LEGITIMATE INTEREST IN COUPLE CONFLICT

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—————— ABSTRACT ——————

The present study examined legitimate interest in couples' conflict-management. Based on observations of intergroup and organizational conflict we expected that partners who perceive each other's interests as legitimate are more likely to report cooperative conflict-management behaviors. Partners of 98 couples independently rated the legitimacy of each other's position in a recent conflict and reported on their self-expression, listening and problem-solving behaviors. Partners who found their own position legitimate indicated they were more willing to express themselves openly and partners who found the other's position legitimate indicated they were more willing to listen to the other side. In addition, self-expression and listening were positive predictors of problem-solving.

KEY WORDS • communication • conflict strategies • perceived legitimacy

'Part of the task of impressing the other side with your interests lies in establishing the legitimacy of those interests. You want them to feel not that you are attacking them personally, but rather that the problem you face legitimately demands attention' (Fisher et al., 1991: 51). In this quotation, Fisher et al. give advice to negotiators on how to deal with incompatible interests in as constructive a manner as possible. The quotation suggests that legitimate interests will

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evoke a cooperative stance in the other side and thus implies that conflict-management is related to perceptions of legitimacy. In personal relationships, too, partners are often faced with incompatible, or seemingly incompatible, interests (Margolin, 1988) and need to resolve their differences in ways that strengthen the relationship rather than weaken it (Duck, 1988). Consequently, perceptions of legitimate interest and their role in conflict-management may be important in couple conflict as well. The present study was conducted to shed light on perceptions of legitimate interest in couples' cooperative conflict-management.

The role of *legitimate interest* in conflict-management has received more attention in research on organizational (Brett et al., 1990; Fisher et al., 1991) and intergroup conflict (deRidder & Tripathi, 1992) than in research on couple conflict. In fact, evidence on legitimate interest comes from a diverse array of interpersonal encounters ranging from conflict-management to helping behavior. Briefly, this evidence suggests that the recognition of mutual legitimate interests facilitates cooperative conflict-management, whereas the perception of illegitimate interests impedes cooperative conflict-management. For example, legitimate interests are more likely to elicit compliance (e.g. Pliavin et al., 1969) and motivate partners to find mutually satisfying solutions (Brett et al., 1990; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993), whereas illegitimate requests are more likely to trigger or escalate conflict (Rubin et al., 1994), including conflict between intimate partners (e.g. Peterson, 1983).

In the present study, incompatible interests were reflected in the conflicting positions that partners took on a controversial issue. For example, one couple brought up spending money as a controversial issue. Her position on this issue was: 'I wanted to go out to eat a lot, and go to, whatever, concerts, movies, margarias etc.... I want to live for today not tomorrow. I like to spend money — and when I can't afford things, I charge them. I feel "Hey why go without, you can pay them off later". It's not a big deal, at least I am happy and don't have to sit home because I am broke'. His position on this issue was: 'I wanted my partner to consider what she was spending money on more carefully. We do not know what type of job we will have in the summer after we both graduate: we cannot handle huge debts. I don't want to have debts hanging over our heads when we don't have to'.

There may be cases in which incompatible interests cannot be reconciled but often interests that seem incompatible at first glance can be transformed into common ground where both parties are capable of exploring mutually satisfying solutions or trading off concessions on less important priorities (Pruitt, 1981). Thus, although incompatible interests can pose serious problems to the continuation of relationships, the advice of Fisher et al. (1991) implies that conflicting parties can handle incompatible interests more easily when they find them legitimate. In fact, some authors have argued that it is not incompatibility per se that inflames conflict but rather the perception that an incompatible position does not conform to accepted rules, is unjustified and illegitimate (Coser, 1956).

Although these findings emphasize how opponents perceive the *other* side, we believe that it is helpful to distinguish between self-legitimacy (i.e. how partners feel about their own interests) and other-legitimacy (i.e. how partners feel about the other's interests). We assume that both perceptions are important because evidence from negotiation research indicates that cooperative conflict-management is facilitated when the opponents take into consideration both

their own interests and those of the other side (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). For example, while it is easier to tolerate the other's position when we feel it is legitimate, it is also easier to stand up for our own position when we feel that it is legitimate (McCall, 1988).

Therefore, in order to examine more closely the role of legitimate interest in cooperative conflict-management, the present study focused on two behaviors that seem to be instrumental in the consideration of one's own and the other's interests: self-expression and listening.

