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### Conflict in Interpersonal Relationships

Conflict is defined by Peterson (1983) as “the interpersonal process that occurs whenever the actions of one person interfere with the actions of another,” and it seems to be unavoidable in romantic relationships. Within his model of conflict, Peterson (1983) suggests that an argument essentially has a beginning, middle, and ending stage, each containing different tactics that a couple will follow that will produce predictable outcomes. If the parties in conflict use constructive tactics to settle their disagreement, it is more likely that when the argument is terminated, there will be a structural improvement in the relationship itself (Erber & Erber, 2001). Mohr and Spekman (1994) describe constructive communication as joint problem solving, and destructive communication as leading to domination or confrontation.

The article, *How to Emerge from a Fight More in Love*, found on Cosmopolitan.com, illustrates this concept. The implied need of this text is an intimacy or romantic need, because it expresses the desire for a warm, close, communicative relationship with one person in particular. This is evident within the article because it is specifically written to give a woman tips on how to strengthen her relationship with “her guy” during a fight. The implied interpersonal goal communicated in this article is relational development. It aims to teach women how to communicate effectively so that their relationships are maintained and grow stronger, rather than fall apart at the first sign

of conflict. The basic argument within the narrative is that if a woman follows the constructive communication patterns suggested within each stage of an argument with her significant other and avoids the destructive communication patterns referenced, her relationship should survive a conflict and may even become stronger as a result. The article specifically gives “dividing moves” and “uniting moves” that one can employ during four stages of conflict: starting the fight, during the debate, wrapping it up, and dealing with the aftermath. Dividing moves include things like blindsiding or ambushing a man with the complaint, using sarcasm or name calling, bringing up unrelated issues from past arguments, and holding a grudge. Some of the uniting moves include staying calm, making sure what you are fighting about is really the underlying issue, using “I” language instead of “You” language, and asking clarifying questions. The text claims that if disagreements are dealt with in a constructive manner, they can provide an opportunity for romantic partners to grow closer.

As previously mentioned, Peterson’s Model of Conflict consists of three stages: beginning, middle, and termination. As explained in the textbook, *Intimate Relationships*, the beginning stage consists of predisposing conditions, initiating events, and the decision to either engage or avoid. Predisposing conditions are sources of conflict that exist before the conflict is even initiated and can be constantly present in the relationship, like gender differences. Initiating events are situations that could trigger an argument, for example, if one partner in the relationship is late for a dinner date and offers no explanation. If an initiating event has occurred, and the couple decides to engage in an argument, then the model progresses to the next stage. If the couple chooses to avoid the argument, the conflict is terminated.

In the middle stage of Peterson's model, after the couple has chosen to engage, they address the issue at hand in one or more of three ways: escalation, negotiation, or conciliation. Escalation often includes personal attacks and attributions of blame and can lead to separation or negotiation. Negotiation involves the search for a solution and problem-solving communication. Conciliation occurs when the parties claim responsibility for their actions and express a willingness to negotiate. When the source of the conflict is perceived as unmanageable by the parties, separation can occur, but may lead to a future reconciliation of the couple (Erber & Erber, 2001).

The final stage of the model, termination, occurs when the conflict has ended and an outcome has been reached. According to Peterson, these outcomes can include: structural improvement, integrative agreements, compromise, domination, or separation. Structural improvement, the most ideal of the outcomes, means that the couple has changed the way in which they view the relationship, and the relationship has been positively restructured. Integrative agreements, another positive outcome, includes a mutually satisfying agreement made by the couple in response to the conflict. If compromise is the outcome, both parties will end up giving something up in order to reach an agreement. Domination occurs when one party involved in the conflict "wins" the argument while the other loses, and separation means that the relationship is terminated because of the conflict. When constructive tactics, such as conciliation and negotiation, are employed within the middle stages of conflict, it is more likely that positive outcomes, such as structural improvement or integrative agreements, will result in the termination stage of Peterson's model (Erber and Erber, 2001).

The results of an Expectancy Violations Theory study that explored the use of constructive versus destructive behavior following a hurtful event in dating relationships confirmed this thought. It was found that those who used constructive communication following a hurtful event caused by one partner in the relationship were more likely to stay together and report a higher relationship quality after the event (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). Another study, comparing the conflict responses of married couples to their marital quality, found similar results. Through personal interviews and self-report questionnaires, the sample of couples studied reported that there were significant negative correlations between aggression and withdrawal and problem solving. In other words, when one or more of the partners used destructive communication or stopped communication within the conflict all together, the issues at hand were not successfully resolved (Wilhelm & Surra, 2001).

The basic logic of Peterson's Stage Model of Conflict is that all interpersonal conflicts progress through stages and have predictable outcomes depending on the type of communication used within the stages. If problem-solving oriented communication is used within the middle stage of Peterson's model, it is likely that the relationship involved can return to a state of normalcy or even improve within the termination stage. If destructive communication patterns are used, such as blame and personal attack, one or more partners within the relationship are likely to be dissatisfied, or even make the decision to end the relationship. The Cosmopolitan article provides advice on this very subject. It is implied within the article that many women are concerned that initiating a conflict with their male counterparts could mean that their relationship is in jeopardy. The article reassures these women by stating that if a conflict is approached in a

constructive manner, a relationship can actually be improved as an outcome. This structural improvement is what Peterson deems as the best possible outcome of a conflict (Peterson, 1983).

Peterson's Conflict Model predicts the implied intimacy or romantic need expressed in this article. Although the model could be applied to a range of interpersonal relationships, the decision to even engage in conflict as opposed to just avoiding it implies that partners are invested in the relationship to a certain extent and that there is a level of intimacy. If two people reach the middle stage of Peterson's model, and are truly committed to resolving their conflict, it is likely that they are either in an intimate and significant friendship or in a romantic relationship with the person with whom they are engaging in conflict.

Peterson's model also explains implied communication goal of the article, which is relational development. It shows how, through the use of either constructive or destructive communication types in the middle stage, conflict can help maintain the relationship, improve it, or bring it to an end. The Cosmopolitan article gives pointers on how to make sure a relationship maintains stability or becomes even better after a conflict.

One limitation of Peterson's Stage Model of Conflict is that it does not paint a clear picture of what the outcome of a conflict would be if the couple uses a combination of destructive and constructive tactics. While the textbook states that this is likely to occur, the model itself does not go into detail about what the outcomes could be. Similarly, the model does not specifically predict what might happen if one party engages in solely constructive tactics and the other engages in solely destructive tactics. In

conjunction with this, the Cosmopolitan article only gives tips on how to be a constructive communicator within an argument. It does not give advice about what to do if your partner responds negatively to your attempts and chooses to engage in destructive communication. Ultimately, each relationship, as well as each conflict, is unique, and not all situations can be generalized in one model. While the article examined does provide some helpful ways to deal with conflicts constructively, sometimes anger and other emotions can cloud judgment and in the heat of the moment, everything you have learned about constructive communication can seem insignificant and impossible to remember.

Peterson's Stage Model serves as an excellent foundation for the article, *How to Emerge from a Fight More in Love*. They both discuss different stages of conflict, from beginning to termination, and different ways that each stage could be handled by a couple. Peterson's model implies that when constructive tactics are employed, the outcome for both parties and the relationship itself is better than if destructive tactics are used. The Cosmopolitan article expands on this idea and attempts to diminish fear that some women have about losing their partners due to a conflict by saying that arguing has a chance of making a relationship better. It follows up by telling women smart and constructive ways to have an argument without ruining their relationship.

## References

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