently and healthily. The focus will be on creating a model of conflict resolution. Information derived from the model will have implications for both couples who are attempting to deal with marital conflict, marriage counselors and family life educators.

#### Proposition and Assumptions

The general proposition of this thesis is that a major reason for marital failure is the individual's inability to live with conflict. The second proposition is that it is not conflict itself that creates dissolution in marriage as much as the inability to live with it. Thirdly it is proposed that conflict needs to be approached for its potentialities to create intimacy. It is assumed for this study that human interactions produce conflict and always will. The study of how these interactions can be approached, so that conflict can be resolved, is the purpose of this thesis.

People are taught to either control conflict, ignore it, or avoid it rather than face it. According to Coser (1956):

There is a tendency to suppress rather than to allow expressions of hostile feeling. In close-knit groups, feelings of hostility tend, therefore, to accumulate and hence to intensify. If conflict breaks out in a group that has consistently tried to prevent expression of hostile feelings, it will be particularly intense (P. 308).

Man is ill at ease with many of his basic needs and drives. Most difficult for him is the handling of his aggressions, as they have great anti-social aspects, and their expression has taught him to be wary of them, as they can cause great social disapproval. However, in seeking strict control of the aggressive needs of man, society has neglected

their healthy aspects. The purpose of this thesis is to explore in part some of the healthy aspects of conflict.

### The Study

The thesis approaches conflict solution from a psychological point of view. Theoretical propositions from motivation theory, communication theory and interactional theory are all cited. The approach is not limited to one theoretical framework as marriage lends itself to more than one approach. It is necessary to attempt a fusion of multiple theories or use an eclectic approach in studying marital interaction if only in the argument that new approaches cannot be achieved until they are tried. In approaching marriage one is faced with two individuals in continual interaction with each other. Their interaction is however dependent on the personalities of the two individuals and the motivational behavior they pursue in the marriage system, within their social context.

It is the judgment of the author that at the current time there is a greater need for the formulation of analytical models of marital conflict and conflict solution than for empirical studies. Therefore, this research will attempt to build models of both marital conflict and marital solutions and generate hypotheses for testing. The hypotheses will not be tested but will be presented for use as the next step of research on marital conflict and conflict solutions.

The second chapter will consist of the review of literature. This will be followed in chapter three by a presentation of a theoretical model of marital interaction and conflict. In chapter three conflict behavior will be studied from a psychological interactional view. In chapter four

a discussion of factors relating to healthy conflict resolution will be presented. This chapter attempts to analyze aspects of resolution behavior that are of therapeutic interest to marriage counselors, who must help couples with marital conflict. In chapter five, hypotheses will be put forth for future testing and the thesis as a whole will be evaluated for aspects that lend themselves to added research.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter presents a review of the literature deemed pertinent to the study of marital conflict and its resolution. The major aim of the thesis is to present a study of factors involved in marital conflict resolution rather than causes of marital conflict. The causes of conflict will be designated a lesser priority than resolution.

The following section will cover several models of conflict from the sociological and psychological perspectives. The second section will look at the functions of conflict. The third section will involve a delineation of the dynamics of healthy conflict solution. The final section will be presented on the goals of conflict.

#### Models of Conflict

One of the most celebrated analyses from the psychological perspective of marital conflict and its resolution came from Spiegel (1957). Using a social role concept, Spiegel postulated the family as existing along an equilibrium-disequilibrium continuum. Complementarity of role fulfillment and expectation between marital partners affects the position which they occupy along the continuum. Complementarity of role fulfillment occurs when the expectation each partner has about the fulfillment of roles within the marriage is in agreement. Should complementarity be disrupted, disequilibrium occurs. Stability or equilibrium is brought back by a restoration of complementarity. This restoration does not imply a failure to change as the restoration of complementarity may come about due to a change in the expectancies of role fulfillment of either individual. Resolution

of conflict comes about either by role induction or role modification. Either a person's role behavior is induced or it is modified to unite both partners needs and expectancies.

Lewin (1948), the field theorist, sees marriage as an intimate group of two individuals each with his own field of existence. The interaction between them involves not only their individual fields but creates a new "marriage field" for both of them. According to Lewin (1948): "The essence of a group is not the similarity or dissimilarity of its members but their interdependence " (p. 84). Conflict or its absence depends on: (a) need satisfaction within the group; (b) territorial freedom within the group; (c) symmetry and complementarity of goals and empathy within the group; (d) freedom to leave the group. When these conditions work against individuals in a marriage, tension will result and build up over time (Lewin, 1948: 89-90). Marriage is a group that satisfies needs. The extent to which these needs are not satisfied gives potential to the extent to which conflict will arise. Not only is conflict seen as caused by internal pressures from the individual but from the outside pressures of society. The three aspects of needs in marriage are: (a) role fulfillment needs; (b) sexual needs and; (c) security needs (Lewin, 1948: 91-93). Needs become central when they are unsatisfied and peripheral when they are satisfied. Unsatisfied needs tend to dominate, thus increasing the chances of conflict (Lewin, 1948: 92).

Landis (1968), sees the resolution of conflict dependent upon the maturity of the marriage partners. How conflict is created and handled depends on the variables of the individual personalities involved in the

marriage and the interaction of the individuals with the marital environment. The personalities of the individuals contains their needs and their means of fulfilling them. Landis adds a new dimension to conflict as he brings in personality and examines its role in the social interaction between two people.

Three main methods of handling conflict are presented by Landis (1968): (a) Accommodation; (b) Compromise and; (c) State of Hostility. Conflict is seen as a difference between individuals, and resolution as adjustment to those differences.

A more interactional approach is that used by Hayley (1958) and Jackson (1957, 1968) based on communication theory. Communication behavior defines a relationship into either: (a) a symmetrical relationship or; (b) a complementary relationship. A symmetrical relationship is one in which the participants attempt to be equal to each other. It therefore tends to be competitive although in varying degrees of intensity. A complementary relationship is one in which the participants are on different levels; one dominates and the other is subservient. A third form of relationship is the parallel relationship. This consists of an alternation between symmetric and complementary relationships. No relationship within a healthy family matrix is constantly either symmetric or complementary, as relationships are in a constant state of flux, depending on the situation or context of that relationship. Healthy relationships within a family matrix are considered to be those which are parallel. The members vary at any given time in their modes of relationship, but they have no difficulty in adjusting to the constant ebb and flow within the system. Maneuvering takes place in

order to establish a relationship. The extent to which this maneuvering is successful determines whether conflict will result. Jackson (1968), classifies families by the maneuvers they use into four categories: (a) stable-satisfactory; (b) unstable-satisfactory; (c) unstable-unsatisfactory; (d) stable-unsatisfactory.

Stable-Satisfactory:

The partners can reach agreement as to who is in control of the relationship, or in control of areas within the relationship. This implies ability to be flexible in arguments or disagreements, so as to return to a stable position rapidly.

Unstable-Satisfactory:

This differs from the above marriage in the length of instability. Stability occurs and is satisfactory, yet periods of instability are present.

Unstable-Unsatisfactory:

Marriages where no explicit or implicit agreement is reached upon the question of who is in control of the relationship or areas within it. Relationships are constantly redefined.

