Relationship Conflict

Daniel J. Canary
William R. Cupach
Susan J. Messman

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Conflict in Parent-Child, Friendship, and Romantic Relationships

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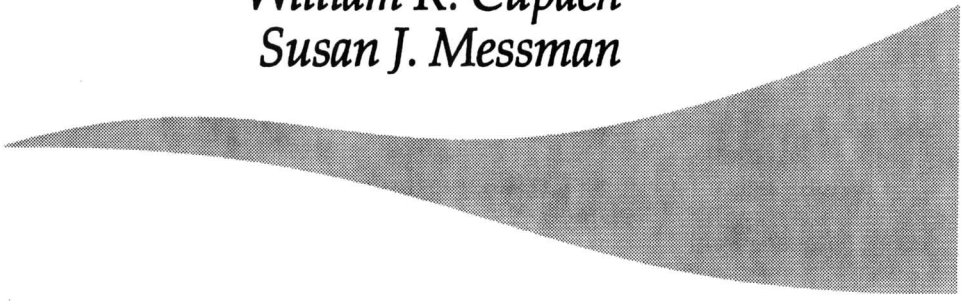

SAGE Publications
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks London New Delhi

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SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
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SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Canary, Daniel J.
Relationship conflict: Conflict in parent-child, friendship, and romantic relationships/Daniel J. Canary, William R. Cupach, Susan J. Messman.
p. cm.—(Sage series on close relationships)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8039-5129-9 (cloth: alk. paper).—ISBN 0-8039-5130-2 (pbk.: alk. paper)
1. Interpersonal conflict. 2. Conflict (Psychology) 3. Intimacy (Psychology) 4. Interpersonal relations. I. Cupach, William R. II. Messman, Susan J. III. Title. IV. Series.
BF637.I48C36 1995
302.3'4—dc20 95-4968

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

00 01 02 03 10 9 8 7 6 5 4

Sage Production Editor: Tricia K. Bennett

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Series Editors' Introduction

When we first began our work on love attitudes more than a decade ago, we did not know what to call our research area. In some ways, it represented an extension of earlier work in interpersonal attraction. Most of our scholarly models were psychologists (though sociologists had long been deeply involved in the areas of courtship and marriage), yet we sometimes felt as if our work had no professional "home." That has all changed. Our research has not only a home but also an extended family, and that family is composed of relationship researchers. During the past decade, the discipline of close relationships (also called personal relationships and intimate relationships) has emerged, developed, and flourished.

Two aspects of close relationships research should be noted. The first is its rapid growth, resulting in numerous books, journals, handbooks, book series, and professional organizations. As fast as the field

grows, the demand for even more research and knowledge seems to be ever increasing. Questions about close, personal relationships still far exceed answers. The second noteworthy aspect of the discipline of close relationships is its interdisciplinary nature. The field owes its vitality to scholars from communication, family studies and human development, psychology (clinical, counseling, developmental, social), and sociology, as well as other disciplines such as nursing and social work. It is this interdisciplinary wellspring that gives close relationships research its diversity and richness, qualities that we hope to achieve in the current series.

The **Sage Series on Close Relationships** is designed to acquaint diverse readers with the most up-to-date information about various topics in close relationships theory and research. Each volume in the series covers a particular topic or theme in one area of close relationships. Each book reviews the particular topic area, describes contemporary research in the area (including the authors' own work, when appropriate), and offers some suggestions for interesting research questions and/or real-world applications related to the topic. The volumes are designed to be appropriate for students and professionals in communication, family studies, psychology, sociology, and social work, among others. A basic assumption of the series is that the broad panorama of close relationships can best be portrayed by authors from multiple disciplines, so that the series cannot be "captured" by any single disciplinary bias.

Conflict is a natural and even inevitable aspect of most ongoing, close relationships. So the issue that differentiates successful from unsuccessful relationships is not whether there is conflict but, rather, how it is handled. The current volume, *Relationship Conflict*, skillfully portrays developmental or "healthy" conflict as well as destructive or "unhealthy" conflict in our most significant personal relationships: parent-child, friendship, and romantic relationships. By taking an interdisciplinary focus with a strong developmental thread, the authors—Daniel Canary, William Cupach, and Susan Messman—expertly lead the reader through a substantial amount of current research and theory to help increase understanding of conflict's legitimate place in the human experience.

CLYDE HENDRICK
SUSAN S. HENDRICK
SERIES EDITORS

Preface

How individuals manage interpersonal conflict dramatically affects their own development and their personal relationships. Although many students recognize the importance of conflict, few understand what it is and how it functions to preserve or to erode close relationships. More precisely, and in spite of the prevalence of interpersonal conflict, many of us cannot indicate the important interaction behaviors that accompany relational harmony or turbulence. We want to provide a synthesis for advanced students that would reflect the diverse literature on conflict in close relationships.

The purpose of this book, then, is to examine the question, "What does conflict look like in various close relationships?" To address this question, we examine how social scientists conceptualize and measure conflict in parent-child, friendship, and romantic relationships. Although such an undertaking appears straightforward, the accomplishment of it requires loyalty to diverse research in social and

developmental psychology, communication, sociology, and other related disciplines.

Our purpose emerged from a desire to reflect different and interdisciplinary literature on conflict. Virtually hundreds of social scientific research books and articles on the topic reveal an amazing lack of integration regarding knowledge about interpersonal conflict in various types of close relationships, despite the effort of many researchers to work from a broad knowledge base. Although we readily acknowledge the limits of our own understanding on the topic, a representative synthesis of research approaches to the study of conflict in close relationships still appears warranted.