Although cooperative conflict-management can take different forms such as tacit moves towards compromise vs explicit problem-solving discussions, tacit approaches have been discussed mostly with regard to bargaining settings (see Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993), whereas approaches to improve couples' conflict-management have focused on explicit problem-solving discussions (Jacobson & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1986). This research shows that couples' problem-solving discussions are to a large extent contingent on effective self-expression and listening behaviors (Jacobson & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1986). Self-expression refers to the disclosure of one's own interests without blaming or accusing the partner, whereas listening refers to tuning in to the other's interests without mindreading or withdrawing (Christensen, 1988). Ideally, both partners are able to state openly their own interests and listen actively to the other's interests.

Notwithstanding alternative ways to consider the interests of both opponents (e.g. tacit compromise), self-expression seems instrumental in the consideration of one's own interests, whereas listening seems instrumental in the consideration of one's partner's interests (Jacobson & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1986). Consequently, if legitimate interests are more likely to be considered favorably than illegitimate interests, then we would expect that perceptions of legitimacy are associated with self-expression and listening. More specifically, we would expect that partners report more self-expression when they consider their own interests legitimate and that they report more listening when they consider their partner's interests legitimate.

Alternatively, self-expression and listening may be related to the importance or the disruptiveness of the issue. Partners who find the issue more important or more disruptive may be more motivated to talk about it, explore each other's viewpoints and resolve the issue. In fact, perceptions of legitimacy may be tainted by importance or disruptiveness, with partners granting more legitimacy to interests they feel strongly about.

Our central hypotheses concern the relationship between perceptions of legitimate interest and couples' reported self-expression and listening behaviors. Based on the preceding discussion, we predict that partners who think their *own* interests are legitimate will report more self-expression but that self-legitimacy will be unrelated to listening (*Hypothesis 1*). We also assume that partners who think the *other's* interests are legitimate will report more listening but that other-legitimacy will be unrelated to self-expression (*Hypothesis 2*).

Our third hypothesis addresses the role of self-expression and listening in problem-solving. The research on couples' problem-solving discussions suggests that partners need to take turns in self-expressing and listening in order to discuss their issues successfully (e.g. Jacobson & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1986). If she engages incessantly in self-expression, it will be difficult for him to communicate his own interests. If she never engages in self-expression, it will be dif-

ficult for him to find out what her interests are. Both self-expression and listening contribute to a successful problem-solving discussion and therefore we expect that self-expression and listening will be independent, positive predictors of problem-solving (*Hypothesis 3*).

In addition, we examine the role of issue importance and disruptiveness. Based on the previous discussion we expect that issue importance and disruptiveness are unrelated to perceptions of legitimacy, self-expression, listening and problem-solving (*Hypothesis 4*).

Method

Data from 98 heterosexual couples were collected at two state universities in the northeastern US. Because variable means and distributions did not differ between the two samples, both data sets were collapsed. Forty-nine percent of the women were under 21 years old, 44 percent were aged 21–25 years and 7 percent were over 25 years old. Thirty-seven percent of the men were under 21 years old, 54 percent were aged 21–25 years and 9 percent were over 25 years old. Seventeen couples were cohabiting, four were married. Eighty percent of the couples had been a couple for less than 2 years. The majority of the participants were caucasian; 7 percent were black.

Couples were recruited through ads in campus newspapers. The study was described as a confidential survey of how partners negotiate different positions. Couples were eligible if they defined themselves as a couple, regardless of the length of their relationship (Lloyd, 1990). When the couple arrived in the laboratory each partner signed a written agreement not to disclose any information obtained during the session to the other.

Both partners were asked to identify a recent controversial issue, where one partner wanted something which the other opposed. Couples were free to come up with any controversial issue, provided that both partners knew what the other's position on this issue was. Each couple brought up only one controversial issue. Partners brought up this issue jointly to ensure that in the following questionnaire both would refer to the same problem.

As soon as they had decided on the issue, partners were separated and seated in different rooms where they *independently* completed a questionnaire in which they reported on the problem and how they dealt with it. They described in an open format their incompatible interests (i.e. their own position and their partner's position regarding the controversial issue), rated the legitimacy of each position and reported on their self-expression, listening and problem-solving behavior. In addition, they rated the importance and the disruptiveness of the issue.

It was made clear that the information in this questionnaire would be kept confidential and there would be no discussion or roleplay of the controversial issue. Each partner received $10 for participation as well as a brochure containing advice on fair fighting and the telephone number of the experimenter, in case of concerns about the study at a later point. No participant used this offer.

Couples completed the questionnaire in the laboratory rather than at home in order to ensure confidentiality of the data and to reduce the likelihood that participants would bias their answers in order to please their partner. We wanted participants to feel free to report on the conflict without being con-

cerned about their partner's reaction. In addition, we did not want participants to discuss the conflict and report a 'couple's story' but rather to give their own point of view.

