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## 2 IMAGINED INTERACTION CONFLICT-LINKAGE THEORY

### *Examining Accounts of Recurring Imagined Interactions*

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A common phrase used when conflict arises is "if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem." The dividing line between problems and solutions can be difficult to discern. Such is the case with recurring conflict. Many couples, friends, and business associates indicate that they experience interpersonal conflicts that tend to recur within a particular relationship or across a variety of relationships. In fact, when conflict recurs in relationships it often contributes to relational problems. As noted in Chapter 1, Honeycutt (1995, 1997, 2003) developed imagined interaction (II) conflict-linkage theory in an effort to explain the persistence of everyday conflict and how it can be managed through a series of propositions cast as theorems with a variety of empirical support. This chapter uses II conflict-linkage theory as the framework for exploring how individuals utilize II to link conflict episodes. We report on a study exploring the content themes in IIs, determining the amount of IIs that were conflictual in nature and to what degree conflictual IIs were linked. The current study also analyzed the content of conflictual IIs in order to determine the level of the conflict (normative, personal, or behavioral) and the amount of verbal and physical aggression that individuals reported in their conflictual IIs.

IIs link a series of encounters together as individuals replay what was previously said and anticipate what may be said in the future. Conflict is maintained by reliving old arguments and *imagining future conversations* so that subsequent encounters may become self-fulfilling prophecy as interaction expectancies are enacted (Honeycutt, 1995).

### IMAGINED INTERACTION AND CONFLICT LINKAGE

Honeycutt (2003) explained that IIs should be examined from a functional perspective. Dance and Larson (1976) articulated the foundations of such an approach to interpersonal communication by isolating the ways in which communication functions within the individual, and how experiences of the individual are affected by the individual's communication with others. In particular, they noted that the mentation function of communication enables individuals to utilize language and meaning to reflect on the past and plan for the future. As such, IIs are a vehicle through which the mentation function is accomplished.

Similar to Cooley's (1902) notion of the *looking-glass self*, Dance and Larson (1976) referred to a process known as *decentering* in which individuals create a mental image of what one believes is the perspective of the other person. Recall that the notion of the looking-glass self is reflected appraisal because people often view themselves based on the verbal and nonverbal feedback (e.g., smiles) that other people provide. If it is positive feedback, self-esteem rises. Instead of taking the other's perspective to view only themselves, the individual can adopt the perspective of the other to view the situation as a whole, which may include the looking-glass self and extend to other interpretations, such as the other's perspective on causes of a particular conflict. Dance and Larson proposed that decentering increases the probability that communicators will achieve understanding. If IIs are examined within the framework of a functional perspective, one must begin by examining how individuals utilize IIs to simultaneously reflect on the past and plan for the future.

Honeycutt (1991) indicated that activity, retroactivity, and proactivity are not independent characteristics. He reported that the correlations between proactivity and retroactivity are moderate ( $r = .34$ ). Furthermore, retroactivity ( $r = .65$ ) and proactivity ( $r = .47$ ) have demonstrated strong relationships with activity. These correlations reinforce a general "activity" or a "frequency" simplex identified by Edwards, Honeycutt and Zogacki et al. (1987) using correlagram analysis. Thus, some IIs may have simultaneous features in which they occur after an encounter and previous to the next anticipated encounter. To the extent that IIs occur with significant others, a number of them may be linked and occur between encounters reviewing and

previewing conversations. The characteristics and functions of IIs, along with the correlations among them, provide the foundation for the development of *II conflict-linkage theory*.

In particular, the research questions posed in this investigation are related directly to the three axioms presented in Table 1.1 and the three theorems: 1, 8, 9. Theorem 1 proposes that recurring conflict is maintained through retroactive and proactive IIs. Pearce and Cronen (1980) defined an episode as a communicative routine that has an identifiable opening and closing sequence. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) asserted that participants punctuate episodes perceptually. According to Watzlawick et al., behaviors are grouped and punctuated into larger units, which in the whole help to define the relationship. As such, IIs serve as a cognitive reviewing function in which individuals punctuate communicative episodes. In essence, communicative episodes in interpersonal relationships occur between partners and within individuals. Individuals attempt to make sense out of strings of behavior and/or define the relationship. Honeycutt and Wiemann (1999) explained that partners tend to "rehearse anticipated encounters with their partners" in their mind to reduce uncertainty.

IIs not only serve as a means of punctuating episodes, they also serve *important affective functions* such as *catharsis* and *self-understanding* that allow individuals to cope with emotions (Honeycutt, Edwards, & Zagacki, 1989-1990). Individuals use IIs in an effort to "get things off their chest" when they know that certain behaviors are inappropriate in actual interactions. For example, some individuals may imagine "telling off" their boss, when they know that doing so could result in the loss of their job. However, once the "telling off" has occurred in the II, individuals feel that they are better able to construct socially appropriate messages. As such, increased self-understanding in IIs may result, in part, because of the cathartic function. By working through certain emotions in IIs, individuals are able to put issues in perspective. Conversely, for some individuals the imagined "telling off" may generate more hostility and less constructive message planning.

