

# The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication

## Introduction to Interpersonal Conflict

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# Introduction to Interpersonal Conflict

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Interpersonal conflict, when managed competently, can bring about positive changes in a relationship. It allows the conflict partners to use the conflict opportunity to reassess the state of the relationship. It opens doors for the individuals in conflict to discuss their wants, needs, fears, and hopes in a relationship. Constructive conflict management profoundly affects the quality of social and personal relationships. On the other hand, interpersonal conflict, when managed incompetently or mindlessly, affects physical, psychological, emotional, and mental health and various relationship processes and outcomes.

In this section, we opt for a broad definition of “interpersonal” conflict. We define the “interpersonal aspect” of conflict as any interpersonal conflict situation or interpersonal conflict relationship in which some of the following features exist: (a) some subtle or overt signals of conflict messages or behaviors are being exchanged, and meanings are inferred; (b) one or both conflict parties perceive that they seek different goals, and they perceive their own goals as being blocked; (c) some degree of emotional frustrations or threats is experienced or felt; (d) the two or more individuals in the relational system are interdependent and oriented toward each other in a social or personalized relationship direction; (e) there exists some degree of reciprocal, mutual influencing process; (f) the conflict scene can take place in a public or private setting; and (g) the conflict episode is framed within multiple embedded contexts (see also Knapp & Daly, 2011). In fact, Cupach, Canary, and Spitzberg (2010) identified the four property approaches to the study of interpersonal conflict as (1) pervasive, (2) explicit disagreement, (3) a hostile episode, and (4) disagreement in particular episodes.

The study of interpersonal conflict also encompasses the complex range of conflict from physiological to emotional arousal processes, the actual emotional experience and expressions, social cognition and appraisal processes, particular conflict interaction styles and tactics, and the exchange of hurtful or hostile messages. Interpersonal conflict contexts can include the study of conflicts in [p. 100 ↓ ] acquaintanceship,

friendship, dating, marital relationship, family socialization, health care, workplace, life span, and/or intercultural context. Diverse meaning constructions, intentions, contexts, relational histories, values, and ideologies are being framed or reframed in an antagonistic conflict episode. An interpersonal conflict situation basically involves the study of how two or more individuals approach and manage the message exchange process and the meaning construction process due to incompatible goals, scarce resources, and the perceived interferences from others in achieving his or her goals in a multilayered, sociocultural system (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011).

In [Chapter 4](#) of this *Handbook*, Guerrero argues that interpersonal conflict episodes are often filled with arousing emotions, both in terms of the negative affect connected to the interruption of goals and in terms of reactions to the partner's communication. The chapter highlights the important role that emotion plays in interpersonal conflict via four sections: (1) emotion is conceptualized with an emphasis on the similarities between emotion and conflict; (2) six categories of conflict-related emotion—hostile, vulnerable, flat, positive, self-conscious, and fearful—and the ways each of these types of emotion are communicated during conflict are discussed; (3) the cascade model and the expectancy violations theory (EVT) are described as exemplar theories for further understanding of the role of emotion within conflict interaction; and (4) the chapter ends with recommendations for future theorizing and researching in the area of conflict and emotion. The author argues that emotion acts as both a cause and consequence of conflict communication and may ultimately guide behavior and determine outcomes.

In [Chapter 5](#) of this *Handbook*, Roloff and Wright focus their discussion on the social cognitive aspects of interpersonal conflict. According to the authors, social cognition research focuses on how people make sense of themselves, others, and their social activities. Such sense making is guided by knowledge content structures that are defined as organized sets of interrelated information about a person's conflict experience. The authors review six types of social knowledge in relation to interpersonal conflict: (1) beliefs, (2) scripts, (3) partner memories, (4) rules, (5) frames, and (6) problem appraisals. They also examine how the process of thinking or social cognitive processes might be related to conflict behaviors (e.g., imagining a conflict influences how individuals try to resolve it). The authors update their chapter in this second edition *Handbook* with a strong focus on (a) reviewing research studies that examine the relationship between social knowledge and interpersonal conflict; (b) analyzing

interpersonal scholarship that informs the relationship between social cognitive processes and conflict, especially with an eye toward integrating new perspectives; and (c) offering an overall critique and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses in the study of social cognition and conflict. They also note that although the bulk of the research on this topic continues to use U.S. samples, there has been some moderate increase in the study of intercultural-interpersonal conflict. There have also been many more longitudinal studies and also relationship conflict studies that analyze both members' viewpoints of the conflict dyad. They conclude that recent research work has linked attribution making in conflict, and that there is also a growing research area in investigating the role of self-regulation in interpersonal conflict communication.

In [Chapter 6](#) of this *Handbook*, Caughlin, Vangelisti, and Mikucki-Enyart comment that the study of dating and marital conflict has a voluminous research data base. To organize their analytical literature review in a coherent fashion, they use a social ecological framework to explain the complexity of romantic relationship conflict. One important aspect of this framework is that it highlights the **[p. 101 ↓]** dynamic nature of the individuals, relationship, and environment, including the conflict behaviors and patterns in that relationship. They consider three interconnected levels of analysis in romantic unions: (1) the environment, which ranges from broad societal influences to a couple's specific social and physical context; (2) the individuals, including the characteristics that people bring to their relationship and beliefs and attitudes they develop during the relationship; and (3) the relational processes, which are composed partly of relational conflict behaviors and conflict patterns. They present ample research evidence on the interdependent connections between conflict behaviors and relational outcomes such as relationship satisfaction or stability. For instance, there is clear research evidence that negativity predicts dissatisfaction and divorce. Moreover, systematic studies of interventions based on the problem-solving paradigm demonstrate that teaching couples to enact constructive communication strategies and avoid excessively negative ones can improve strained relationships. The authors conclude with promising directions for future research concerning the importance of time frame and environmental-level analysis and their impact on the study of dating and marital conflict interactions.

