An Exploratory Study of Marital Conflict

This monograph is a report of an exploratory study of marital conflict. The initiating aims of our explorations were two-fold: (1) to investigate different methods of studying marital conflict in order to sharpen our research tools for subsequent, larger scale studies; and (2) to develop insights and hypotheses about factors affecting the course of marital conflict which might be tested in subsequent studies. The results of our explorations have been sufficiently interesting to warrant separate publication without waiting for the findings of more definitive, larger scale studies.

The research described here is based on a laboratory study of ten couples who were married at least two years. All but one were recruited by newspaper ads or notices placed on bulletin boards in local universities. The recruitment notices stated that we were conducting research on "marital interaction" and would pay couples $50 for 10 hours of their time, to be spent in our laboratory. (Most couples spent over 12 hours with us and they were paid more than the $50 they had expected.) We tried to screen those who volunteered so as to eliminate couples who were seeking therapy or who showed clear evidence of personal or marital psychopathology.

The 10 couples are, of course, not a random sample of any population and we shall not offer any generalizations about marital life in the United States or, even, among financially-needy, college-educated, young married couples in New York City. The only safe statement about the 10 couples collectively is that almost all found the study interesting and, in addition, they thought that they got a good deal from participating in it. Moreover,
none of them, as individuals or as couples, felt disturbed enough as a result of the procedures to which they were exposed to use the services of a psychotherapist who was made available for consultation if such help were desired.

The couples were put through an intensive and extensive series of procedures during the course of three sessions, each of which lasted about three hours. The three occasions were usually on separate days in the same week. The first session consisted of a battery of personality inventories which were filled out individually. The second session consisted of several, long questionnaires inquiring into different facets of their marriage and their perceptions of themselves and spouses; these questionnaires were filled out separately by each spouse. The final session involved a number of different interactional situations, most of which were video-taped for later analysis. After the couples had been through all of the research procedures, we held a concluding debriefing session with them in which we answered their questions, explained the purposes of the various procedures and of the overall research, and inquired into their attitudes toward the experience they had undergone in our laboratory. In the debriefing session, an opportunity was offered to further discuss, with a trained psychotherapist, any feelings that had been evoked by their participation in the research; none of the couples felt this was necessary.

The research procedures which were employed in the three different sessions are described briefly below:

Session I: Personality Measures

We employed a variety of personality measures, nine all-in-all.

The measures were given in the following order:
1. Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale. This scale, which has been widely used in research, purports to measure the extent to which a person believes the control of their fate resides within themselves ("internals") or is determined by agents or factors extrinsic to themselves ("externals"). A recent review of it is presented in Robinson and Shaver (1973).

2. Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire. This questionnaire claims to measure 16 primary personality factors: (A) reserved vs. outgoing; (B) intelligence; (C) ego strength; (E) dominance; (F) sober vs. happy-go-lucky; (G) superego strength; (I) forthright vs. shrewdness; (O) guilt proneness; (Q1) radicalness; (Q2) self-sufficiency; (Q3) self-control; and (Q4) tenseness. In addition, the questionnaire gives rise to 4 second-order factor scores: I Anxiety; II Extraversion; III Alert Poise; and IV Independence. The 16 PF questionnaire has been used to differentiate happily from unhappily married couples ( ). For references, see Buros (1970).

3. Christie's Machiavellianism scale. This scale attempts to tap a person's general strategy for dealing with people, especially the degree to which he feels other people are manipulable in interpersonal situations. Those who are high in "machiavellianism" purportedly have a "cool detachment" which makes them less emotionally involved with other people, with sensitive issues, or with saving face in embarrassing situations (Robinson and Shaver, 1973).

