VIOLENT EMOTIONS

Shame and Rage in Marital Quarrels

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Preface

Mary Anne Fitzpatrick

The main reason for reading a preface is to find out what the book has to say. Suzanne Retzinger has done such a fine job of presenting her theory and research that a detailed description by me of this book would be redundant. Consequently, after a cursory treatment of the main points of Dr. Retzinger's argument, I will try to indicate the importance of this book by placing it within the context of the work concerned with communication in the family across a number of social science disciplines. These last are fields with which I am familiar, but they are relevant beyond that fact. A communication theory of the family must account for emotional processes, and Dr. Retzinger's research moves the field in an important direction in that regard.

According to Dr. Retzinger, connection with others is the primary motive in human behavior and is accomplished through communication. Central to her theory is the idea that social connections or bonds between people are at risk in all encounters: If they are not being built, maintained, or repaired, they are being damaged. Within her framework of human sociability, an important source of conflict and aggression between intimates becomes reactions to lapses in important social

bonds. A perceived attack by one partner on the bond between partners causes rage and shame and hence conflict escalation.

Dr. Retzinger presents a powerful theory of emotional processes and conflict escalation in intimate relationships. In testing her theory of protracted conflict, she employs complex verbal and nonverbal coding schemes, identifies specific emotions within the context of marital quarrels, and isolates recurring patterns preceding the escalation of a quarrel. She provides exemplars of how this theory works through the intensive analysis of segments of conflict exchanges in four couples. The reader will come to know Rosie and James, David and Colleen, Roxanne and Brian, and Randy and Karin very well by the end of this book. I suspect that many researchers, teachers, and therapists will turn to the vivid descriptions and transcripts the author provides to illustrate important points about communication in intimate relationships.

If Dr. Retzinger had accomplished only these feats in her book, it would be an important addition to the literature. She has, however, done much more. I hope to show the extent of her contribution by discussing the fault lines dividing the research on family process, the central role of affect in understanding conflict dynamics, and how this theory can benefit other major lines of investigation in the family area.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL FAULT LINES

The study of marital and family interaction cuts across disciplinary boundaries. Researchers are housed in a variety of disciplines, including communication, psychiatry, social work, sociology, and clinical, social, and developmental psychology. Each discipline approaches the study of family interaction somewhat differently. Some of the differences come from the weights that each discipline assigns to the various levels of analysis from which an examination of the family can proceed (Fitzpatrick & Wamboldt, 1990); some come from the quantitative versus qualitative fault line that splits family communication researchers.

This book and the way Dr. Retzinger approaches her research may keep the fault line from becoming a chasm. She heavily references and relies on both quantitative and qualitative work to build her argument, displays great sensitivity about how the "other side" may view the importance of case studies, and is extraordinarily careful in documenting her arguments about sequence and pattern in these dialogues. In other words, within a conversation, Dr. Retzinger compares the presence or absence of shame and rage and its relationship to escalation, and justifies her conclusions with empirical evidence. It is up to the reader to decide the degree to which the method of proof used in this book defends against alternative explanations. But the same holds true for the reader of a piece of communication science research in family interaction (Jacobs, 1988).

Dr. Retzinger and I are on opposite sides of this epistemological fault line; whereas she may be considered a discourse analyst who uses a case study method, with its focus on intensive analysis and in-depth exemplars, I am a communication scientist who studies family communication processes by employing large-scale data sets and quantitative techniques to examine sequence and pattern in couple communication. According to the usual logic of these positions, the methods of argument and the standards of proof differ so radically that little can be learned from the writing generated on the other side of the fault line. Like children at parallel play, work on family dynamics proceeds along similar tracks within each camp, yet is rarely acknowledged outside of the group. Panel discussions at academic conventions sometimes give lip service to how much we all have to learn from one another. The political fact, however, is that researchers and theorists working in what might be called discourse-analytic approaches versus communication science approaches to communication in the family rarely read or cite each other's work, appear in each other's edited volumes, or review each other's books.