Stable-Unsatisfactory:

The partners agree never to make an issue of who is in charge of the relationship nor of areas within it. Dissatisfaction is kept hidden or ignored. On the surface this family seems stable and satisfactory but underneath it is characterized by the distances between family members.

Jackson (1957), sees families as having homeostasis. That is they seek to maintain the status-quo of the family system. This adds to Spiegel's (1957), hypothesis on family equilibrium the factor of a family need to seek stability.

The majority of authors would agree that marriage is a relationship with conflictual elements. Charney (1969), goes beyond this in presenting marriage as: "an inherently tense, conflict-ridden, interpersonal system whose successful fulfillment demands not resolution of conflict so much as it requires a constructive living out as tapping of conflict for generating energy for creative living in both partners..." (Charney, 1969: 2).

Echoing this viewpoint is Sprey (1969), who also approaches marriage as a system in conflict that needs to seek constant negotiation of its relationship. These authors contend that marriage is conflict oriented whereas more traditional viewpoints approach marriage as a social system that is stable until conflict arises.

#### Functions of Conflict

The functions of conflict are approached with different emphasis by different authors. At the traditional extreme, writers such as Landis (1968), Burns (1963), and Christensen (1950), look on it as a mostly destructive experience, which does contain some constructive aspects, if handled with discipline. At the other extreme are writers such as Bach (1969), Jackson (1968), Charney (1969), and Ellis (1961), who regard quarreling as a healthy aspect of marriage, as an information producer and tension releaser, a vehicle for the growth of the relationship. They recognize its destructive aspects but prefer to channel the emotion raised by argument into constructive form.

The traditional view sees quarreling as a beginning emotive phase of conflict that in mature attempts at resolution becomes muted and unnecessary. This involved reducing anger and feelings of pain.

The modern view explores quarreling as an honest emotive reaction that needs to be constructively handled, and implicit in this is the view that anger and the need to act aggressively for what one values is healthy. Facing anger leads to a more mature interaction between marriage partners, Bach (1969), Ellis (1961). According to Coser (1950): "Conflicts within a group frequently helps to revitalize current norms, or it contributes to the emergence of new norms." (P.309). Conflict is also seen as useful in defining relationship boundaries: (Duvall & Hill 1953: 239), (Bach 1969: 27).

In relation to Lewin (1948), and the factor of territorial needs of individuals, Bach (1969), further stresses a function of conflict as being the signal of the individual that his territory is being overrun. The aggression that underlies conflict is thus not totally destructive; and, in fact, if used rationally, constructively aids in enhancing the information each partner in a marriage receives about the other.

Landis (1968), sees few quarrels in marriage as being constructive because of their irrational and emotional aspects. Bach (1969), would agree but attempts to rectify this situation by outlining an approach to conflict that enables marriage partners to fight constructively. Basic to this approach is the use of anger as a reliever of tension or as catharsis. This is also seen as healthy by Waller (1938: 311). However, the destructive aspects of conflict are ever present. Coser (1956: 308), views conflict as posing a threat to intimate relationships, since the feelings exhibited are seen as a threat to the individuals in the group and hence the group itself. Consequently hostile feelings tend to be suppressed.

The literature tends to support the presence of conflict as healthy and natural if it is non-destructive, eases tension, and helps delineate issues and personal feelings. Erikson (1959), cited the inability to engage in controversy and useful combat as one of the criteria contributing to a failure to achieve intimacy.

#### Dynamics of healthy conflict resolution

Handling conflict in marriage has always been intellectualized to the point that few major differences appear in the general review of literature. Most of the difference occurring is related to how the emotional aspects of conflict are handled rather than how conflict is resolved. Underneath his semantic vigor Charney (1969), still advocates essentially the same factors and processes that lead to conflict resolution as do the traditional authors. Even the seemingly novel idea that couples should learn how to fight constructively is not new. The Binkley's (1929), urged that couples learn how to quarrel successfully some forty-two years ago.

Irregardless of the theoretical base used, the approach to conflict resolution contains the basic elements of good sense, empathy and democracy.

The major elements of conflict resolution that are repeated over and over again by Bach (1969), Ellis (1961), Charney (1969), Landis (1968), Duvall & Hill (1953), and Jackson (1968) are:

- (a) Facing conflict and not running away from it.
- (b) Close and functional communication between marriage partners.
- (c) Cooperation and not competition.
- (d) Avoiding of ego-destructive behavior.

#### Facing Conflict

The problem that faces most partners who live together is the inescapable fact that conflict is painful. For this reason there is a great urge to avoid

conflict. Avoiding conflict, however, is avoiding what Edwards (1954), cites as basic human needs: the need to assert oneself, to defend oneself, and to seek individuality. Thus a dilemma is created which must be faced. On the one hand is a passive existence devoid of any real emotion and on the other is a painful yet necessary human process, that offers the potential for healthy marriage adjustment.

A review of the literature shows a united front in favor of facing conflict rather than avoiding. There are exceptions of course, but they pertain more to conflicts that are trivial in nature. Blood (1960), and Landis (1968), encourage ignoring trivialities, and advocate that minor problems that can be handled individually and internally should be so handled. Bach (1969), however, views trivial matters warily, as he sees the possibility that underlying them can be more serious problems that, if ignored, may lead to conflict later on. Trivial issues need to be properly explored before being ignored.

Persons frequently lie in order to avoid conflict, and the more one is threatened by it the more one tends to avoid it. An interesting study by Goodrich and Ryder (1966), showed that newlyweds who rated themselves as happy, also showed a marked tendency to lie to each other in order to avoid conflict.

In avoiding conflict, however, it seems that couples reduce immeasurably the chance of receiving further information about each other. According to Duvall & Hill (1953): "Marriage partners can come to terms on a basis of reality only when they have felt the heat of each others' hostile feelings." (p. 240). Conflict acts as a catalyst to produce information that may

otherwise remain hidden. This is, of course, both a danger and a boon. Information that is kept hidden from the marriage partner is most always painful if not to the spouse then to oneself. Avoiding conflict temporarily is looked on as a healthy behavior if it avoids a confrontation that may be emotionally painful. Emotion can reach such a pitch that conflict would only destroy. In such cases it is best to allow a cooling off period and then to discuss the issues. This is advocated by: (Duvall & Hill, 1953), (Bach, 1969), (Blood, 1960), (Christensen, 1950). However the danger lies in allowing the cooling off period to act as an escape from conflict with the inevitable result that hostility is suppressed only to reappear again in the future.

There is a time and place for conflict. Bach (1969), advocates setting an appointment for arguments. Times not to carry on a fight are when either of the partners is tired, drunk, or otherwise weakened (Bach, 1969), (Burns, 1963).

The basis of the approach of Bach (1969), and Charney (1969), is that conflict can be taught to couples so that they can learn to face it more readily and handle it more constructively. Bach (1969), in fact conducts marriage counseling along these lines in his version of "fight therapy." Conflict ceases to be merely spontaneous, but is approached in an organized way with rules, goals and strategies.

#### Communicating effectively with spouse

Communication is the essence of conflict solution. Many conflicts arise out of the assumptions that are made from a spouse's communication; assumptions based on faulty evidence. Learning how to communicate and how

to interpret messages correctly can greatly reduce the incidents that arise in an interaction that need not arise at all.