4. Schutz's FIRO-B attempts to measure how an individual behaves with respect to three fundamental interpersonal dimensions: inclusion, which at the positive end is manifested by associating, belonging, communicating, etc.
and at the negative end by excluding, ignoring, detaching, withdrawing, etc.; control, which is evidenced by power, dominance, influence, etc. at one end and by resistance, anarchy, submission, etc. at the other end; and affection which is expressed by love, closeness, warmth, intimacy at one end and hate, coldness, distance, etc. at the other end. The behavior of an individual may be behavior that he expresses toward others or that he wants from others. Six scales are, thus, derived from the Firo-B questionnaire: expressed and wanted behavior in the areas of inclusion, control, and affection. See Buros (1970) for references.

5. Witkin's Embedded Figures Test. The task of the subject in this test is to identify a simple figure that is perceptually embedded in a more complex figure; a series of 12 such tasks, graded in difficulty, comprise the test. The test is a measure of "field independence or dependence," which appears to relate to degree of psychological differentiation and articulation. Individuals who have difficulty in perceiving the embedded figures are more field dependent, less psychologically differentiated, have less of a sense of separate identity, and are more likely to have a hysterical character structure than those who readily perceive the embedded figures (Witkin et al, 1971.)

6. Draw-a-person test. In this test, the person is simply asked to draw a person on a standard-sized white sheet of paper. After he has finished, he is asked to draw a member of the opposite sex. The test is a projective test and requires a skilled interpreter, specially trained in its interpretation. The test purportedly gives insight into the individual's self-concept and concept of the other sex. For references see items 442A and 451 in Buros (1970).
7. Rosenberg's self-esteem scale. This scale measures the self-acceptance aspect of self-esteem. It is a ten item scale which takes only a brief time to complete. See Robinson and Shaver, 1973, for references.

8. Gurin symptom check list. This questionnaire contains a list of psychosomatic symptoms and the individual is asked, for each one, to indicate on a 4-point scale (from "nearly all the time" to "never") how frequently he experiences the symptom. Gurin et al (1960) have used this questionnaire as a measure of mental health.

9. Shostrom's Personal Orientation Inventory. This inventory attempts to provide a "comprehensive measure of values and behavior seen to be of importance in the development of self actualization." The questionnaire provides 12 measures: (1) Time competence (i.e., the degree to which one is "present"-oriented); (2) Inner versus outer-directedness; (3) Self-actualizing value; (4) Existentiality (ability to react situationally without rigid adherence to principles); (5) Feeling reactivity (responsiveness to one's own needs and feelings; (6) Spontaneity; (7) Self-regard; (8) Self-acceptance (despite weaknesses); (9) Nature of man (constructive view of masculinity, femininity); (10) Synergy (ability to transcend dichotomies); (11) Acceptance of one's own aggressiveness; and (12) Capacity for intimate contact. References for this inventory can be found in Buros (1970).
The Second Session: Questionnaires Relating to Their Marriage

During their second session, each spouse in a couple filled out separately six questionnaires about their marriage. Each questionnaire is described below:

1. The Locke Mental Adjustment and Prediction Scales. This questionnaire consists of 51 items covering such topics as one's happiness with one's marriage, the amount of disagreement with one's spouse on various matters, one's relations with one's parents, one's moods, etc. From the entire questionnaire a measure is derived which purports to predict one's marital adjustment.

2. Marital Adjective Check List. This questionnaire consisted of eighteen 7-point bipolar rating scales ("dominant-submissive," "active-passive," "cooperative-competitive," "happy-sad," "sexually attractive-not sexually attractive," "good-bad," "in love-not in love," etc.) which were to be rated from four different perspectives:

   (a) In my relationship with my spouse, I feel...
   (b) In my spouse's relationship with me, I predict my spouse feels...
   (c) In my relationship with my spouse, my spouse thinks I feel...
   (d) In our relationship, my spouse is...

This questionnaire provides measures of each spouse's own attitudes, and his or her conception of the other's conception of one's own attitudes. By comparing the responses of the husband and wife, one can also get measures of the congruency of their attitudes and the accuracy of their perceptions of one another's attitudes.

