MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION:
A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND ITS EMPIRICAL EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

In this article, a conceptual framework relevant to the resolution of marital and other interpersonal conflict is introduced and several of its practical applications are discussed. The framework developed here will be divided into three primary sections. First, a task analysis for disagreement, a specification of the particular tasks at which it is ordinarily necessary to succeed if two people are to resolve an issue confronting them, is introduced. Second, a list of pitfalls, i.e., of actions or omissions on the part of participants which have a high probability of leading to failure to resolve

differences, is generated from the foregoing task analysis. Third, some remarks concerning the place of anger in the present account of conflict resolution are presented. This article concludes with a discussion of two practical applications of this conceptual framework. The first of these is a videotaped program embodying the ideas contained in the conceptual framework. This program and some empirical research done to establish its effectiveness are described. The second application is that to clinical practice: here some ideas for the utilization of this conceptual framework in psychotherapy are presented.

The primary purpose of this article is to present an organized framework of ideas relevant to the resolution of marital and other interpersonal conflict. The aims in doing this are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the aim here is one of providing a coherent conceptual framework from which future thought and research in this area may be generated. Practically, the present formulation is proffered as an organized set of ideas, for use by clinicians and others, relevant to the question of how issues arising in relationships may constructively and amicably be resolved.

Subsequent to the presentation of this conceptual framework, two of its applications will be related. The first of these is a piece of empirical research in which the ideas comprising the framework were embodied in a videotaped program designed to help couples to better resolve their differences. This program was shown to couples, and its effects on their conflict behavior and wider relationship were assessed. The second application is that to clinical work. Here, a general sketch of the uses to which this conceptual framework may be put in clinical practice will be presented.

SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Range of Convenience

The account presented here was developed primarily for the resolution of conflict between marital partners. However, its range of convenience also extends to disagreements between other intimate partners, close friends, roommates, business associates, and others. In general, as will become clear from the subsequent explication of this framework, its nature is such that it should prove relevant to any contending parties confronted with a situation in which it is important to them to resolve their differences. Although in the discussion to follow examples will be drawn largely from the domain of marriage and other intimate relationships, this wider applicability should not be forgotten.

Requisite Motivation: The Primary Desire to Resolve Differences

Confronted with an issue between himself and another, an individual might be motivated to achieve a variety of ends. He might want to gain revenge, to get his way, to resolve the issue, or to perpetuate a state of conflict, to name but a few possibilities. Indeed, the usual state of affairs in this situation is one in which the individual is simultaneously disposed to several ends, and some of these ends are incompatible with others (e.g., an individual may wish both to punish and to get his way, but may also wish to ultimately restore harmony between himself and the other). The present formulation applies in those situations in which the individuals involved are *more disposed* to achieve a resolution of their differences than they are disposed to other, incompatible goals. Given such a primary goal, the ideas presented below are intended as means for its achievement. Given other and incompatible primary goals (e.g., revenge, perpetuation of a state of conflict), a situation obtains in which by definition what the individuals are seeking is not primarily resolution, but something else. To the extent that this is the case, the present conceptual framework becomes irrelevant. (Note: Confronted with a couple in the latter situation, clinicians would thus have to address and deal with these competing motives if they wished to employ the ideas contained in this framework. See the "Clinical Applications" section for more about this matter).

A Note on Context

A consistent difficulty with previous formulations on interpersonal conflict has been the (probably unwitting) tendency of authors to address issues of context or of situation with absolute formulas. For example, Rubin (1969) may be characterized as advocating the policy: "Whenever you are angry, express this anger." In effect, such absolute formulas amount to a directive to ignore context. Obviously, certain problems and dangers attend upon such a strategy. In Rubin's case, for example, action consistent with his policy would be appropriate and constructive on some occasions, but on others would be inappropriate, unethical, self-destructive, or in other ways ill-advised.