Satir (1964), describes dysfunctional communication as the incongruence between the two levels of a message: (a) the denotative or content level and; (b) the metacommunicative level. The denotative level involves what is said in a message verbally while the metacommunicative level involves the true meaning of the message. For example, a general greeting such as "good morning" contains the content message which is as stated and the lower level message which projects what is really being said, which is dependent on voice tone, facial expressions, and the context of the message. Dysfunctional communication can be performed by both the sender and the receiver of the message. The failure to clarify a message and the failure to seek clarification both result in false information.

Navran showed in a study in 1967 that happily married couples differ from unhappy couples in that they:

- (a) talk more to each other
  - (b) Convey the feeling that they understand what is being said to them.
  - (c) Preserve communication channels and keep them open.
  - (d) Make more use of supplementary non-verbal techniques of communication.
- (Navran, 1967: 182).

Schizophrenic families show in microcosm a faulty form of communication that: "creates a state of chronic disequilibrium and discord: communication consists primarily of coercive efforts and defiance, or of efforts to mask the defiance to avoid fighting." (Mishler and Waxler, 1965: 285). Further studies of schizophrenic and abnormal families conducted by: (Ferreira, Winter, 1967, 1968a, 1968b), Friedman, 1970), (Hayley, 1967), (Coe, 1969) have shown: a distorted communication system, overt hostility and conflict,

and an inability to make quick and relevant decisions. Family members do not reveal their feelings to others and have a low knowledge of each other.

What is not made clear in these studies is to what extent abnormalities in the family structure or individual personalities created poor communication, or to what extent poor communication created the abnormalities. This does not detract, however, from the necessity of reducing functional communication in marriages. At the base of what any couple know of each other and the outside world is their method of communication. As marriage involves intimacy the communication of husband and wife must go beyond rituals and games and center on the realities of the situation. Ruesch (1953), states that: "Successful communication with self and with others implies correction of stored up information. Successful communication at all levels is the backbone of mental health." (p. 220).

#### Cooperation and Competition in Conflict

The need to avoid competition is seen as essential in handling conflicts. Competition between a couple that involves a power struggle may be quite functional under certain conditions, especially if it involves the assertion of self against unfairness and dishonesty. When it seeks to correct a relationship that is not fulfilling the needs of the individual, it can also be seen as healthy. However, in the resolution phase of conflict the feelings of competitiveness invariably result in an inability to come to terms with the issues in a constructive way.

Cooperation does not mean the negation of differences. Horowitz (1962), sees cooperation as: "the settlement of problems in terms of which make possible the continuation of differences and even fundamental disagreements."

(p. 186). The goal of conflict resolution is essentially achieving a mutual fulfillment of needs between the marital pair. Competition can scarcely bring this about. Saxton (1968), delineates "bad" marital adjustment as that action which may resolve an immediate conflict, but the resolution, in only involving one spouse, usually results in a lack of mutual fulfillment, and sows the seeds for further conflict.

An alternative to competition as seen by Blood (1960), is accommodation in which there is an agreement to disagree; but this in itself requires cooperation. In concessions where one partner wins, Blood (1960), sees the necessity of compensating the loser so that the loss is not total.

Bach (1969), feels that both partners have to win in order to achieve a constructive resolution and this is done by ensuring that the relationship gains from the conflict so that neither individual loses in the long run. A fifty-fifty relationship between husband and wife is considered unrealistic by Dreikurs (1968), due to the state of flux in a relationship in which differences of opinion and interest are inevitable. Yet if the conflict is not seen as a common one, and creates competition in which both have a strong stake to win to prevent a loss of equality, emotional issues arise which makes resolution difficult.

Many studies have been conducted to show that democracy and equality in the group decision-making process produces better results both creatively, psychologically and productively. Lewin (1948), in his book: Resolving Social Conflicts, discusses the experiments carried on at the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station (Lippit & White 1939). In these studies it was found that children, placed in a democratic atmosphere in which each had

equal voice and were not subject to loss of self-esteem by competition, suffered less hostility and showed a greater willingness to listen to alternatives. In the autocratic atmosphere there was a feeling of low stakes by each member; every child became a potential enemy to each other, struggling to retain status, and scapegoating the hostility of the group on one member.

Similarly Scanzoni (1965), showed that dissolution of lower class marriages was strongly affected by authoritarian attitudes on the part of men and the lack of freedom from parental influence. Hoffman (1964), showed that decisions tend to be more creative and productive in groups in which all members are equal and free to express themselves.

Cooperation between partners thus enables the individuals to assert themselves more freely and to seek more freedom of choice in the marriage, whereas competition tends to restrict and confine members of a marriage to interaction that though basically self-gratifying is also destructive to the relationship.

#### Avoiding Ego-destructive behavior

When self concepts are attacked pain is inevitable. Yet in conflict pain is almost inevitable if the self-concept of the individual is weak. Negative statements will be taken as personal attacks on the integrity of the individual, and in defense, information that may lead to the growth of the individual is often ignored. Attacks on the person almost guarantees that the conflict interaction will continue in a destructive way by inviting retaliation. Partners who have lived together for any length of time are well cognizant of the others "Achilles heels": areas of the psyche that are best left alone. It is best to learn of the strengths and weaknesses

of the partners ego so that conflict will not result in the painful destruction of the defense mechanisms that may serve to keep that person healthy.

Fairness to Bach (1969), involves keeping injuries within the capacity of the partner to absorb them. This is not to avoid pain but to control its effect on the individual. He believes, in fact, that human beings are much more capable of absorbing pain than is assumed. A total fear of hurting the partner results in fight phobia which is characterized by Jackson's (1968), category of the stable-unsatisfactory marriage.

Painful statements in marriage are seen by Ellis (1961), as necessary for growth: "Both husband and wife in trying to face and get at the root of a difficulty must look at disagreeable things not only in relation to the other but also to themselves." (p. 61). He encourages husband and wife to accept the most awkward and inappropriate expressions of resentment, anger and outright hate from their partner. Both Bach (1969), and Ellis (1961), feel that a certain amount of pain is healthy provided it is not deeply inflicted. However, senseless destruction of the partner's ego to serve the need to win, or to prove the other wrong is not condoned.

#### Goals of Conflict Resolution

It might seem reasonable to assume that the goal of conflict resolution should be the resolution of conflict, and indeed the traditionalists hold this view. Yet Bach (1969), Ellis (1961), Jackson (1968), and Charney (1969), see the goal in a different light as not so much resolving conflict as living with it healthily. Essentially all writers agree on the inevitability of conflict, it is merely that the "fight-trainers" such as Bach and Charney see conflict not only as inevitable but welcome provided it is handled in

such a way as to become a tool for the growth of the relationship.

Waller (1938), saw destructive quarrels as those which left a relationship with a smaller sum total of assets than it had before.

The process of conflict resolution was seen by Satir (1964), as needing to possess the following goals: enhancement of self-esteem, prevention of bodily injury, creation of closeness, creation of a sense of receiving from the partner and productivity. Thus it is impossible to separate the gains of the relationship from the gains of the individual.