Participants rated their own position and the other's position on four 5-point scales ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Specifically, they indicated whether the position was appropriate, legitimate, reasonable and justified.

Two 5-item scales were constructed to assess self-expression and listening. The items of the self-expression scale referred to being able to talk openly with the partner about one's own position. The items of the listening scale referred to being able to listen openly to the position of one's partner. Problem-solving was measured with the Collaboration subscale of the Conflict Style Inventory (Levinger & Pietromonaco, 1989). All items are presented in Table 1. Participants described their self-expression, listening and problem-solving behaviors with regard to the one issue they had brought up, not with regard to their conflict-management in general. Items were answered using 5-point scales ranging from 1 = never or almost never to 5 = always or almost always.

TABLE 1
Items for self-expression, listening and problem-solving

Self-expression
1. I felt comfortable explaining my point of view to my partner.
2. I felt comfortable to argue in favor of my position.
3. I presented all of my arguments.
4. I felt comfortable expressing my point of view.
5. I tried to explain fully my point of view.

Listening
1. I felt comfortable listening to my partner's point of view.
2. I didn't mind my partner arguing in favor of his/her position.
3. I listened to all of my partner's arguments.
4. I felt comfortable respecting my partner's point of view.
5. I tried to understand fully my partner's point of view.

Problem-solving (adapted from Levinger & Pietromonaco, 1989)
1. I shared the problem with my partner so that we can work it through together.
2. I tried to get all of our concerns into the open so that we can deal with them.
3. I collaborated with my partner to work through our differences.
4. I sought my partner's help in working out a mutually satisfying solution.
5. I tried to deal with all my partner's and my own concerns.

Participants indicated how important the issue was to them and how disruptive it was to their relationship using single-item scales ranging from 1 = very unimportant/not at all disruptive to 5 = very important/extremely disruptive.

Results

Because participants are couples, sex was treated as a within-subject variable. Due to missing data on some variables the number of observations on which a particular analysis was based varies between the number $N = 81$ and $N = 98$.

Table 2 contains scale means and internal consistencies for women and men. Internal consistencies were based on Cronbach's alpha and were satisfactory

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Scale	Cronbach's alpha		Mean		
	Women	Men	Women	Men	t
Self-legitimacy	.92	.92	4.37	4.21	1.33
Other-legitimacy	.87	.92	2.91	2.99	.48
Self-expression	.88	.88	3.87	3.84	.23
Listening	.84	.87	3.69	3.60	.76
Problem-solving	.84	.89	3.78	3.56	1.55
Importance	—	—	4.05	3.75	1.80
Disruptiveness	—	—	3.08	2.98	.99

Note: No differences significant at 5 percent level or lower based on paired *t*-tests.

for women and men. Table 2 also shows that the means for self-legitimacy, other-legitimacy, self-expression, listening, problem-solving, importance and disruptiveness did not differ significantly between women and men based on paired *t*-tests for dependent groups.

In support of hypotheses 1 and 2, Table 3 shows that self-legitimacy was positively correlated with self-expression but unrelated to listening, whereas other-legitimacy was positively correlated with listening but unrelated to self-expression.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that self-expression and listening would be independent, positive predictors of problem-solving. In order to rule out that the relationship between self-expression, listening and problem-solving was due to shared variance with perceptions of legitimacy a regression analysis was conducted (Cohen & Cohen, 1983) in which self-legitimacy, other-legitimacy, self-expression and listening were entered as predictor variables. Problem-solving was the criterion variable.

Table 4 presents the unique contribution of each of these variables. As expected, self-expression and listening were significant predictors of problem-solving even after the legitimacy ratings had been partialed out. The analysis supports our prediction that both self-expression and listening would contribute to problem-solving. For women, the two variables accounted for 28 percent of the variance in problem-solving; for men, they accounted for 34 percent of the variance in problem-solving.

As predicted in Hypothesis 4, issue importance and disruptiveness were unrelated to perceptions of legitimacy, self-expression, listening and problem-solving. Most of the correlations were non-significant. There was a tendency for

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Note: * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001 (one-tailed tests).

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Women's other-legitimacy	-.01	.09	-.01	.11	.903
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Men's self-legitimacy	.16	.10	.15	1.53	.129
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women and men to report less listening when they found the issue more disruptive and for men to report more problem-solving with important issues; these correlations were only marginally significant at the *p* < .10 level and may be spurious.

Discussion

The objective of the present study was to shed light on the role of legitimate interest in couple conflict. Partners reported on a recent controversial issue in which they had conflicting interests. Each partner rated the legitimacy of his or her own interest as well as the legitimacy of the other's interest. As we had expected, self-legitimacy correlated positively with self-expression but was unrelated to listening, whereas other-legitimacy correlated positively with listening but was unrelated to self-expression. In addition, self-expression and listening were independent, positive predictors of problem-solving. Importance and disruptiveness of the issue were largely unrelated to perceived legitimacy and conflict-management variables.