Few researchers explore conflict processes across various personal relationships. Instead, most of us focus on a particular kind of relationship in our research, or we pursue research objectives that entail scope conditions suggesting a certain kind of interpersonal involvement. Efforts to research different relationships have generated a wealth of information on the topic of conflict in close relationships, which is a positive outcome. One regretful outcome of this focus on particular relationships concerns a lack of coherence on the simple question guiding this book. The answer to the question of what conflict looks like in various kinds of close relationships also changes across disciplines.

Or does it? Are there "points of connection" between conflict and close relationships in general? We believe that there are, at least enough so as to permit inferences. However, we recognize that people correctly immersed in their own portion of the picture may feel frustrated that we did not elaborate in a particular way on that portion. We hope the reader understands that our goal is to represent a diverse body of research concerning different relationship forms. We realize that our goal means that we omit some detail. Nevertheless, we think this decision presents the reader with a fuller grasp of interpersonal conflict processes across relationship types as presented in several fields.

A crucial point of convergence occurs in the examination of interaction behaviors. That is, in order to talk about how people in close relationships have and manage conflict, researchers eventually discuss how conflict is interpersonally accomplished through interaction behavior or interpersonal communication. As Hinde (1976) noted, "To describe a relationship, it is necessary to describe the interactions that

occur—that is, their context and their quality" (p. 4). Accordingly, we focus on processes central to conflict interaction between two people in close relationships.

By *close relationships,* we refer to relationships characterized by knowledge of the partner, interdependence, and inability to replace the relational partner (vs. replacing a store clerk, or any other social relationship) (Duck, Lock, McCall, Fitzpatrick, & Coyne, 1984; Perlman & Fehr, 1987). We discuss three generic types that we see represented in the conflict literature: parent-child, friendship, and romantic (dating and married) relationships.

We do not attempt to review all the relevant theory and research. Such a review would be exhausting, to use Roloff's (1987) turn of phrase. Comprehensive and insightful reviews on the conflict activities can be found elsewhere with regard to particular kinds of relationships, including parent-child (e.g., Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992), friendship (e.g., Hartup, 1992), and romantic (e.g., Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988). Instead our goal is to provide a representative survey and commentary on empirical research to reveal some links among these literatures.

Preview of Chapters

Chapter 1 presents our assumptions and attempts to locate definitions of interpersonal conflict. Toward this end, it explores dimensions of definitions and theoretical orientations on interpersonal conflict. This initial chapter reveals much variation in definitions and theoretical orientations to interpersonal conflict.

Chapter 2 reviews popular survey and observational measures of conflict. The reader will again discover immense differences in operational definitions of conflict, reflecting the conclusion in Chapter 1 that researchers, by and large, do not explicitly agree on the nature of the phenomenon. Our position is that *both* survey and observational approaches are needed, depending on the scholar's research purpose. However, we do provide a set of advantages and disadvantages for each approach.

Chapter 3 concerns conflict in parent-child relationships. The research regarding parent-child relationships casts conflict in a child development framework. Researchers take interest in conflict for

what it says about the maturation of the child, especially in recent conceptions of bilateral influences of mother and child. This literature also reflects two different conflict activities: one involving the young child trying to master his or her social world and one featuring the adolescent trying to understand changes due to puberty while asserting him- or herself as an individual. We also discuss the direct and indirect effects of parental conflict, including psychological adjustment outcomes related to parental conflict and divorce.

Chapter 4 discusses conflict between friends. This literature begins with a discussion of conflict between young acquaintances, friends, and siblings, again stressing the bridges between conflict behaviors and individual development. This chapter is organized on literature specific to particular cohorts, stressing how conflict patterns between friends change over important friendship periods. More specifically, our discussion focuses on conflict between early childhood friends, middle childhood friends, adolescent friends, and adult friends.

Conflict in romantic involvements is presented in Chapter 5. Hundreds of studies have examined romantic conflict, many with an eye on connecting various conflict behaviors to relational quality or stability. This research provides insights into the productive and destructive relational features of interpersonal conflict. Perhaps here (more than in Chapters 3 and 4), we attempt to represent the literature, in lieu of providing a comprehensive account. The sheer number of articles published on the topic of conflict in romantic relationships is daunting.

Chapter 6 concludes this book with four points of connection between conflict and close relationships. Accordingly, Chapter 6 provides a forum for a few generalizations about conflict in close relationships. Of course, we do not miss the opportunity to suggest some interdisciplinary avenues for future research.

Acknowledgments

Several people deserve mention for their help and support to us during the completion of this project. First, several people provided technical assistance. Sue DeWine (Director, School of Interpersonal Communication, Ohio University) provided us with resources to photocopy articles. Tara Emmers, Parrish McIntosh, Rebecca Smith

(all from Ohio University), and Larry Erbert (University of Iowa) provided several citations as part of research projects with the lead author. Molly deLaval-Hixson (Ohio University) helped type our initial reference list. Each of these people made our task of assembling the necessary materials easier.

We also wish to acknowledge the editors of the series, Susan and Clyde Hendrick, for their generous and friendly support and patience as we proceeded through different phases of this book (and as we have moved around the country). We most appreciate their careful and immediate feedback on the initial draft. Their attention to meaning and detail is marvelous. Several fine editors at Sage promoted and dramatically improved our manuscript. We owe a debt of gratitude to C. Terry Hendrix for his encouraging us along the way, to Dale Grenfell for her diligent editing, and to Tricia Bennett for her expert management of the production of the book. As authors, we have benefited from the series editors' sage advice, as well as those who work in Thousand Oaks, California.

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