Beck (1966), perceives the goals of conflict resolution as being a marital balance:

A dovetailing of the partner's needs and patterns of reciprocity in meeting them such as will maintain over the long run an equilibrium in gratifications that is suitable to both...the concept does not imply that all needs of each partner must be met, but simply that the core needs specific to a given marital relationship must be satisfied (p.212).

Spiegel (1957), sees the goal of resolution also as a re-establishment of equilibrium although he defines equilibrium as the high complementarity of roles between the couple and disequilibrium as low complementarity of roles. What he refers to as requilibration would mean a restoration of complementarity.

The growth and stability of the relationship itself is the goal of much of the conflict resolution. Bach (1968), sees the individual as responsible not only for his own role in the formation of the relationship, but in his partner's as well. "It is a partner's legitimate goal to change a specific characteristic of the other, if such a change is incontrovertibly for the other's own good." (p. 76). He does not explain how some action can be

considered incontrovertibly for someone's own good. However, the spirit of the statement is important for it implies that the partner needs to have a commitment to the relationship so that a need to seek change in the other, if deemed necessary for the good of the relationship, is a worthwhile goal.

Finally Bach (1968), lists twelve goals of conflict resolution:

- (a) Less hurt.
- (b) More information.
- (c) Solution of conflict.
- (d) Control over other's behavior (if sanctioned).
- (e) Less fear of fighting and partner.
- (f) Trust.
- (g) Loss of feelings of revenge.
- (h) Forgiveness and reparation.
- (i) Strengthening of individual identity in marriage.
- (j) Strengthening of self concept.
- (k) Catharsis.
- (l) Strengthening of cohesion and affection of couple (p. 103-106).

In the next chapter a model will be put forward that presents an approach to the study of conflict and its resolution. The main emphasis of the thesis will, however, rest on resolution, as it is this aspect that is of greatest interest to the marriage counselor.

## CHAPTER III

FRAMEWORK ON MARITAL CONFLICT AND MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In the preceeding chapter a review of the literature was presented on conflict resolution, and in the introduction the major postulates pertaining to conflict resolution were outlined. These are: (a) the exploration of conflict resolution in marriage; (b) the understanding of problems that face a married couple while in conflict; (c) the delineation of those factors conducive to constructive conflict resolution behavior. In this chapter a theoretical model for conflict and conflict resolution in marriage will be presented. In order to undertake this stated purpose it is necessary to explore the basic human behaviors that create conflict, and those that help to resolve it. The models of human interaction presented will be from four major theoretical areas. These are represented by: (a) The motivational theories expounded by Maslow (1970); (b) General communication theory, Satir (1964), Jackson (1957), Hayley (1958), Ruesch (1953); (c) Field theory, Lewin (1948) and; (d) Psychological self theories, Rogers (1953), Kaplan (1965). From this basic theoretical presentation, human interaction will be approached in relation to conflict and conflict resolution in marriage.

This model does not emphasize the exterior sociological factors that affect the marriage. This is done not because these factors are considered irrelevant but because the author feels that the best approach suited to the study of marital conflict resolution is that which emphasizes that man is an actor as well as a reactor. The basic goal of most counseling techniques is to elicit change in the behavior of the individual. It is thus

felt that the most beneficial approach involves looking at man in terms of his psyche and in terms of his interactions within a marital system. The model is thus limited by its one way approach, but it is nevertheless felt to be a viable approach to take from the marriage counselors point of view.

In studying man in the context of marriage, two areas have to be explored: (a) the self system; that area that comprises the individual himself, and; (b) the interaction system, or that area that comprises the individuals interaction with other individuals. The self system will be viewed as comprising of two main components: (a) the Evaluative component and; (b) the Motivational component. The interaction system will be viewed as comprising of two main components; (a) the Interactional environment and; (b) the Interactional behavior.

Each individual is a self system of interacting parts. Two main parts of this system are the evaluative and the motivational aspects of the individual. The interaction of these two areas of the self create the behavior and attitudes of the individual.

#### Evaluative component

Every human individual has the ability to evaluate his position in the universe. From childhood on, he creates a self concept that is created from his evaluations of his experiences with the world (Kaplan, 1965). Within this self concept is: (a) the self image and; (b) the self ideal. The self image is the core of the self and according to Kaplan (1965): "includes the individuals basic perceptions of what the world is like and of his own abilities and deficiencies." (p. 131). It is the individuals self appraisal that determines how the individual moves within his world and how he inter-

acts with it. The self ideal is that image the individual has of what he would like to be, and consists of his desires, aspirations and fantasies.

#### Motivational component

The other aspect of the individual's self system involves his desires or needs which influence his behavior. There are two main divisions of "needs": (a) the physiological needs and; (b) the psychological needs. (Maslow, 1970) (p. 35-58). The physiological needs consist of the organic needs of the human body. The psychological needs are learned by the individual in the process of growing up in a social environment, Kaplan (1965: 60), and are influenced heavily by the evaluative component of the self. Human behavior involves the drive of the human being towards the fulfillment of his needs. Maslow (1970) lists four basic or fundamental psychological needs: (a) Security needs; (b) Belongingness or affectional needs; (c) Esteem needs, and; (d) Self-actualization needs. These needs are: "organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency." (p. 38). As lower needs are satisfied higher needs can be pursued. Frustration of any need results in an abandoning of higher need motivation. If an individual is hungry his behavior will tend to seek gratification of that need at the expense of others. Not all behavior is need motivated or coping behavior; it may be caused by maturation or expression (p. 30). Yet in general it can be said that nearly all human behavior is motivated by seeking fulfillment of the fundamental needs, and that these needs are for the most part unconscious to the individual.

Preconditions need to exist prior to need fulfillment; among them are: freedom to speak, freedom to act provided no-one is hurt, freedom to express

oneself, freedom to seek knowledge, freedom to defend oneself, justice, fairness and honesty. "Thwarting in these freedoms will be reacted to with a threat or emergency response." Maslow (1970: 47). Thus essential to the fulfillment of needs is an environment in which motivation behavior towards fulfillment is possible. The hierarchy of the basic needs are not fixed in every individual. Some individuals seek self-esteem without needing to achieve belongingness; others never establish an affectional need. Neurotics may be motivated simply by defense needs even though seemingly pursuing higher needs. Specific examples may always be found that contradict a general theory, yet this does not detract from the usefulness of the theory.

The area of the self system consists of four different levels of awareness. These are cited in Figure 1.

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|                    | Known to self  | Not know to self |
|--------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Known to others    | Revealed Self  | Denied Self      |
| Not know to others | Concealed Self | Unconscious Self |

Figure 1: Areas of awareness of the self

(Adapted from a figure in Bennis, (1964: 27))

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The evaluative component of the self system tends to suppress information threatening to the self image either by concealing it, denying it, or by repressing it into an unconscious state. Psychological needs are to a large extent unconscious to the individual, as are behaviors based on

conditioning and physiological coping.

### Interaction system

"Marriage is a group situation, and as such shows the general characteristics of group life." Lewin (1948: 84). The individual's self system is created by his interaction with the world. In his interactions two main areas need to be examined; (a) the environment in which the interaction takes place, and; (b) the interactional behavior of the group.

### Environment

The environment of the marriage group consists of its goals, regulations and its style of living, Lewin (1948: 86). These are dependent on: (a) the individuals themselves and; (b) the outer society.