The present formulation emphasizes the importance of a more flexible, situationally-oriented policy with regard to the conduct of disagreements. When an issue arises between two persons in an intimate relationship, it is ordinarily the case that a disagreement (a term which will be defined precisely in the following section) is called for. Depending on the particular circumstances, the consequences of maintaining a status quo which is an unresolved issue are most often negative for a couple. For example, a situation might arise in which a wife goes to work against the wishes of

her husband. The maintenance of this state of affairs (i.e., she working, he being opposed to this) as a live, unresolved issue would often entail such consequences as prolonged mutual anger and resentment, disruption in other spheres of their relationship (e.g., sexuality), and distress to one or more of the children in the family. Consequences would, of course, vary in importance, kind, and duration depending on the particular circumstances and individuals involved. Thus, confronted with an issue, it is generally desirable that a couple address and ultimately resolve this issue for the benefit of their relationship.

In particular circumstances, however, there are at times good reasons for *not* conducting a disagreement. At times, for example, the issues may not be of sufficient importance to an individual to warrant a disagreement. At other times, an individual might perceive that the reasons why some "provocation" has angered him have much more to do with his own hypersensitivities or exaggerated claims on others than they have to do with truly objectionable behavior on the part of another. And so forth. I recognize that reasons such as these often serve as rationalizations for individuals who do not wish, on other grounds, to disagree openly with another. This is a separate problem. Suffice it to say in this regard, however, that this possibility does not constitute grounds for dispensing with the caution here not to ignore context.

THE TASK ANALYSIS FOR DISAGREEMENT

The term "disagreement" as employed in this article encompasses the entire range of interpersonal conflicts of clashes which we ordinarily designate by recourse to such terms as "argument," "quarrel," "fight," "dispute," "squabble," "spat," and so forth. It is intended to cover conflicts characterized by much or by little emotional display, as well as those of major or of minor significance within the context of a particular relationship. In sum, the concept of *disagreement* is here employed as a generic term which encompasses the whole spectrum of such interpersonal clashes.

The format for the conduct of a disagreement, as well as the precise meaning of this term as employed throughout the present article, is given in the "Task Analysis for Disagreement" diagram (Ossorio, Note 1) shown in Table 1. This task analysis constitutes a delineation of the

Table 1.   Task Analysis for Disagreement.

BASIC CONDITION: An issue arises	TASK #1: Statement of positions	TASK #2: Negotiation of differences	TASK #3: Resolution of differences

requisite achievements in the paradigm case of disagreement. That is, it provides a *specification of those tasks at which it is ordinarily necessary to succeed* if *two people are to resolve an issue confronting them.* (Note: if our analysis is correct, then, it becomes not only "descriptive" but *necessarily* prescriptive). The paradigm case is the complete or full-fledged case, i.e., that case which conforms to the logical requirement that it contain all of the essential features which an instance of a given concept could have. Non-paradigm cases are cases deficient with respect to certain of these features which, despite this, still qualify as disagreements. Each of the achievements in the task analysis for disagreement will be discussed briefly.

Basic Condition: An Issue Arises

This refers to the basic situation in which the conduct of a disagreement is ordinarily indicated. The term "issue" as employed here is intended in its everyday sense. It refers, quite simply to *any matter with respect to which two people are at odds or at variance.* Of particular importance here are those issues which for a given couple are such that failure to resolve them would be damaging to their relationship (e.g., for many couples, polarization on such issues as whether or not to have children, how often to have sexual intercourse, or what means are permissible to influence each other, would entail such consequences). Of less importance are those issues with respect to which continued polarization creates either minor problems or no problems at all (e.g., for many couples, the espousal of divergent political beliefs is an issue which entails few or no untoward consequences).

Task #1: Statement of Positions

Given the existence of an issue, the first task in conducting a disagreement is that of both parties' stating openly where they stand with respect to this issue. They must let each other know, in whatever way, "This is what I want here," "This is my reaction to what you've done," "This is where I stand on this issue"—whatever makes sense in the particular situation.

Task #2: Negotiation of Differences

Here the task of the parties involved is twofold. Their first task is to bring up considerations which have a bearing one way or the other on the issue at hand. Such considerations usually take the form of reasons in defense of one's own position and critical of the other's position.

Their second task concerns the adjustment of positions in light of considerations presented. This task entails giving *genuine consideration*

to the points introduced by the other party and, on the basis of their soundness, fairness, and legitimacy, adjusting one's original position in the light of these.