As a communication scientist, I see Dr. Retzinger operating within the context of discovery in that she has carefully outlined a theory that can be (and is) operationalized and tested. The assumptions behind her theory as well as her propositions are unambiguously presented to the reader. Communication

scientists, working within a context of justification, may want to demonstrate the relative frequency of occurrence or the situational variability of the emotional patterns that Dr. Retzinger has discerned in her four conversations. Indeed, I believe that important research in communication science can be generated from the theory presented by Dr. Retzinger on how couples and other intimates escalate conflict by attacking the social bonds. Those workers in communication science interested in third-party intervention and mediation may find exactly the theoretical stance they need on conflict in intimate relationships in Dr. Retzinger's theory (Donohue, Lyles, & Rogan, 1989).

THE ROLE OF AFFECT IN INTIMATE CONFLICT

Few would argue with the commonsense notion that emotion in families and close relationships is an important area of study. Many would be surprised to find that until recently little attention has been paid to this area of study. Within the last decade, however, given the work of a number of fine investigators, it has become the accepted view that the emotional climate of a distressed and conflict-ridden marriage includes both more negative affect and more reciprocation of negative affect than that of a nondistressed marriage. This finding has been replicated in different laboratories and cultures and appears to show strong cross-situational consistency within a given couple. In addition, the causal effect of such negative affect cycles has been demonstrated in longitudinal designs (see decade review by Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). If this is the accepted view, what information do we gain about affect by reading the work of Dr. Retzinger?

Two answers to this question immediately spring to mind. The most obvious answer is that the strength of this theory is that it unpacks the construct of negative affect so that we may examine it more closely. Rage and shame are given central theoretical focus as the causal mechanisms responsible for marital conflict escalation. Anger alone is not the villain, but the accompanying shame that comes with an attack on the marital bond. A less obvious, yet far more important, answer is that

the author presents an interactional theory of affect (also see Gottman, 1990). Family communication theorists often decry the scarcity of relational-level terms in both naive language and scientific writing. Within the theoretical tradition that attempts to keep concepts and inferences at the relational level, and thus rejects individual-motivational terms, affect has long been suspect (Raush, Greif, & Nugent, 1979). Within this decade, negative affect reciprocity has joined this construct class, yet still other relational-level affect descriptors for interaction are needed. In a field still weak in language to describe process, Dr. Retzinger introduces social emotions or emotions that operate to regulate the bond between people in order to ensure the survival of connections between intimates.

Aside from the theoretical importance of this language, it has pragmatic value as well. By the end of this book, Dr. Retzinger is able to give pragmatically oriented readers advice about short-circuiting dysfunctional communication patterns. Rather than making generic statements about being more positive and less negative, she shows the reader actual ways to derail the rage-shame interact, and accompanying conflict escalation, either within one's own interaction or when observing that of a third party.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER RESEARCH

One of the major ways that scientific research is judged is the degree to which it complements other research endeavors. The working assumption for those who research intimate relationships is that embedded patterns of interaction between partners cannot be successfully hidden but are revealed through a close examination of how couples communicate. Dr. Retzinger's research is clearly within this tradition: It should set to rest the doubts anyone might have about the willingness and ability of couples to engage in conflict with one another while being videotaped in a scientist's laboratory (I refer skeptics to Karin and Randy).

In reading the intensive analysis of the dialogues of Retzinger's couples, I was struck by the similarity of the conflict

patterns she uncovered to those I have seen in my laboratory (Fitzpatrick, 1988, 1991). From both the presentation of psychological information about the couples and their standard dialogic patterns of engagement and avoidance of marital conflicts, I would like to speculate as to the definition of the marriage held by each couple. The definition that each couple holds concerning their marriage incorporates three dimensions: ideology (e.g., relational beliefs, values, and standards), interdependence (e.g., degree of connectedness), and expressivity (e.g., views on conflict avoidance/engagement). I would argue that the definition that couples hold about their marriage is one way to describe in detail the kind of bond that couples have. This description may help to predict a priori which messages would be more likely to be an assault on the bond for given sets of couples and, considering the degree to which this theory complements my own work, will allow me to make more substantive and theoretical statements about conflict escalation in various types of marriages (for an attempt, see Burrell & Fitzpatrick, 1990).

Rosie and James have conventional marital and family values, yet also they privilege their individual freedoms over the maintenance of the relationship. This couple is not very companionate, and they share little with each other, trying to maintain a psychological distance in their relationship. Rosie and James might describe their communication with each other as persuasive and assertive, yet they collude in avoiding open conflict. One partner may display outright hostility yet retreat quickly if the partner disagrees. In my terminology, Rosie and James are Separates.