### Interactional behavior

The interaction process of the marriage group is dependent upon: (a) what needs the individuals bring into the group; (b) how they seek to achieve fulfillment of those needs, and; (c) how the environment of the marriage group allows individual need fulfillment to be pursued.

Marriage is thus a relationship that involves two individuated self systems in interaction with each other and environment around them. Through this interaction is created a "Marriage system". The interaction behavior can be studied by examining the communication involved in that interaction.

The interaction of any two individuals involves communication. The self system is created through communication with the environment. The experiences of man are received through his communication with life. How he receives messages affects his self image and how he sends out messages

affects others' image of him. Communication involves a sender, a message, a receiver and a context.

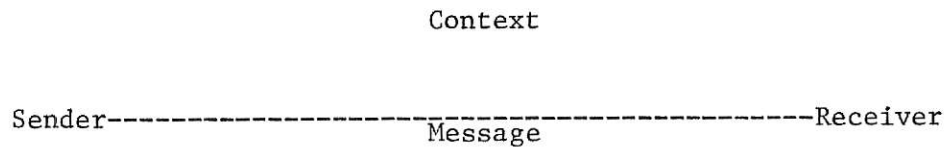


Figure 2: Communication system

Man communicates verbally via symbolic language and nonverbally through signs, facial expressions etc. There are two levels of communication: (a) the content or denotative level and; (b) the metacommunicative level. The content level is the literal or superficial level whereas the metacommunicative level involves the meaning level or the real aspect of the message. Satir (1964), Jackson (1968), Reush (1957).

How a message is sent does not necessarily denote how it is received. Whenever the content level and the metacommunicative level of a message are congruent within the context of the message, the communication is functionally sent. The communication is further functional if the message received is the message sent. If the receiver chooses to ignore the message sent and relies on his own interpretation, dysfunctional communication results. Thus communication is dependent on a complexity of interpersonal and intrapersonal factors. Consistent functional communication is not possible but clarification should aid in achieving clearer communication.

As self systems are different, conflict in the interaction between two people is inevitable. As the environment of the individuals change, their

self systems must also change to keep pace with the new information received. Every man has a need for order and congruency between his self system and the environment, and a need to know that what he feels, really is. Coleman (1964: 71). Those whose mechanism of interaction is such that the self system is threatened by change may rigidify their self system and will evaluate their environment as their own creation rather than to allow the environment to affect their self image; or they may ignore threatening information by suppressing it out of their conscious awareness level.

Rituals and games grow out of the need for order and congruency and allow for interaction that, if played by the rules, does not disturb the generalized, rationalized view of life commonly held and allows for a stability of the self system. Stability of the self system occurs when the needs and expectancies of the individual are congruent with his evaluation of his physical and social experiences.

In a relationship such as marriage, rituals are harder to achieve, for they pertain more to superficial relationships, and they require a concealment of true feelings that is difficult in a relationship based on close physical and psychological proximity. Consequently any interaction in which there are revealed or unrevealed differences may lead to conflict. Any interaction in marriage is thus fraught with conflictual possibilities. How this conflict is handled characterizes the potential of the relationship.

Each individual thus brings into marriage his own self system with its own set of needs. He also brings his own communication system. The marriage system is thus a creation of all the variables that the individual brings into the system and consists as mentioned before of an environment and an interactional system.

The marriage is created to fulfill certain needs of the individuals, and these needs vary from individual to individual. When marriage occurs, there is, in most cases, a congruency of needs between the two individuals. Dreikurs (1968: 88). This does not mean that certain needs must be the same; they may merely be complementary. However it is the attraction each feels for the ability of the other to fulfill certain needs that is held in common when marriage occurs.

In marriage as in any intimate interaction group, the two self systems of the individuals cannot be congruent for long without differences arising in either needs, values, expectations, or opinions. The extent to which these differences threaten any one individual in the marriage determines the extent of the conflict and to a certain degree its scope. All conflicts in marriage can be seen as being caused by an incongruency between the two individuals' self systems. Any interaction which makes visible a difference between two individuals may result in conflict. Whether conflict will result depends on the evaluative emphasis placed on the "differences", by one or other or both of the individuals.

The evaluative emphasis placed on "differences" or incongruencies between two individuals will depend on:

(a) The degree of need tension that the incongruency creates in the individual. Need tension occurs when basic needs are being frustrated or satiated. The more tension a basic need is creating through its frustration or satiation, the greater the emotional threat reaction against any further tension. Need tension may generalize any incongruent interaction as being an irritant. This may be illustrated by the conflict that occurs when a husband snaps at

his wife because he had a bad day at the office, thus generalizing his frustrations and reacting not to the cause of his irritation but to a scape-goat.

(b) The communication involved in interaction. A failure to ask clarification of a message that is causing incongruity may result in conflict although incongruity was not intended.

(c) The environment of the marriage at that point in time. Marriage interaction takes place in a constantly changing environment. If the environment threatens the individual, conflict is more likely to occur than if the environment is non-threatening at the time of the interaction.

(d) The evaluative state of the individual. How an individual evaluates experiences is dependent on the functioning state of his evaluative abilities. An individual may view the same experience differently if his self image is on different levels of esteem. It is a generalized truth that pessimists view experience pessimistically while optimists view them optimistically.

Once conflict occurs its nature and scope will be determined by: (a) the environment of the relationship and; (b) the nature of the self systems of the individuals.

(a) The environment of the marriage relationship will partially determine the nature and scope of its conflicts. A threatening environment with little expression of trust or honesty will produce conflicts that reflect that basic feeling. Interaction will be non-trustworthy and information transmitted will be dishonest. Basic to most games played in marriage is an environment of dishonesty and competition that produces interactional

communication that seeks to prove the other wrong and oneself right, Dreikurs (1968: 97).

(b) The nature of the self system of the individual. This comprises as was previously mentioned of an individuals evaluational and motivational components. Conflict will tend to be defensive and aggressive, if the basic evaluation of interaction is one of self threat. At stake to the individual may be his self image or the fulfillment of his needs. Most individuals will strive to defend themselves against any interaction they deem a threat to the core of their psychological being. The deeper the evaluation of threat they place on a conflictual interaction, the more irrational and self defensive they will become. As long as the threat is seen to exist behavior will be largely defensive and destructive to the interactional procedure.

#### Conflict Resolution

In this next section the discussion of conflict resolution will involve the relation of the theoretical model to the review of the literature.

If conflict is created by the incongruencies between two individuals' self systems then conflict resolution must engage itself in creating congruency. Not all incongruencies create conflict, especially if the incongruencies do not involve a threat to the self system of an individual. Thus the congruency sought by the marriage counselor involves only those areas of the self system that are evaluated as being under threat. The actual existence of a threat is not as important as the evaluation of a threat.

Conflict resolution in marriage must be involved with: (a) creating a marriage environment that is conducive to resolution; (b) effecting changes

in the interaction between the individuals to favor constructive conflict resolution, and; (c) restructuring aspects of the self systems of the individuals that are hindering conflict resolution.