Negotiation as a social practice is a process of *mutual judgment*. It is a process in which two people take into account all of the considerations presented, regardless of source, and, on the basis of their perceived soundness, relevance, and fairness, make a *mutual judgment* regarding what is to be done. It is analogous in some respects to the social practice of "philosophical inquiry" as discussed by Socrates in Philebus: ". . . for surely we are not now contending in order that my view or yours may prevail, but I presume that we ought both of us to be fighting for the truth" (Jowett, 1871). The social practice of philosophical inquiry implies an adherence to the goal of establishing the truth. In the process of discussing a philosophical issue, it is "presumed" that one will state only what one believes to be true and that, in response to considerations presented by others, one will accept or reject these based on their apparent truth. Where this is not the case (e.g., where "prevailing," not truth, becomes the primary goal), we have a *different social practice,* rhetorical contest. In the same way, the social practice of negotiation implies a commitment to introducing only those considerations which are considered true or just, to genuinely considering the legitimacy of the partner's statements, and to making a sound, fair mutual judgment on these bases.

Task #3: Resolution of the Issue

The final requisite achievement in the task analysis for disagreement is that of resolving the issue. The task here is that of the involved parties' coming together on some mutually agreed-upon resolution of their differences. The minimum requirement here is merely that each assent to some resolution. Their satisfaction with this resolution is a separate matter. This may range from (optimally) a good deal of satisfaction to (minimally) sufficient tolerance of the resolution that the individuals involved can honestly assent to it.

As a rule though not exclusively, resolutions take one of three forms. (a) Compromise: here the resolution is one in which the parties involved each concede to some extent with respect to their original position, and settle on some intermediate position. For example, X might wish to visit in-laws and stay for a week, while Y might wish not to visit them at all, and the two resolve their differences by agreeing to go, but to stay only a few days. (b) A bargain or exchange: in this form of resolution partners exchange concessions. For example, X might agree to fulfill certain household responsibilities if Y agrees in return to fulfill certain others. (c) Capitulation: in this form of resolution, one partner accedes to the other partner's demands. For example, X might recognize that Y has a right to

be irritated about some behavior of his, concede this, and apologize. In the present formulation, unlike a number of previous ones, there is no commitment to any particular form of conflict resolution as *the* preferred mode. Emphasis is placed, not on the particular form a settlement takes, but on the desirability of *some* settlement in whatever form being achieved. An issue is still a *live* issue until this has been accomplished. (This is not to say that every settlement arrived at provides a guarantee that the issue is no longer a live one. Inevitably some resolutions will not prove satisfactory and arrival at some other settlement will be indicated.)

Conclusion

The task analysis for disagreement is a delineation of those tasks at which it is ordinarily necessary to succeed if two conflicting parties are to resolve their differences. Herein lies both its descriptive and its *practical* value. The three tasks which comprise the Task Analysis of Disagreement are *logically* distinguished inasmuch as many actions on the part of participants qualify simultaneously as relevant to the achievement of more than one task (e.g., to say "I like science fiction movies" may both state my position and present a reason why my position should be adopted). The relation between the different tasks is this: the achievement of all "later" (i.e. higher in number) tasks ordinarily requires as a precondition the achievement of all "earlier" tasks. Specifically, negotiation of differences (task #2) presupposes that these differences have been addressed (task #1). And, most importantly, *resolution* of differences (task #3) presupposes both that differences have been addressed and that relevant considerations have been introduced and entertained.

PITFALLS IN THE RESOLUTION OF DIFFERENCES

The concept of a "pitfall" is important in this conceptualization. The term, as employed here, assumes no idiosyncratic technical meaning. Rather, it is used in its everyday sense as "any concealed danger or trap for an unsuspecting person" (Webster's 1962). A pitfall, in this conceptualization, is *any action or omission which, in a disgreement, is likely to lead to failure to resolve the issue.*

The logical relations between the three tasks comprising the task analysis for disagreement were delineated above. Briefly, it was asserted that the achievement of a later task in this diagram ordinarily requires as a precondition the achievement of all earlier tasks. It follows from this that failure to achieve any particular task in the diagram ordinarily precludes success at any later task in the diagram, and, ultimately, success at resolving the issue. Thus, *any* way in which an individual fails at any of these tasks qualifies as a pitfall in the process of the successful resolution

of differences. It is this general point that is the most important one. However, certain specific sorts of failures seem empirically most common and thus worthy of note.