3. A Marital Activities Questionnaire. This questionnaire listed 54 separate marital activities (such as "pays major bills," "invites friends over,"
"does the dishes," "initiates sexual relations"). For each activity, six questions were asked: (a) who does the activity? (2) who does your spouse think should do it? (4) how satisfied are you with how it is done? (5) how satisfied is your spouse with the way it is done? and (6) how frequently do arguments take place over that activity? This questionnaire provides measures similar to the Marital Adjective Check List, except that the measures focus on specific activities rather than on qualities of the interrelatedness.

4. The Marital Roles Survey consisted of 228 items that clustered into twelve areas: (1) background data; (2) religious and political values; (3) family finances; (4) work and volunteer activities; (5) contraception and family planning; (6) child care; (7) relations with friends; (8) relations with relatives; (9) recreation; (10) companionship; (11) sexual relations; and (12) satisfaction with one's spouse and one's marriage. This inventory gave a fairly detailed picture of the perceived value congruence between oneself and one's spouse in the various areas covered by the questions.

5. Sources of Conflict. From the literature on marital conflict, we compiled a list of 27 important potential sources of conflict. Each spouse rated each of the 27 sources as to how important a source of conflict it was in their marriage. For any item that was considered as an important source of conflict, the nature of conflict was to be described.

6. The Problem Solving Survey. This 85-item questionnaire inquired into how the married couple deals with arguments and conflict: how often do they occur? how do they usually start? what tactics and strategies are used during an argument? what feelings do they give rise to? what are their consequences? It provides an assessment by each spouse of how productively
they handle the conflicts within their marriage and is, thus, one of the central instruments in our investigation.

The Third Session: Interaction Measures

In the third session, the couples participated in five structured situations in which their interaction with one another could be studied. The five situations are described below:

1. The Prisoner's Dilemma Game. This game has been widely used in the study of interpersonal conflict (Deutsch, 1973). It is a situation in which each spouse has to choose between two alternatives and the outcome that each receives is determined by what the other chooses as well as what one chooses oneself. In the matrix in Figure I, the husband chooses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>+4</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>+7</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: The Prisoner's Dilemma

between Rows A & B, the wife between Columns X and Y. The husband's possible outcomes are encircled; the wife's are not. If the husband, for example, chooses Row A his outcome would be either +4 or -7, depending upon the wife's choice: if she chooses Column X, he would receive +4; but if she chooses Column Y, he would lose -7. Similarly for the wife, her outcome is determined by her husband's choice as well as her own. Thus, if she chooses Column X she can receive either +4 or -7, depending upon whether her husband chooses Row X or Y.
As can be seen from Figure 1, both can gain only if an "AX" combination of choices occur; in other words, only if they trust one another and cooperate. However, each spouse faces the temptation that he or she might do better by not cooperating (make +7 rather than +4) when the other chooses cooperatively: that is, the husband is tempted to choose Row B and the wife is tempted to choose Column Y. Both realize that the other is tempted not to cooperate and each realizes that each could lose less (-3 rather than -7) if each plays it safe and chooses suspiciously. Thus, temptation and suspicion suggest that one not cooperate but, if both the husband and wife decide not to cooperate, each will end up losing -3 and each gain +4 by cooperating. That is their dilemma.

The game was played for 30 trials; the choices were made secretly and simultaneously, without communication, on each trial with the outcomes of each trial being announced after each trial. The Prisoner's Dilemma game was the only one of the interaction situations that was not videotaped since all of the interactions were by game choices.

2. The Acme-Bolt bargaining game (the Ravich version). In this game, the husband and wife each operated railroad trains which could earn money by going from a starting point to a final destination. Each would get a constant sum of money for making the trip minus a variable cost, which was a function of how long it took for their train to make the trip. The longer the trip took, the less would be earned. Each train had two routes to its destination: a short route and a long, alternate route. The short, direct route was partly shared by the two trains. The shared part, which the two trains used in opposite directions, permitted only one train to go through at a time. If both trains tried to take their short route they would meet on the shared part, going in opposite directions, and block one another.
They would be faced with the problem that one or the other had to back up to let the other one go through but each would earn more by going through first. To complicate matters, the husband and wife each controlled a gate which could be used to prevent the other from going to his or her destination on the short route.