Klinger (1987) maintained that individuals are more likely to react with emotion when they encounter cues related to the pursuit of some goal. Therefore, the rehearsal function of IIs and affective functions of IIs should be related, insofar as IIs used for planning or rehearsal are goal-directed. Taken as a whole, IIs serve as a means for assessing and punctuating episodes that have taken place, a means for coping with emotions, and means for generating goals for episodes that one anticipates in the future. As such, II activity may be more likely to involve episodes that are recurrent and emotionally charged, such as conflict episodes. Therefore, the following research question was advanced:

RQ1: What percentage of participants reported imagined interactions that were conflictual in nature?

Honeycutt (2003) indicated that IIs play a role in communication because they are instrumental in the development of conversational scripts for particular situations. As such, IIs not only enable one to define and redefine their relationships with others, but they also create relational expectations that help the individuals make sense out of behaviors that they observe in others and themselves. Because IIs are a mechanism for punctuating and/or reconstituting events and that conflict may be maintained through retroactive and proactive IIs, Axiom 3 is concerned with an outcome related to how people describe their relationships. Indeed, the classic work on cultural dimensions of relationships by Wish, Deutsch, and Kaplan (1976) reveals that competitiveness and conflict is a dialectical opposite of cooperation and tranquility. As such, Axiom 3 of II conflict-linkage theory states that a major theme of interpersonal relationships is conflict management and that managing conflict begins at the intrapersonal level of communication. Therefore, in examining conflictual IIs, we tested the following research question:

RQ2: What percentage of individuals reported conflictual IIs that are linked to one another over time?

II conflict-linkage theory Axiom 2 states that an interpersonal relationship is maintained and developed through thinking and dwelling on a relational partner. Additionally, research regarding IIs indicates that "emotional investment" in the relationship is linked to goal pursuit (Honeycutt, 2003; Zagacki, Edwards, & Honeycutt, 1992). Because emotional intensity in IIs has been linked to romantic partners and family members and to relational conflict, goals related to relationships in which individuals have strong emotional investments (e.g., conflict with significant others) may be the domain in which they rely most heavily on IIs for a multiplicity of functions, including review of previous encounters, rehearsal of anticipated encounters, catharsis, and self-understanding. If this is true, then investigating conflictual IIs may help researchers to increase their understanding of the multifaceted use of such imagery. Hence, parts of understanding conflictual IIs lies in understanding whom the reported interaction partners are in such IIs. Therefore, the following research question was asked:

RQ3: Who do participants identify as their interaction partner in their conflictual IIs?

Because IIs serve both planning and affective functions, simply investigating the linkage of conflictual events is limited. Understanding the characteristics and content of conflictual IIs is also a necessary step toward developing a theory of conflict linkage. Braiker and Kelley (1979) characterized conflict content according to three levels: behavioral, normative, and per-

sonal. Their research indicated that behavioral conflicts focus on specific behaviors, such as different preferences over music, art, or recreational activities. Normative conflicts focus on relational rules and norms, such as household duties, and economic issues. Personal conflicts concern a person's characteristics, dispositions, and attitudes, such as the individual's anger, physical appearance, or religion.

Braiker and Kelley (1979) found that when individuals do not achieve their conflict goals, they escalate the conflict to a higher level. They maintained that escalation to higher levels may have incentive value, in that, when criticism of specific behaviors does not achieve the desired results, expressed disagreements over more personal issues, such as relationship rules or personality, are more likely to "get the partner's attention." Braiker and Kelley's findings lend support to conflict linkage in IIs. Individuals engaged in conflict, who do not achieve their desired results, may experience a desire to alter their goals in order to get their partner's attention. This may create a larger conflict through the individual's use of symbols to let their partner understand the escalating conflict. Imagined interactions may be utilized in an effort to reconstitute the conflict so that a "new goal" is conceptualized and planned. If this is true, then more normative and personal levels of conflict than behavioral levels of conflict should characterize conflictual II content. Therefore, the following hypothesis was advanced:

RQ4: Do individuals report more II conflicts that are characterized as normative or personal conflicts rather than behavioral?

Because individuals are likely to escalate conflict to normative and personal levels, it is also necessary to explore the content of such escalatory conflicts. Honeycutt (2003) reviewed research on argumentative skill deficiency and how IIs are related to rage and verbal aggression as individuals often imagine the aggression episode. Recall that Theorem 4 proposes that rage is the result of inability to articulate arguments. The body of research regarding verbal aggression provides a strong parallel to personal level conflicts. In particular, Infante and Wigley (1986) defined verbal aggression as an attack on a person's self-concept. They found that verbal aggression may substitute or be used in addition to an attack on another person's position on a particular topic.