Pitfalls Related to Task #1: Statement of Positions

1. Not addressing the issue

The failure here is a simply one of omission with respect to the task. An issue arises for a couple but, for whatever reason, they fail to address their differences. Each fails to let the other know where he or she stands with respect to this issue. Rather, the two may pretend no issue has arisen, one of the two may collude with the other, etc.

One common reason why partners encounter this pitfall bears noting. Partners often expect each other to be "mindreaders" (Bach and Wyden, 1968). When an issue arises, one or both of them assumes that the other knows what he wants or how he feels about that issue and that, consequently, he needn't overtly address the issue.

2. Not addressing the issue with sufficient clarity

At times, partners do attempt to address their differences but one or both fails to do so with sufficient clarity so that the other partner adequately understands his position.

3. Addressing unresolvable issues

This pitfall is related to task #1 in a different way. It occurs when an individual addresses an issue with his partner, but states his position in such a way that no resolution is possible. For example, one partner might address the issue by objecting to his partner's "dependency". In effect, he demands that his partner stop being "dependent." Posed in this form, the individual is asking his mate to do the virtually impossible; one does not simply stop being dependent. Posed in a different form, e.g., in the form of specific requests or demands for specified times when one is to have privacy, the issue becomes amenable to resolution. The individual is now requesting something which is possible. The general point in this regard is that to pose an issue in such a way that it is unresolvable, whatever form this might take, is a pitfall in the resolution of this issue.

Pitfalls Related to Task #2: Negotiation of Differences

1. Not sticking to the issue

The individual encountering this pitfall is one who introduces considerations into a disagreement which have no significant bearing on the issue at hand. Certain common and especially pernicious forms which this may take are described by Bach and Wyden (1968). One of these they

term "digging up relics from the psychiatric museum." This refers to the practice of introducing old grievances into a current disagreement to which they have no relevance. A second form described by these authors is termed "kitchen sinking" and refers to an attack on the partner which focuses upon current but irrelevant matters (e.g., in a disagreement about money, attacking the partner's sexual adequacy).

2. Escalation of the arena of conflict

In this pitfall, the original issue is expanded or dilated to an unnecessarily broad arena. For example, such an escalation might occur where the action, omission, conflicting interest, etc., with which issue is originally taken is posed as an expression of the character of the offending individual (e.g., a wife, angry at her husband for his refusal to make a large purchase, attacks him as "greedy," "selfish," and a "miser"). Escalations may take many forms. As a class, they result in the evolution of new and often far more unresolvable issues, and frequently, as in the example cited, provoke an added degree of anger and antagonism which renders conflict resolution far more difficult.

3. Failure to listen to and to consider the partner's points

The individual encountering this pitfall is one who, when considerations are introduced by the partner, either fails to listen to these or, if he does listen, fails to consider or to entertain them. He fails, as it were, to ask himself: "Is this a legitimate gripe?", "Is that a valid point?", "Is this something I should take into account?", etc., and, if indicated, to make the appropriate adjustments in his position. The pitfall here lies, not in the conclusions which might be drawn (e.g., "that's *not* a legitimate gripe"), but in the failure seriously to consider and to entertain the considerations in the first place.

When the process of negotiation is viewed as a mutual judgment, the status of these failures as pitfalls in conflict resolution becomes even clearer. First, in the cases of "not sticking to the issue" and of "escalation of the issue," these may be seen as failures, when making a judgment, to confine attention to considerations relevant to the judgment. In the case of failure to entertain or consider the partner's points, this may be seen as an arbitrary rejection of considerations potentially relevant to the judgment and a consequent failure to adjust one's position (if indicated) in the light of these considerations.