In the Ravich version of the Acme-Bolt game, the players are able to move their trains electronically and to follow the train movement visually; there is a very clear visualization of what is occurring. The game was played for 20 trials and the husband and wife were allowed to communicate with one another freely during the game. The game has been extensively employed in therapy with married couples (Ravich, 1975) and we thought it might be useful in understanding the marital interaction of the couples we were studying.

3. **Communication exercises.** We modified two techniques commonly employed in encounter groups for use with our couples. In the first exercise ("I appreciate, I resent") each spouse was instructed to say something he or she appreciated about the other; the recipient was told to receive the communication without reacting adversely and further to give evidence from his own behavior supporting the compliment. Each spouse repeated this exercise twice. Then, they were asked to communicate some aspect that they resented about the other and the receiver was also to find evidence supporting the criticism. Each spouse was "communicator" and "receiver" twice. In the second exercise ("I hear, I imagine"), one spouse was asked to say something critical of the other and the recipient was asked to repeat the message ("I hear..." and then to say what he or she
imagined the other really meant ("I imagine...").

4. **Pappy's role-playing situation.**
II. Preliminary Theoretical Outline

Our previous research on conflict (Deutsch, 1973) had been directed at answering the general question of what determines whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course. Our approach to studying this question had been largely through experimental investigations employing people who had no prior relationship with one another before entering our laboratory. Based upon this research, we had come up with some preliminary answers to our query. The present study was motivated, in part, by the desire to see whether these answers would have relevance to conflicts in an important, on-going, intimate relationship such as marriage as well as in the more casual, superficial relationships we had previously investigated. The study was also motivated by the desire to extend our thinking as we faced the complexities of understanding marital conflict.

In this chapter, we summarize some of the conclusions of our prior work and draw implications for the characterization of marital conflict. We shall start by outlining some of the fundamental assumptions in our approach to conflict. Basic to our outlook on conflict is the assumption that perception is not always veridical: people may argue about the wrong thing or, even, with the wrong person; they may argue, believing that they disagree, even when they actually agree; or people may deny, repress, avoid, or otherwise not experience or deal with a real conflict between them. Thus, one set of questions to ask about marital conflict have to do with the existential status of conflict within the marriage. Another central feature of our view of conflict is that it is a natural
and inevitable aspect of all ongoing relationships. Conflicts are to be expected in all marital relationships; moreover, although some of these conflicts will be characteristic of the given type of relationship, some of them will be unique to the relationship. Thus, a second set of questions to ask about marital conflict has to do with what kinds of conflict occur in marriages and with what the conflicts are about within a given marriage. The third key aspect of our perspective is that conflicts have consequences: they can be constructive or destructive on the parties involved and their relationship. Thus, a third set of questions to ask about marital conflict have to do with the course and consequence of conflict. Below, each of the set of questions are specified in greater detail with some possible answers.

The existential status of the conflict.

With regard to any marital conflict, it is relevant to ask such questions as: Does the couple typically face the conflicts between them or do they avoid them? Which kinds of conflicts are they more prone to avoid and which more likely to face? When they avoid facing a conflict, how do they do so? And what are the consequences? If they face the conflict, do they perceive it—including one another's position—accurately and, if not, what sorts of distortions or misunderstandings occur? What sorts of conflicts typically give rise to misunderstandings? Do they have the skills for detecting and for correcting misunderstandings?