#### Marriage environment

In the review of the literature it was emphasized by various authors that the first step in the constructive handling of conflict must involve facing the conflict rather than avoiding it. This cannot be accomplished if the environment of the marriage does not allow the couple to do so but encourages them to avoid interaction that is threatening and allows them the opportunity to behave so destructively in conflict situations that the effort of facing conflict creates unbearable tension. An environment must be created in the marriage that allows each individual to feel that conflict and its solution is a task that involves both individuals. Competition which challenges the couple to compete and to differ at the expense of cooperation can only take place in an environment which lacks equality and empathy. Basic to all competition is the attempt to prove the other less powerful. An environment that fosters equality between the married couple will create its own barrier to consistent "power play" games. Another major point mentioned in the review for fostering constructive conflict resolution, is the close and functional communication of married partners. Although a discussion of this belongs in the next section, it is essential to restate that interactional behavior will reflect its environment. Factors such as openness, trust, empathy, honesty and responsibility are necessary before communication can be realistically informational. Finally the avoidance of ego destructive behavior in conflict is also partly

determined by the environment of the marriage relationship. Variables such as the degree of love, empathy and respect shown in a relationship help create the atmosphere in which ego destructive behavior cannot flourish.

### Interaction

In the review of literature the importance of functional communication was stressed. In the early section of this chapter a general overview of communication behavior was presented. Communication theorists stress the need to teach individuals the art of communication so that the relationship can proceed on an interactional level that is honest and informational. As mentioned previously, conflict is created by the evaluated threat to the self system. Many such evaluations by individuals are falsely created by faulty communication between spouses. The reduction in dysfunctional communication can serve to reduce those conflicts that occur as a result of false evaluation. In the review of literature it was postulated that a major function and goal of conflict was to present information to the marriage partners about each other that could help to redefine the system of that relationship in accordance with reality. The interactions of the individuals towards each other must constantly be in a state of flux so as to incorporate new information about each others needs. Behavior cannot remain constant but must change in accordance with the relationship system.

### Restructuring the self system

Intrinsic to any change sought in the environment of the marriage relationship or in the interaction of its members is individual change. Any changes in the individual self systems will result in a change in the relationship. Any change in the relationship effects change in the individual.

Essential to any change in behavior is a change in the individual himself. In order that the individual approach conflict resolution constructively, it is necessary that his evaluation of the behavior of his marriage partner be realistic. Evaluation based on self threat will not be conducive to motivating the individual towards behavior that will lead to resolution. An individual with a low self image will tend to evaluate messages pessimistically irregardless of the reality of the situation. A constructive change in this individual's evaluation system would involve a more realistic appraisal of interactional communication as well as more reliance on trust of the partner. Trust, of course, can only be evaluated if it is present, or if the individual ignores reality and creates his own fantasy of it.

Implicit in this section is the assumption that many changes of the individuals self systems in marriage are a mutual occurrence between individuals, and serve to bring the relationship into congruence. However individual isolated change can also occur that enables resolution to come about. An individual may simply cease unproductive behavior and act in accordance with the partner's wishes, with no corresponding change in the latter's behavior. This may be referred to as submission or concession.

## CHAPTER IV

ILLUSTRATIONS AND APPLICATIONS OF THE MODEL

In the preceeding chapter a model was presented that illustrated an approach to examining human interaction and the creation of conflict. Three main variables were then stated that relate to conflict resolution. In this chapter those variables will be expanded and their applicability to marriage counseling will be discussed.

The marriage counselor in treating conflict within a marriage must be aware of the three goals mentioned in the last chapter: (a) changing the environment of the relationship; (b) changing the interactions of the individuals, and; (c) restructuring aspects of the individual's self system. These three tasks must be accomplished in order that the couple seeking counseling may not only be able to handle the conflict but be able to come to some harmony concerning the issues.

The term healthy conflict resolution is defined in terms of the effect resolution action has on the relationship itself. A relationship, to stay healthy, needs to constantly redefine itself. The changing external environment of the relationship and the changing internal environment of the individual affect the potential for changes in the relationship. How this relationship is changed or remains unchanged involves growth, stagnation or regression. A relationship must be able to handle any changes that take place within and without the relationship. It must also be able to handle changes that take place within the individuals making up the relationship. Healthy conflict resolution involves those procedures that handle conflict in a way that enhances the relationship, so that both individuals gain from

the interaction. However, before these processes can occur in a relationship, the environment of that relationship has to be conducive to the presence of those processes. Water cannot boil in an environment that does not allow heat.

The factors that create an environment for a healthy relationship are as follows:

(a) Trust, (b) Respect, (c) Empathy and Understanding, (d) Love, (e) Freedom, (f) Communication, (g) Honesty, (h) Openness, (i) Equality, (j) Responsibility.

Trust involves the mutual trust a couple have for each other. A knowledge that they can rely on each other to fulfill tasks, needs and expectancies. It also involves a trust in the relationship as a whole, as well as the individuals. It requires an optimism that the relationship will continue to flourish despite breakdowns in communication, losses of self-esteem, cruelty from the partner and changes in behavior, provided that such occurrences are temporary and short-lived. Trust in a relationship allows a person to be himself rather than an actor and thus opens the door for honesty and openness.

Respect occurs between two people when they honor each others intrinsic humanity. They honor each other's opinions and behavior, while not necessarily agreeing with it.

Empathy and Understanding. This applies to the self as well to the partner in marriage. Empathy is the ability to understand a person by attempting to feel what he is feeling. Understanding involves the individual and the insight he has into his own behavior, and his ability to recognize and predict that behavior.

Love is the ability to care for someone else as much as for oneself.

Freedom in a marriage allows each individual to fulfill his needs and create his identity while remaining responsible to the relationship. It allows a partner to voluntarily give up power in a marriage (such as a housewife) but enables her to retrieve it when she wants to (as she might if she sought a job).

Communication involves the sending of messages between people that best conform to the feelings of the individuals sending the messages. It is the ability to transmit information to each other that allows for the best mutual understanding. Also involved is the necessity of keeping the lines of communication open.

Honesty. Communication that conforms to reality is honest. Honesty informs the partner of true feelings and thus serves to create a relationship that is true and not fabrication. It involves admitting errors and avoiding games.

Openness is a measure of the honesty shown in a relationship. It is dependent on trust between marital partners and requires responsibility.

Responsibility is the ability to know when openness and honesty are painful, and to know when to put the needs of the relationship above the individual's. Responsibility requires that behavior does not hurt the growth of the relationship.

Equality. Allowing the needs and feelings of the partner to be as important as one's own. Equality of individuals is based on their basic human rights and not on role positions in a marriage.

A marriage will have the potential to handle conflict maturely and

healthily to the extent that it contains the above conditions and to the extent that those conditions exist at a particular time in the conflict interaction. Relationships are constantly in a state of flux. Conditions that are conducive to mature resolution of conflict may be present at certain times and not at others. Environmental conditions may affect an individual's self image which may reduce for example, the possibility for communication in the relationship. Loss of self-esteem caused by a loss of a job, may have the effect on a person of temporarily or permanently disturbing the environment of the relationship. The pain to the ego may produce defense mechanisms that in attempting to cope with a problem produced outside the marriage, instead throws the relationship itself off balance.

When a relationship is thus off balance the partners must struggle to regain the aspects of the marital environment that led to healthy resolution behavior before. This can be accomplished by the couple being aware of the aspects of that healthy environment and by being aware of actions that help to bring the relationship back to stability.