Pitfalls Related to Task #3: Resolution of the Issue

Playing for a win

The individual encountering this pitfall pursues the goal of winning regardless of the legitimacy of his own or his partner's position. Goals of

coming out on top, being "right" about some matter, having one's way, etc., are pursued for their own sake and take priority over all else in a disagreement. (Bach and Wyden, 1968)

It is important to distinguish between *playing* for a win and *achieving* a win. The pitfall lies, not in the achievement of a win when this is the natural outcome of a disagreement between two people who don't *have* to win, but in playing for a win, i.e., going into a disagreement in the first place and conducting the disagreement throughout with the attitude that one must win no matter what. The failure to recognize this seems responsible for the tendency of previous authors (e.g., Bach and Wyden) needlessly to proscribe this form of conflict resolution (i.e., capitulation) in their formulations.

The perspective of viewing a disagreement as a mutual judgment once again helps to clarify the status of playing for a win as a pitfall. The person encountering this pitfall may be characterized in this respect as "violating the practice." That is, he is no longer even attempting to make a sound, just, mutually agreeable judgment. The term "judgment" no longer applies to his activities. Rather, descriptions such as "engaging in a power struggle" or "attempting to impose an arbitrary 'rightness'" seem most apt.

Conclusion

The task analysis for disagreement thus serves as a useful organizational and explanatory device for a large number of pitfalls. Other pitfalls, however, are not directly related to this diagram. For an extensive list of these, the reader is referred to Bach and Wyden's excellent work, *The Intimate Enemy* (1968). For purposes of the present article, no further pitfalls will be mentioned.

Two Qualifications

In concluding this section on pitfalls in the resolution of differences, it is important to mention two qualifications. With respect to any of the prohibitions listed above, it is *usually* the case that acting contrary to it is a destructive practice and is likely to result in failure to achieve an amicable resolution of differences. However, to encounter a pitfall does not always or inevitably guarantee failure to resolve such differences. For example, couples who are aware of these pitfalls may quickly recognize where they have encountered one, cease to do what they are doing, and return to more constructive modes of conflict resolution. In addition, analysis of particular situations will sometimes suggest that to do some of these otherwise proscribed things may be desirable or even necessary. For example, although not sticking to the original issue is generally a poor idea, situations may arise in which a couple becomes aware that the

original issue is not the important issue, and thus that a shift to the more important issue is indicated.

SOME REMARKS ABOUT ANGER AND ITS PLACE IN THE PRESENT CONCEPTUALIZATION

For those with a special interest in problems of anger and aggression, the present conceptualization may be seen as a statement about some ways in which aggression may be constructively managed in a relationship. As conceived and presented above, the conceptualization is broader than this. Broadly conceived, it is a statement about how a couple confronted with an issue, whose aim is to resolve this issue, might go about accomplishing this end. Moving from the general to the specific, among the sorts of relevant issues here are those in which the investment of the conflicting parties in their respective positions is such that opposition provokes strong anger and other emotionality. Among the sorts of considerations which are commonly brought to bear in a disagreement are considerations which prove provocative to the opposing party.

Certain things, however, are noteworthy about the case of disagreements characterized by anger. Early in the discussion above, the observation was made that, when issues arise, the individuals involved may be disposed to different ends (to amicably resolve differences, to punish the other, etc.). And the direction of this discussion has been, loosely, "If you want an amicable settlement, observe these prescriptions and prohibitions." By its very nature, anger is not an emotion which disposes people to this goal of an amicable resolution. An individual who is angry at another is often, by the very fact of this anger, disposed to goals incompatible with an amicable settlement, e.g., revenge, punishment, or rejection of the other. For such an individual, the constructive resolution of differences will call for the making of certain allowances for his anger. The avoidance of specific pitfalls (e.g., kitchen sinking, character assassination) will often require restraint on the part of an angry individual. At such times, the conduct of a disagreement as described in the foregoing pages, a fundamentally cooperative activity calling for listening, fair consideration of the other's position, a willingness to concede at times, etc., will often be rendered very difficult.