Our prior research touched lightly on the kinds of questions listed above since our experimental situations made it difficult for subjects in our studies to avoid the conflicts of interest between them. Nevertheless, our theorizing (Deutsch, 1973, 1974) would suggest that conflicts are most
likely to be avoided when the potential participants anticipate that they would be worse off rather than better off as a result of engaging in the conflict. There are a number of reasons why members of a married couple might have such an expectation. First, their prior experiences with conflict may have been with bitter, destructive, competitive conflicts; hence, they think of conflict as likely to leave them and/or their spouse as very upset, hurt, and unhappy. Second, they may consider themselves to be in a very weak position of power, relative to their spouse, so that the other can readily ignore, overwhelm, or humiliate them if they initiate a conflict. Third, they may feel that the issues in the conflict are so important and fundamental to the relationship that an attempt to confront the conflict will evoke explosive or uncontrollable emotions whose consequences may not be welcome or which the relationship may not be strong enough to contain. Or they may feel that confronting any particular conflict will open the flood-gates so that the particular conflict will be lost in the flood of previously unresolved conflicts and feelings. In addition, a conflict may be avoided because the issue is seen to be insignificant or one that is likely to be short-lived and not recurring.

Avoidance of conflict within a marriage is an active process. The conflict to be avoided, if it is not a trivial one, cannot simply be ignored; it must be defended against. The mechanisms of defense that couples may employ to avoid their marital conflicts are analogous to those identified by the psychoanalysts as being utilized against unacceptable impulses. They may **repress** the conflict so that the conflict disappears from their conscious interaction, they may **isolate** it so that they don't experience
its emotional significance to them; they may displace the conflict so that it is dealt with symbolically through other issues, they may through reaction-formation develop a surface harmony which appears to deny issues, they may project the conflict and be very sensitive to it in others, they may develop rationalizations to justify the status-quo, and so forth.

A couple must collude and their mechanisms of defense must complement one another's if they are successfully to avoid conflicts. The cost of the collusion is that they don't resolve the issues between them, with the result that there is a covert barrier to full rapport and intimacy in their relationship. In addition, the avoidance of conflict is an energy-consuming and constructing process. Nevertheless, just as is true for many individuals, it is also likely to be true for couples that effective mechanisms of defense may be functional: couples who do not have the resources to deal constructively with their conflicts may be able to live and function together by avoiding them.

Even if a couple face their conflicts, they may do so in a manner which fosters distortions and misunderstandings. There are, of course, many different factors that can contribute to misunderstandings in the course of conflict. Some of these inhere in the personalities and skills of the people involved, some have to do with their communicative compatibility, and some have to do with their motivational orientations toward one another. Thus, individuals vary in their ability to take the role of the other and, thus, to predict how the other will understand and react to what they say. Also individuals vary in the many skills that relate to affective communication; some people can articulate their thoughts clearly and vividly, others cannot;
some have developed techniques of obtaining feedback from the other to check on the success of their communication but many have not. While communication is aided by skill in taking the role of the other, it is apparent that this skill is not highly developed in most people. Successful communication usually also presupposes shared backgrounds, shared implicit assumptions, and shared language usage. Faulty communication can arise because people believe they share the same assumptions--e.g., about how emotions are to be expressed--but, in fact, they do not (as is the case for many husbands and wives).

Faulty communication may arise within a couple because of their orientations toward one another. They may feel that they cannot be fully honest with one another; they hesitate to be open and frank with the other and they have doubts about the other's willingness to be completely above board. Such marital suspicion may well reflect a deeper feeling of doubt about each other's basic orientation: can I trust the other to be for me? As we shall see in a subsequent section, a mutually cooperative orientation fosters effective communication, while a competitive orientation hampers it. The kind of conflict,

Research on interpersonal attraction (Huston, 1974) and mate selection (Barry, 1970) suggests that a three-stage process may operate in successful marital pairing. First, as a result of propinquity, people become acquainted with one another and have a chance to interact. Secondly, after becoming acquainted, if they come to think that they have similar beliefs, attitudes, and values, they are likely to become attracted to one another and to interact more frequently. Finally, if as a result of this attraction,
they feel that their behaviors and needs complement one another so that they experience their interaction as mutually rewarding and fulfilling—e.g., both want a very close relationship with the other or one wants to be dominating and the other wants to be submissive—then they are likely to pair off with one another. However, the processes of forming impressions of another may be faulty. One may develop an inaccurate view of how similar the other’s perspectives are to one’s own or one may misjudge how compatible the other’s behavioral style and personality are with one’s own.