The study has limitations and strengths. To begin with the limitations first, all findings are based on retrospective self-reports. Thus, although there is support for the notion that legitimate interest is implicated in couples' conflict-management, observational studies of couples' interactions need to further corroborate this claim. Second, participants in the present study were young and most relationships were short. Additional research is necessary to explore the role of legitimate interest among older partners and couples who have been together for longer periods of time. Third, the present study did not address questions of directional influence. Although it is conceivable that self-legitimacy motivates self-expression, it is also conceivable that self-expression increases partners' sense of self-legitimacy. Similarly, other-legitimacy may motivate listening but listening may also alert partners to the legitimacy of the other's interest.

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Women's other-legitimacy	-.01	.09	-.01	.11	.903
Women's self-expression	.32	.09	.36	3.56	.001
Women's listening	.32	.11	.33	3.00	.004
Men's self-legitimacy	.16	.10	.15	1.53	.129
Men's other-legitimacy	.17	.08	.22	2.24	.028
Men's self-expression	.33	.10	.35	3.47	.001
Men's listening	.27	.09	.30	2.99	.004

women and men to report less listening when they found the issue more disruptive and for men to report more problem-solving with important issues; these correlations were only marginally significant at the $p < .10$ level and may be spurious.

Discussion

The objective of the present study was to shed light on the role of legitimate interest in couple conflict. Partners reported on a recent controversial issue in which they had conflicting interests. Each partner rated the legitimacy of his or her own interest as well as the legitimacy of the other's interest. As we had expected, self-legitimacy correlated positively with self-expression but was unrelated to listening, whereas other-legitimacy correlated positively with listening but was unrelated to self-expression. In addition, self-expression and listening were independent, positive predictors of problem-solving. Importance and disruptiveness of the issue were largely unrelated to perceived legitimacy and conflict-management variables.

The study has limitations and strengths. To begin with the limitations first, all findings are based on retrospective self-reports. Thus, although there is support for the notion that legitimate interest is implicated in couples' conflict-management, observational studies of couples' interactions need to further corroborate this claim. Second, participants in the present study were young and most relationships were short. Additional research is necessary to explore the role of legitimate interest among older partners and couples who have been together for longer periods of time. Third, the present study did not address questions of directional influence. Although it is conceivable that self-legitimacy motivates self-expression, it is also conceivable that self-expression increases partners' sense of self-legitimacy. Similarly, other-legitimacy may motivate listening but listening may also alert partners to the legitimacy of the other's interest.

Nonetheless, the present study breaks new ground by examining perceptions of legitimacy in couples' cooperative conflict-management. More specifically, this study derived testable hypotheses about the relationship between self-legitimacy, other-legitimacy, self-expression and listening that were supported in a large sample of couples. Hopefully, this work will encourage more research on legitimate interest in couple conflict. In our own work we are now looking at factors that may be associated with perceptions of legitimacy such as support and criticism from partners' network members (Klein & Milardo, 1995).

In conclusion, although legitimate interest has received more attention in intergroup and organizational conflict (Brett et al., 1990; Coser, 1956; deRidder & Tripathi, 1991), the advice from Fisher et al. quoted at the beginning of this paper may be valuable in the management of couple conflict as well.

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THE ROOMMATE RELATIONSHIP FOR THE ELDERLY NURSING HOME RESIDENT

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——————— ABSTRACT ———————

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the roommate relationship for the institutionalized elderly adult. More specifically, two research questions were examined: Does roommate rapport predict life-satisfaction for elderly nursing home residents? What variables contribute to roommate rapport for the elderly nursing home resident? For this study, 50 elderly persons from six different long-term care facilities were interviewed. The nursing home residents ranged in age from 58 to 98 years, with 43 persons 75 years of age or older. The participants completed the Life Satisfaction Index A, the Short Form of the Roommate Rapport Scale and the Adult Communication Questionnaire through personal interviews. The results of this study indicated that roommate rapport predicted life satisfaction only for those who talked to their roommates. Perceived talk, engaging in activities with one's roommate and talking about the topic of family predicted roommate rapport for the elderly. Nearly half of the elderly residents never talked to their roommates. Most of the reasons for this centered around physical barriers to communication such as hearing problems and speech impediments.

KEY WORDS ● elderly ● nursing homes ● roommates

Little is known about the nature and function of interpersonal relationships that are formed between nursing home residents. Estimations predict that by