A realistic account, then, must acknowledge the difficulties that an angry person is likely to have operating within the constraints of the present framework. On the other hand, however, the *possibility* of doing so should be emphasized. Finally, lest there be any confusion on this score, what is being urged here is *not* that individuals suppress their anger, but rather that they make allowances for it. Here restraint takes the form of confining the expression of this anger to constructive modes.

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

If the ideas which comprise this conceptual framework are sound and constructive, then learning and employing them ought to help couples to resolve their conflicts better. Research was done to see if this was indeed the case. A brief description of this research will be presented here. For a complete account, see Bergner (1973).

The Marital Conflict Videotape (MCV)

The vehicle chosen for presentation of the conceptual framework was a videotaped program. This program, entitled the "Marital Conflict Videotape" (MCV), employs four repetitions of the following format. First, a short play is presented in which a couple is seen having a disagreement. In this play, they encounter one or more pitfalls, all related to the same task in the Task Analysis for Disagreement, and they consequently fail to resolve their differences. For example, in one sequence the couple fails to stick to the original issue; instead they generate multiple issues and, as a result, ultimately fail to resolve the initial issue. Following this play, a commentator appears and presents a very brief lecture in which he defines the relevant task and discusses the pitfalls related to it. Finally, the play is shown a second time; this time action is stopped at key points and the commentator poses multiple-choice questions to the audience. These questions require the viewer to apply the materials of the lecture to the events of the play. In the first three play-lecture-play sequences, pitfalls relevant to tasks #1, 2, and 3, respectively, are encountered by the couple. In the fourth sequence, no pitfalls are encountered. Here, constructive modes of resolving conflict are modelled for viewers.

Experimental Procedures

A total of 20 couples participated in this research. Initially, a tape-recorded sample of their actual conflict behavior and some questionnaire data were obtained from each of these couples. The latter data concerned such matters as the couple's typical behavior when issues arise, the frequency and severity of their disagreements, and the nature and satisfactoriness of the typical outcomes of these.

The experimenter rated each of the 20 tape-recorded conflicts for the degree to which the participants encountered the pitfalls mentioned above in the conceptual framework. Couples were then assigned to two matched groups on the basis of these ratings. Those couples who were assigned to the experimental condition then viewed the MCV. Those couples assigned to the control condition received no treatment.

One week later, a second tape-recorded sample of conflict behavior was

obtained from all couples in the study. One month following this, the questionnaire data were again obtained. This delay was due to the longitudinal nature of many items on this questionnaire (e.g., "During the past month, how many times . . .").

Finally, three months later, a third tape-recorded sample of conflict behavior and a third questionnaire were obtained from a total of 6 couples (3 from each experimental condition).

Behavior ratings

Two trained raters listened to each taped marital conflict, and made judgments regarding the degree to which each pitfall mentioned in the MCV was encountered. Any disagreements about particular ratings were resolved by negotiation. The raters did not know either the experimental condition to which any couple belonged or the pre-test vs. post-test vs. follow-up status of any disagreement.

Results

Post-treatment results

At post-treatment, exposure to the MCV was associated with significant positive changes on the following variables: (1) the extent to which Ss exhibited the pitfalls delineated in the MCV in their taped conflicts ($t = 2.86$, $p < .01$, $df = 19$); (2) the reported frequency with which Ss directly addressed issues ($t = 2.61$; $p < .01$, $df = 19$); (3) the reported frequency with which couples achieved mutually satisfactory outcomes to their disagreement ($t = 2.07$, $p < .05$, $df = 9$); (4) general feelings of "affection" for their partners ($t = 2.31$, $p < .025$, $df = 19$); and (5) reports of "overall satisfaction" with their partners ($t = 3.27, p < .005$, $df = 19$). Control Ss exhibited no significant positive changes on any of these variables (t's $= -.12, .42, -.54, -3.25, -2.25$, respectively).