In [Chapter 7](#) of this *Handbook*, Spitzberg reviews and analyzes the complex landscape of intimate partner violence (IPV). The author considers aggression and violence in the

intimate partner context, with an eye to their nature, scope, functions, processes, and effects. According to the author, IPV refers to any acts of physical violence that occur in the context of a relationship in which romantic or courtship objectives are being pursued by one or both of the interactants. There are at least two broad typologies of motives in enacting violence. *Instrumental* motives represent the more traditional power and control objective, in which a particular, discrete goal is being pursued by the violence. *Expressive* motives reflect internal cognitive and/or affective states (e.g., anger, jealousy, rage, frustration, and aggravation), or even personality disorders or traits that reinforce such states. According to the author, the three key ideas to understand IPV are that (1) it is almost always embedded in a larger interactional context of conflict and psychological abuse—most arguments do not result in violence, but violence rarely occurs “out of the blue;” (2) it generally co-occurs with communicative aggression (defined by the author as any recurring message patterns that function to impair a person's preferred self-image)—for example, IPV victimization is strongly associated with expressed anger, hostility, negative affect, and communicative aggression; and (3) together with communicative aggression, it is highly reciprocal—according to research, high percentages of individuals who report experiencing IPV also report perpetrating it. Research also generally indicates that problem-solving skills, anger management skills, argumentativeness, and tendencies to engage in more positive affectionate or collaborative behaviors are critical IPV circumventive communication strategies. In [Chapter 8](#) of this *Handbook*, Koerner addresses family conflict issues and observes that families that manage their conflicts competently have more satisfied parents and children, and that children perform better in school and in peer relationships. The focus of the chapter centers primarily on parent–child interpersonal conflict communication patterns. The author conceptualizes family conflict from a communication standpoint as observable behavior that expresses family members' perceptions of goal incompatibility and with its associated negative affect that has high probability to influence the behavior and the psychological well-being of family members. The conflict communication behaviors acquired in families are among the most important behaviors learned that affect children's subsequent interpersonal relationships. The chapter is organized along two motifs: (1) compare the [\[p. 102 ↓\]](#) various conceptualizations of family conflict and review some of the consistent findings that broadly describe the phenomenon of family conflict communication and its outcomes; (2) identify some of the properties of family relationships that distinguish family conflict communication from other interpersonal

conflict communication and discuss how future research might address these issues. The author believes that family conflict is but one part of the larger process of family communication and is best understood in relation to the larger family communication schemata framework.

In [Chapter 9](#) Bolton Oetzel discusses the intricate relationship between mental health disorder issues and family interaction patterns. Individuals with mental illness are oftentimes not able to articulate the extent of their isolation, fears, and needs, which then leads to conflict within families and other interpersonal relationships. To begin, the author offers clear conceptualizations of the following four mental health disorders: (1) depression, (2) anxiety, (3) substance abuse and dependence, and (4) schizophrenia. She then explores the role of race and ethnicity on mental health, the relationship between mental health disorders and family conflict, as well as practical suggestions for providers and families. Two areas where culture factors in are within the presentation of symptoms and also in the seeking of services. Cultural-bound syndromes are clusters of symptoms that appear to be more prevalent in one culture than another. In addition, the majority of research studies have demonstrated that people from underrepresented minority groups utilize mental health services less than Whites and are less satisfied with those services. The author advocates the importance of using a “Biopsychosocial Model of Disease” framework to understand the complex relationship among biology, parenting, communication, marital discord, culture, levels of stress, and environment on mental health issues. The chapter concludes with the notion that family does matter in the treatment or intervention of mental health disorders. For example, evidence suggests that high levels of warmth displayed by family members can circumvent the chances of relapse in individuals with schizophrenia. In addition, family-based psycho-educational models have been shown to be more effective than either individual treatment or medication alone.

In the concluding chapter ([Chapter 10](#)) of the Interpersonal Conflict section, Canary, Lakey, and Sillars focus their attention on how individuals can gain greater control of their conflict interactions by managing various conflict events competently. The chapter emphasizes a competence-based mindful approach in negotiating important personal conflict goals in close, interpersonal relationships. The chapter is developed in three sections: (1) the authors present a brief rationale for the competence-based conceptual lens and then examine what is meant by competence in conflict management; (2)

they then present a model of strategic conflict that locates events where people can mindfully establish objectives for their management of conflict, following the explanation of each event (i.e., episodic control, personal control, attribution control, goal control, strategy control, and interaction control), and they also offer implications for the mindful management of conflict; and (3) they advocate for the important role of personal ethics in the execution of a competence-based approach to interpersonal conflict management; as both parties pursue their goals in the conflict process, neither person should exploit the other, harm the other, or even ignore the other. In other words, a competence-based approach suggests that people treat each other in an ethical manner. They conclude with the critical role of partner assessment of the other person's competence in managing conflict and how the appraisal process affects the use of cooperative versus [p. 103 ↓ ] competitive conflict strategies and, in turn, affects relational outcomes.

Some of the emergent themes of the interpersonal conflict section include the centrality of studying conflict communication messages in shaping relationship outcomes, the importance of family socialization in shaping interpersonal conflict, the importance of studying the reciprocal effect of conflict relationship, and the premium role of social cognition and emotion in navigating the interpersonal conflict trajectory. Interpersonal conflict researchers also advocate for the importance of studying the embedded contexts and the sociocultural ideologies in which conflict occurs. They also examine the role of mindfulness as a facilitating bridge in developing competent interpersonal conflict practice.

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