The most important actions that a married couple need to pursue in handling conflict have been outlined previously in the review of literature. They are:

- (a) Not avoiding conflict when it arises and the issues are important, but handling conflict fairly.
- (b) Avoiding behavior that will produce pain in the partner such as attacks, on the self-esteem, insults, dishonesty, etc.
- (c) Communicating effectively between partners.
- (d) Reducing the need to win or the fear to lose.
- (e) Concentrating on the issues and not personalities.
- (f) Cooperating to bring about rational approaches.

(g) Making decisions and acting on them.

The environment of the marriage cannot be separated from the behavior within it; both variables create each other and influence each other. Conflict behavior within a marital group will be influenced by the meaning that the conflict has for the group. This is dependent on the interaction between each individuals' self system.

The marriage counselor must explore what the conflict means to the couple and then must attempt resolution by seeking to have the couple change that behavior that is causing conflict, and seeking to change the environmental situation of a marriage so that behavior change is possible.

It is not always possible to gauge the deeper meanings of a conflict. Needs are to a large extent unconscious. In conflict situations in which need frustrations are difficult to ascertain, it is the behavior itself that must be focused on. Therapists such as Glasser (1965), and Ellis (1970), advocate treatment that focuses on change of unacceptable behavior irregardless of its causes. With couples that do not have a good base of marital communication and who are not well aware of each others needs, it seems best to work on changing that behavior that is causing the conflict, even if it is only a symptom of underlying causes. From a change in behavior it is assumed that a change in an environment of the marriage will occur.

#### Environment of the relationship

A marriage counselor must help and enable his clients to create as much as possible an environment in which conflictual behavior can be changed from destructive to constructive behavior. If he is counseling clients who are having difficulties due to the presence of a mother-in-law, it may well

be his duty to explore the affects she is having on the general home environment. Her presence may be a threat to one or other of the clients which might result in a reduction of trust, honesty, freedom and openness. As Scanzoni (1965), has pointed out lower class families have a greater dissolution tendency due to the engulfing presence of the extended family structure.

The environment of a marital system will consist of the product of the interaction of the two individual systems. Each individual will bring into the marriage a pre-conceived notion of the environment that he seeks, but he will also carry many unconscious needs from his past parental environment. He may seek an environment of trust but may in reality behave in accordance with a past conditioning of mistrust. A husband who has been taught to hide his feelings may do so unconsciously, and yet his wife who might have come from a more trustful home may conceive his behavior as implying a basic distrust of herself. A conflict thus arises over mistaken assumptions about environmental needs. The marriage counselor would need to enlighten the couple regarding their mutual dissonance, and then attempt to encourage behavior that would lead to a mutual reorganization of their basic needs. The husband might be appraised that his own distrust came from his parental environment and that his new environment need not be a model of the old one. The wife might relax her desire to seek immediate total openness from her husband, in order to accommodate his difficulty with it.

### Interaction

The goal of the counselor in conflictual situations is to seek a way of bringing the clients together so that both may be rewarded by resolution

rather than one individual. It is not the job of the counselor to side with one client or another, if he feels that the merits of one position favors its pursuance. Losing an argument under pressure results in a lowered self image for the individual. This is not to assume that losing arguments is necessarily destructive conflictual behavior. As long as the loss is not conceived of being a threat to the individual, no harm is done. However, underlying many arguments is not the issue of who has the better information, or who is right, but who has the power. Women in many societies are taught to give in to the husband on any issue as there is value placed on the authority needs of men and the submissive actions of women. As long as both individuals feel that this situation fulfills basic assumptions about their roles, there will be no loss of self-esteem.

The only really constructive way of handling a conflict that is in essence a power struggle is to seek a reduction in the power needs of each individual and arrive at a solution that will not place either individual below the other. A couple may be in disagreement over the schooling of a child, and may have reached the stage where neither will countenance any action espoused by the other. Basic to the conflict is a need not to give in. The issue of where the child is to be educated has been lost in the struggle. The counselor can bring the couple back to this issue but would need first to resolve the basic issue. Why is compromise not possible? No need is so immutable that it cannot be modified, and the best approach is to apprise the couple that it is not the needs of the individuals that need priority, it is the needs of the relationship.

Conflict resolution behavior must attempt to fulfill the mutual needs of a marriage relationship as well as individual needs. Interaction which

involves itself with cooperative behavior will keep the mutual needs of a relationship alive. Cooperation in essence brings individual needs into congruence and complementarity. Once marital behavior loses this common bond, needs become differentiated and fulfilled in a vacuum.

In the review of the literature, conflict was seen as a valuable informational tool for the marriage relationship. Implicit in the attempt to get couples to fulfill relationship needs is the need to know the nature of the partners' needs. Conflict serves a useful purpose in making these known. A person's needs can no longer be taken for granted if that person's behavior threatens the relationship. A person engages in conflict not for the purpose of destroying but for the purpose of defending his own self system and its needs. In this defense, behavior may result that is destructive, but destruction is not the basic purpose of the conflict. Conflict signals that individuals are having basic needs frustrated. The counselor, in teaching clients to interpret conflict as signals of a partner's needs that they may not be aware of, helps to educate the partners about each other. He can do this by showing the clients that conflict is not to be avoided, as this reduces the information they may gain about each other. He may also show them that the information in conflict can be better achieved if the communications system they employ becomes more functional. Satir (1964), teaches her clients how to communicate more effectively with each other by listening to messages, seeking to clarify them, and sending out clear messages that transmit the intended information an individual wishes to make clear.

Couples, by knowing what they are fighting about, stand a better chance

of resolving the fight than couples who are seeking only to defend themselves. Thus the conflict must be highly informational in nature and this involves the voicing of feelings that the individuals are having during the conflict. These feelings however must be guarded in their pronouncement as ego threatening statements may be verbalized that threaten the individuals self security. Once ego threatening statements have been interjected into conflict, it is difficult to stay on the issues underlying the conflict. Behavior becomes "defense-attack" fixated.

It is difficult however to avoid ego attacking statements in conflict and the easier solution would be for the couple to evaluate such statements as being irrational in the heat of the moment. This may be accomplished with difficulty if the couple is "fight-phobic" and avoids confrontation of any nature.

Conflict serves as a catharsis for many couples. Tension that has been built up for days or weeks may suddenly erupt. After a few minutes or hours of frantic fighting the atmosphere may return to normal. Catharsis by itself is, of course, healthy, but it must be carried one step further. The conflict itself may only release tension and not solve a basic frustration. After ever major quarrel, it is necessary to seek solutions, to seek behavior changes and to organize actions so that the problem is attacked at that time and not allowed to disappear into the unconscious or concealed area of the self.

Conflict pushes into interaction many problems that people have been concealing. If these problems are not handled as they arise, they will disappear again, as the individuals ego defense mechanisms repress them

from the consciousness. Conflict thus acts as a catalyst for bringing concealed, denied or unconscious feelings into marital interaction. If the couple is threatened by these feelings they will be repressed again only to appear at a later time. Thus although conflict may cause the airing of some feelings that need to be worked out, it is only the conscious, rational effort of the couple that accomplishes this. Conflict itself is only constructive as long as the issues it raises are dealt with by the couple.