Roxanne and Brian share nonconventional values about relationships and family life, yet are very open and companionable with one another. This couple is constantly renegotiating their roles, and disagreements are a fundamental part of their relationship. Because they tend to engage in conflict very openly, Roxanne and Brian are Independents.

In my terminology, David and Colleen are a mixed type, in that he appears to have an independent view of the marriage whereas she has a separate definition. Mixed types are noted for their disagreement on fundamental issues in the

relationship as well as their different ideologies and views about connectedness. David and Colleen are Independents/Separates.

Although the definitions of their marriages held by the first three couples seem to fall clearly into patterns I have previously uncovered, I am loath to speculate about Randy and Karin. Not only is there less information given about the values and levels of interdependence in this marriage, but this couple seems to be in severe distress after the loss of two children. Whereas the other three couples enacted protracted yet manageable conflict escalation, the nature of the conflict interaction in Randy and Karin's marriage is severe and intense. This couple may be an Independent couple who, although previously able to control their angry exchanges, have now escalated their conflict out of control.

Concern for saving the face of the partner and preserving the bond in the marriage is a major feature of the final major type of couple I have isolated in my research, the Traditionals. Traditionals do not appear in this book about rage and shame in the escalation of marital quarrels. It may be that Traditional couples use the conflict deescalation techniques suggested by Dr. Retzinger in the final section.

CONCLUSION

The theory and research presented in this book pass what I think of as David Reiss's (1981) three-point heuristic test of a model of family processes. To have lasting effects, a work on family process must be found to be (a) plausible and familiar, (b) robust enough to stand revision and tinkering, and (c) capable, with some additional work, of greatly expanding our understanding of family process. Dr. Retzinger's model of conflict escalation through the emotional displays of rage and shame has this heuristic power.

Acknowledgments

This book proposes a theory and method for understanding conflict in relationships. Primary emphasis is placed on the importance of the social bond; lapses in the bond are precursors for conflict. Alienation and emotion usually precede disruption. Although it is common knowledge that anger is involved in conflict, the important role that shame plays in perpetuating anger is not as well understood. I use the information from many fields in a microscopic approach to understanding conflict

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My debt to the late Helen B. Lewis cannot be expressed easily. She was my adviser and role model; her support and loving care will be difficult to match. Her *Psychic War in Men and Women* provided the seed for this book; I express my sorrow for the loss of a great woman. I extend my gratitude to her husband, Naphtali Lewis, for his continued encouragement.

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and intellectual support and encouragement. I extend my most abundant appreciation.

Finally, I wish to thank the couples who volunteered to be a part of this study. They are true pioneers who enabled me to map a passage into an unexplored territory

—Suzanne M. Retzinger

Introduction

> The Godhead is broken like bread. We are the pieces. ("Herman Melville", W. H. Auden)

Randy and Karin, like many couples, have been arguing about the same topic for years; they can't seem to connect with each other:

10:13.50 K: ya but the support doesn't come in telling me not what to eat but realizing that I have some problems an I'm internalizing them is where the support an YOU should come in
23.34 R: ya but I can't get into your mind

Although the primary topic of their argument is the weight Karin has gained, they go from topic to topic. They are alienated and feel hopeless in the situation; they blame each other for the problems:

13:53.00 K: . . . that sex isn't the greatest, could any of it be your fault?
R: NO
56.62 K: NONE of it?

R: uhuh
K: none of it in BED was your fault, it was all my fault that it wasn't the greatest (1.8) you see what you're saying
R: ya I do ( ) and that's what I'm saying
. . .
14:10.00 K: wel-I mean but lets be honest about it ( ) I'm THAT horrible in bed and you're that exciting ( ) is that what you're saying
R: umhmm

Blame only makes the situation worse. Change of topic does not get them any further in resolving their issues, but leads them further into entrenchment; they move to another topic, and the vehemence between them rapidly increases. To observers their topics often seem trivial:

54.40 R: . . . I mean it used to be that you had some actual lips ( ) NOW::you're there's-ther there's very
17:01.31 K: (interrupting R) [you don't have any upper lip]
R: little definition
K: don't talk about my lips

Randy and Karin might be any of us. Although the topic may be different, many couples can recognize the beat of the drums in their own relationships. The topic could be body weight, money, sex, the division of household duties, or the way the kids are raised. Although topics may change, giving the appearance of a new quarrel, the beat goes on. Some couples end in divorce, some live with conflict and violence, others lead lives of quiet desperation; some actually resolve their conflict.