When a marital relationship is not firmly rooted in similarities of basic values and compatibilities with regard to central personality characteristics, it is natural to expect that such a relationship will be characterized by more than the common household variety of conflicts. If by mishap, a devout orthodox Jew were to marry a militant atheist, it could be expected that they would be faced with frequent, fundamental conflict. Similarly, a woman who needs more sustained closeness than her husband can tolerate may be deeply wounded and, as a result, be unable to deal with everyday conflicts constructively.

It is evident that not all dissimilarities in viewpoint or incompatibilities in personal need lead to sustained difficulty in a relationship. What kinds of dissimilarities in beliefs, attitudes, and values are likely to promote pathogenic conflict? What kinds of incompatibilities are apt to stir discontent and dissension? Probably, it is not the particular content per se of the dissimilarity or incompatibility that leads to marital problems: differences over religious values may be more, or less, prone than differences over political views to cause difficult conflicts. Rather it is the importance
or significance of the issue to the parties involved and the frequency with which the issue arises in their interaction. Thus it is not simply that a married couple, for example, differ in their political views which makes for a difficult marriage. For difficulty to develop, each must feel deeply invested in their viewpoints and their viewpoints must lead to frequent action which violate fundamental values of one or the other. If one spouse is a political radical and the other a conservative, even if each feels intensely about their views, they may experience little conflict if they only sit-on their political values during presidential elections once every four years. On the other hand, if each spouse has strongly-held conceptions which differ about the roles and responsibilities of the "husband" and the "wife," they may find themselves in frequent conflict because their daily activities in the marriage are related to these role definitions.

Although marriages vary enormously in terms of the functions they are expected to fulfill for the marital partners, most marriages involve a considerable degree of interdependence between the spouses in such spheres as money matters, household arrangements and management, sexual satisfaction, child-rearing practices, companionship and social activities, affection, intimacy, and emotional support. It is in such spheres of high interdependence that marital conflict is most likely to occur. A given couple may experience disputes over money matters as more damaging than conflicts about sexual relations, for another couple it may be just the reverse. As I have suggested elsewhere (Deutsch, 1973), conflict is more likely to be damaging when the issues involved are of central significance to one's self-esteem or one's sense
of security and when the issues are rigidly defined so that it becomes
difficult or impossible to find satisfactory alternatives or substitutes
for achieving the outcomes at stake in the conflict.
imagined the other really meant ("I imagine ")

Exercise: find (and select) with students

Replay, Barry, 10/10/19

4. Group Learning Outside

on a Sunday (heat exhaustion)

addressed employed on the playing situation in which one ought
to gain understanding of the teaching aspect of "learning their names"

what technique he used in the role of playing?

the other was not drawn and rejected. In the opposite, the husband

was asked to imagine in which he felt he did not want to have

something to do with his job, a mood in which he felt with drawn

rejection toward her. At the same time, the wife was told to imagine

that he husband had been cold and distant for the last few days, so that she

identified by her behavior. She was then told that she was upset that she was

originally to break down the barriers and get close to her. The therapist

spoke of the husband's state of a room and the effect/therapy. The therapist

stated the problem for 15 minutes. In the second session, the wife was assigned the

above task in both outside were with both her and her 

husband.
5. The spirit moves me to record a few facts of interest. A day or two before the battle of Gettysburg, the Union forces were in a state of high tension. They were preparing for a major battle, but their confidence was waning. The leaders were divided on strategy, and there was a fear of defeat.

After the battle, President Lincoln delivered his famous Gettysburg Address. He spoke of the sacrifices made and the need for a more perfect union. His words were a call to action, to work towards a better future.

In the aftermath of the battle, the Union forces were victorious, but the cost was high. Many lives were lost, and the nation was forever changed. The spirit of unity and determination was a driving force in the days to come.
so the ratings were discussed to see if they could be understood.