In looking at an issue in conflict the couple must decide before they cease interaction, what actions they can take to change behavior, the environment, or individual feelings so that the conflictual situation does not arise again, or if it does, can be faced more realistically.

Conflict cannot be resolved as long as one member of a marriage is unwilling to cooperate. In marriages where cooperation has only led to the fulfillment of one individual's needs, the basic environmental need of equality is missing.

In looking at conflict solution behavior it becomes obvious that the only constructive solution for a relationship is that solution which adds to the fulfillment of both individuals' needs. Behavior which gratifies only one individual at the expense of the other, reduces the effectiveness of that relationship. Any marriage that gratifies certain needs and not others may continue to exist with little conflict as long as the needs not met are not central to the marriage.

#### Restructing of the individual

It has been reiterated throughout the preceeding chapters that the key to conflict is the evaluation an individual in a marriage places on the interaction. If the evaluation is one of self threat, conflict will

occur, whether it be overt or covert. It is not feasible to create a change in the individual that will cause all evaluations of the self to be non-threatening or need frustrating. Evaluation of threat is a healthy defense that contributes to man's existence. However certain interactions in conflict are consistently, falsely, evaluated as threats to the self. The individual needs to learn, and the marriage counselor needs to teach those aspects of human behavior that contribute to the realistic appraisal of interaction information. Individuals are conditioned by childhood to react stressfully toward any interaction that frustrates needs or threatens the self image. As adults, however, the ability to make rational evaluations is often neglected in marital conflict.

In a counseling session the counselor can make practical use of the interaction procedure to enable the couple to evaluate events and interactions according to reality and not according to fantasy. Too often evaluation is based on assumed facts that may not be true. Marriage partners bring into their marriage many assumptions about interactional procedures, assumptions they have learned previously. There needs to be a re-evaluation of these assumptions as they may lead to faulty communication. The pattern and meaning of one individual's communication procedure may be quite different from the other individual's. This is especially true of inter-cultural marriages in which symbols become confused.

It has become a trite phrase that couples must work together to build a marriage. Before cooperation is necessary, a commitment has to be made by each individual that the mutual needs of the relationship must be placed above the needs of the separate individuals. In many healthy marriages, individual needs are mutual needs. The individual cannot be

merely committed to themselves but must be committed to the relationship.

In conclusion it is stressed that the evaluation of conflict resolution in this chapter is merely a general guide. It is not presented as a definitive evaluation of the subject, for it is limited in scope and consists only of an overview of the problem of conflict resolution as a whole.

## CHAPTER V

### IMPLICATION AND DISCUSSION

#### Discussion and evaluation of thesis

This thesis has attempted to create an approach to the study of conflict resolution in marriage. In this approach, a general model of human interaction was created from various existing models. From this model some general and specific factors regarding conflict resolution were outlined and discussed. Specifically, those factors involved the area of marital environment, marital interaction and individual personality. It is felt that from this thesis can be drawn a general overview of marital conflict resolution. From this overview, which is largely psychological in nature, specific areas of conflict resolution behavior can be outlined which need to be studied in depth.

Prior to the exploration of specifics, it is necessary to examine the subject as a whole. Consequently due to the scope of the area studied, the study is limited by its non-specificity or general approach. In examining the area of marital conflict resolution, general propositions were made concerning the subject, which cannot necessarily be applied in more specific cases. However, the overview approach is useful in that it designates areas for future research which are relevant to the marriage counselor and family life educator, who must themselves approach the subject on a general level.

## Hypotheses

Hypotheses regarding marital conflict and marital conflict resolution can be derived from the model. The proposition that a major factor in conflict resolution is the communication pattern employed by the married couple proposes the first hypothesis. Null Hypothesis number 1: There is no relationship between poor marital communication patterns and a high non-constructive conflictual marital environment. Marriages which are constantly in conflict and engage in non-constructive resolution behavior will tend to have poor communication patterns. These patterns will be marked by dishonesty in interaction, lack of information sharing, and little positive feedback.

Another factor mentioned in the thesis that creates conflict in marriage, is competition for power between married individuals. Null Hypothesis number 2: There is no relationship between non-egalitarian marital power structure and non-constructive marital approaches to conflict. This hypothesis is limited to American marriages and will be more appropriate to the middle class marriage.

With regard to conflict behavior in marriage, a third hypothesis is presented. Null Hypothesis number 3: There is no relationship between a constructive marital environment and constructive conflict resolution. It is hypothesized that in conflict situations, poorly adjusted couples will tend to use less positive feedback, more ego destructive statements, less mutual esteem, and to approach a conflict situation in a non-cooperative manner; as opposed to adjusted couples, who will tend to seek mutual goals, offer positive feedback and refrain from ego destructive comments.

### Further research steps

Many studies have been conducted that attempted to delineate those factors that relate to marital adjustment and non-adjustment. The majority of these studies have concerned themselves with evaluations based on the self-report of married individuals themselves, Hicks & Platt (1970). It is felt that more lucrative results would occur if research was conducted that explored the behavior of married couples in interactional situations. Self evaluation of conflict behavior does not offer the possibilities of realistic objective appraisal. The marriage counselor has the need to know about the intricacies and complexities of interactional behavior as well as the generalities of married life. Future research also needs to pursue the efficacy of counseling techniques, in order to eliminate elements of "quackery" and chauvinism that have pervaded the area of marital counseling. Techniques of counseling, in order to be successful, must be based on empirical research, and this research must not only involve itself with the study of marital behavior, but with the counseling techniques themselves.

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ANALYSIS OF SOME OF THE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE  
TO MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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The purpose of this thesis was to study the psychological and interactional aspects of conflict in marriage and delineate factors conducive to constructive conflict resolution.

A study of conflict resolution was conducted through a review of literature garnered from the areas of sociology, psychology and marriage counseling. This review was presented and factors involved in conflict and conflict resolution were outlined. The most salient factors considered conducive to conflict resolution were: (a) Facing conflict and not avoiding it: (b) Refraining from ego destructive behavior: (c) Focusing on the issues of the conflict; (d) Engaging in cooperative behavior and not competitive behavior; (e) Communicating functionally.

A theoretical model was then presented which consisted of a compilation of several already accepted models. From this model, conflict and conflict resolution were explored and related back to the review of literature. Conflict was seen to result from an incongruency of the evaluative and motivational components of the individual's self system in interaction within the marital system. Three "action" areas were presented as necessary for the production of constructive conflict resolution. They were: (a) Change in the marital environment; (b) Change in the marital interaction and; (c) Change in the individuals.

These three conditions or goals were then expanded upon and related to the work of the marriage counselor. Environmental conditions that aid in producing constructive conflict resolution were interpreted and behavioral aspects of conflict resolution were discussed. Examples were given of marital conflict problems that marriage counselors face and aspects of the approach to their reduction were evaluated.

In the final chapter, hypotheses were presented for future testing. These were: (a) Marriages which are characterized by poor functional communication patterns will also be characterized by a high non-constructive conflictual interaction; (b) Marriages which are marked by a non-egalitarian power structure will be characterized by non-constructive approaches to conflict; (c) Poorly adjusted couples will be characterized by a marital environment and interaction that does not coincide with those factors considered necessary for constructive conflict resolution.