The questions I raise are these: How is it that the same quarrel can continue for years on end, even with great effort to resolve it? What are the driving forces beneath the quarrel that give seemingly trivial topics a powerful life of their own? What roles do emotions play? How can conflict be self-perpetuating?

Although this book is about couples, it may also have implications for other forms of conflict. Conflict is a fundamental problem facing our society. It is clear that conflict is endemic, as suggested by even the most casual glance at present world conditions. Evidence for conflict can be found in all areas of

modern civilization; so little seems to change—wars rage on, violence continues among family members, races, classes, and religions. All the expert systems and advanced abstract knowledge have not seemed to help.

Dahrendorf (1965) implies that conflict is a basic human element when he argues that "wherever we find human societies there is conflict. Societies . . . do not differ as to the presence or absence of conflict, but rather to the degree of violence and intensity" (p. 171). Simmel (1955) suggests that "a certain amount of discord, inner divergence and outer controversy, is organically tied up with the very *elements that ultimately hold the group together*" (p. 18); conflict can be important for *group cohesion*.

If one assumes an innate propensity for conflict, this assumption might lead to the belief that conflict is a predominant motive of human behavior. On the other hand, if human beings are thought to be fundamentally social creatures, maintenance of social contact would be primary. One question to ask is, If conflict is fundamental to human societies, what is it that holds the group together?

Marx (1844/1964) and Simmel (1955) suggest the underlying function of conflict—restoration of social bonds and group unity. The implication of this perspective is that human behavior is not primarily conflictful, competitive, or aggressive, but rather social; conflict is an attempt to restore bonds—the social bond being the glue that holds the group together.

Marx began his analysis with concern for communal bonds, assuming connectedness (solidarity) among its members. In his view, communal bonds were being replaced by alienation in the Industrial Revolution; with the emergence of modern industrial society, community had declined. Marx's writings represent a plea for community, and the hope that eventually conflict would restore community. Simmel (1955) takes a similar view: "Separation does not follow from conflict but, on the contrary, conflict from separation" (p. 47). Although both Marx and Simmel propose that the function of conflict is to restore group cohesion or unity, other theories are permeated with the assumption that aggression and conflict are primary.

A rapidly changing world can lead to breakdown in community (bonding between identified persons). Community is replaced by society—where persons are "arbitrarily and artificially united by promise and contract" (Scheler, 1961, p. 166). Where relationships once were immediate, with rapid changes in time and space, they are becoming increasingly more abstract and distant (Giddens, 1989). Social relationships are being lifted out of the present. In an alienated society there is danger of excessive conformity to *symbolic* values in an attempt to reestablish community. In the process of overconformity, certain aspects of the self are in danger of being lost; the result can be alienation from self.

Recent studies by Lewis (1976), Bowlby (1988), Ainsworth (1989), and others suggest that sociability and affectionateness are primary to bonding; conflict seems to arise only under specific conditions, such as thwarts, threats, or damage to social bonds (i.e., loss of face). A glance at the earliest behavior of human beings finds clutching and clinging rather than fight or flight. Sociability and affectionateness seem to occur prior to aggression; connection with others can be a goal of even conflictful behavior.

I chose to study conflict escalation in marriages for several reasons. First, broken family bonds can be one of the most intense sources of conflict. For example, in some child custody disputes, two otherwise rational people seem to become temporarily insane. Each partner becomes violently reactive to the slightest gesture of the other; the two cannot disentangle themselves emotionally from each other—the level of conflict can increase virtually without limit. Another reason to study marriages is that a precise method can be used that captures moment-by-moment escalation: videotapes of actual quarrels.

The integration of diverse approaches to conflict is the foundation for this book: couples conflict, community conflict, communication theories, large-scale warfare. Conflict theorists have discussed the importance of the *social bond*, but recent work on marital and family conflict, based primarily on atheoretical observations, has virtually ignored this aspect of human behavior. Few have dealt with *sequences* of events that occur during escalation.