Follow-up Results

Three months later, exposure to the MCV was associated with the maintenance of significant positive change on the following variables: (a) the extent to which Ss exhibited the pitfalls delineated in the MCV ($t = 4.08$, $p < .01$, $df = 5$); (b) the reported frequency with which Ss directly addressed issues ($t = 2.34$, $p < .05$, $df = 5$); and (c) the reported frequency with which Ss achieved mutually satisfactory outcomes to their disagreement ($t = 3.00, p < .05$, $df = 2$). The significant changes at post-treatment for "affection" and "overall satisfaction" were not maintained (t's $= .00, 1.72$, resp.). Control Ss again exhibited no significant positive changes or any of these variables (t's $= .39, .47, .22, .45$, and -2.18, resp.).

In retrospect, it is my judgment that the failure to obtain follow-up data from all Ss represents a serious drawback in this study. I say this for two reasons. First, statistical procedures (see Bergner, 1973 for details) indicate that the particular subgroups sampled at follow-up may not have been representative of the larger samples. Second, the resultant number of observations is far too small to make generalizations with any degree of confidence. For these reasons, the follow-up results obtained in this research should be regarded as tentative.

Discussion

Overall, the results obtained in this research support the contentions: (a) That the ideas comprising the conceptual framework for marital conflict resolution are sound and constructive; and (b) that the MCV is an effective vehicle for the presentation of these ideas. With respect to both contentions, stronger support is provided by post-treatment data. Follow-up data, as noted above, must be regarded as far more tentative.

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

In those cases where conflict behavior is to be a focus in psychotherapy, we may distinguish two broad groups of clients. The first is composed of individuals who are ready, and at times even eager, to hear and to put into practice the ideas contained in the conceptual framework for marital conflict resolution. This group, in my experience, constitutes the minority of individuals seen in therapy. They tend to be very distressed by the discord existing between themselves and their partners, highly motivated to resolve their differences and, most importantly, not highly invested in some goal or some mode of conduct which would be incompatible with conflict resolution.

With this group, utilizing the ideas contained in the conceptual framework is a straightforward matter. Typically, what I will do if a couple is composed of two such individuals is simply observe the pitfalls which they encounter as they discuss their problems and then present these observations and the associated rationale to the couple. A typical observation might be the following: "I just noticed something which might be very important. The two of you started off a little while ago arguing about how you wanted to divide up household responsibilities, but as you've been talking, you've gotten into a whole lot of other issues—whether or not Mary needs a new car, whether John wastes too much time, and several others. I wonder if this is one of the reasons you have so much trouble resolving issues; namely, you don't stick to them,

ind you introduce so many other issues that the first one gets lost." In order to enhance both awareness of and avoidance of this pitfall, I might then suggest to the couple that they pay attention to this pitfall in the ensuing week, try to avoid it in their disagreements, and discuss their efforts to do so in the next session.

At times, clients seem in need of a more comprehensive, less piecemeal, exposure to the ideas contained in the conceptual framework. For example, for some couples the whole notion of "constructive disagreement" is alien; to these couples, disagreement and conflict represent *ipso facto* relationship failure, not a potentially constructive process which can improve a relationship. On such occasions, I have exposed couples to the entire conceptual framework, either by providing a lecture or, more often, by requesting that they take home and read a written version of this framework. At these times, if I had a more technically adequate version of the MCV, I would use this.

The second broad group of clients is composed of individuals who, although they encounter severe difficulties in the conduct of their disagreements, seem substantially unwilling or unable to put the ideas from the conceptual framework into practice. This group is composed of individuals who have a significant investment in goals or modes of conduct which are incompatible with conflict resolution. For example, such persons might be so furious at their partners that revenge takes precedence, so "allergic" to acceding to influence attempts from them that they cannot yield the slightest ground, or so bent on being "right" that they cannot acknowledge the legitimate aspects of their partners' positions.

With individuals such as this, obviously, the sort of straightforward feedback discussed above becomes insufficient by itself. In addition to such feedback, the individuals' competing goals and modes of conduct must be assessed and dealt with if they are to employ and benefit from the ideas contained in the conceptual framework. The question of how such competing agendas might be dealt with therapeutically is a question as broad as how to do psychotherapy itself and is thus beyond the scope of the present account. Suffice it to say in this regard that, for the majority of couples I have treated, considerable effort has been devoted to the discovery and alteration of these very important barriers to conflict resolution.

NOTES

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