One of their explanations for verbal aggression is communication skills deficiency in which individuals become frustrated because of an inability to articulate new arguments in support of their position; hence, they repeat old claims. Indeed, research on planning by Berger (1997) reveals that people are cognitive misers when they find that their plans are failing. Instead of articulating new arguments, they merely restate old claims with a louder voice (e.g., "maybe you didn't hear me before") because it takes less time and effort compared to redundancy.

As a result of *communication skills deficiency*, failed plans, or vested interest, personal-level conflicts are likely to be characterized by the use of verbally aggressive messages because the conflict surrounds personal characteristics, attitudes, and values. If IIs were utilized to reconstitute conflict goals and/or to provide some cathartic outlet for conflicts that have already taken place, one would expect conflictual IIs to be characterized by verbally aggressive messages. Therefore, the following research question was asked:

RQ5: What percentage of reported conflictual IIs reflect verbally aggressive messages?

Research by Infante, Chandler, and Rudd (1989) linked *verbal aggression* with physical aggression in their model of interspousal violence. Infante et al. posited a model of interspousal violence that suggests that verbal aggression serves as a catalyst to violence when societal, personal, and situational factors are strong enough to produce a hostile predisposition. They pointed to a number of studies that support the notion that hostile language often serves as a trigger for physical violence. An interesting avenue for investigation resides in the framework of conflict linkage and imagined interaction: If individuals use IIs to reconstitute, and perhaps escalate conflict episodes in which their goals have not been reached, and if individuals escalate conflict to personal levels via verbally aggressive messages, to what extent does an individual internally stimulate or "trigger" physically violent images? Therefore, the following research question was posed:

RQ6: Do individuals report acts of physical violence in their conflictual IIs?

## Findings

Participants ( $N = 105$ ) were undergraduate students enrolled in a large lecture course in language and communication; approximately 20 participants did not provide usable data. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 57 (median age = 26) and the sample consisted of approximately 54% females and 46% males. The participants were asked to keep a personal journal of their imagined interactions during the semester. Following a brief lecture on the nature and characteristics of IIs as a function of language processing, participants were given a 16-week assignment to keep a journal of their imagined interactions. They were asked to describe their current IIs and were not asked to focus on conflict in any way. Participants were told that they could make journal entries as often as they wished and were reminded weekly to make at least one journal entry. Participants were given course credit for their participation in the study.

*Analytic induction* (Blumer, 1978) was utilized in order to develop a content coding scheme for the current study. Analytic induction involved the derivation of categories by selecting a subset of the data, forming a category set that fit the selected data, and then modifying the category set in an iterative back and forth manner, as needed. Linked IIs were defined as having some specific referent to previously recalled IIs in the journal. Furthermore, in selecting messages for the verbal aggression category, a strict definition of "messages that attack the self-concept of another" was employed.

Two independent coders content analyzed the journals. Content-analytic categories included the following: (a) whether the episode was conflictual or nonconflictual; (b) the conflict partner reported by the participant; (c) the conflict level (behavioral, normative, or personal); (d) verbal aggressiveness of the conflict messages; and (e) imagined acts of physical violence. Based on the content analysis of the two independent coders, approximately 20% of the journals were selected for interrater reliability analysis. A  $\kappa$  coefficient (see Cohen, 1960) for interrater reliability was calculated for each of the six content categories: conflictual or nonconflictual imagined interaction (.93); conflict partner (.87); linked imagined interaction (.77); conflict level (.79); verbal aggression (.88); and physical violence (.98).

The first research question sought to determine what percentage of participants reported imagined interactions that were conflictual in nature. There were 774 coded IIs. Results revealed that of all of the IIs reported by participants, 41% were conflictual. Observed conflict was significantly higher than chance according to the results from a  $\chi$ -square test [ $X^2(6, N = 82) = 110.93, p < .001$ ].

Based on Honeycutt's (2003) conflict-linkage theory, the second research question sought to determine to what degree the participants reported conflictual IIs that were linked to one another. Results from a  $\chi$ -square test indicated that in the current sample, IIs that were linked to previous IIs were significant [ $X^2(4, N = 69) = 129.92, p < .001$ ]. In an effort to characterize the data presented, the current study also sought to determine whom participants reported as their interaction partner in their conflictual IIs. Results revealed that in the current sample, a wide array of interaction partners were reported based on percentages of messages including significant other (27%); friend or acquaintance (18%); boss (18%); family member (12%); co-worker (8%); stranger (8%); roommate (7%); and potential partner (2%).

The fourth research question set out to determine whether participants reported more II normative or personal II conflict episodes than behavioral ones. First, a  $\chi$ -square was computed to determine if participants significantly reported these three categories. Results revealed that participants reported conflict associated with all three categories; behavioral conflicts [ $X^2(6, N = 82) = 110.93, p < .001$ ], normative conflicts [ $X^2(4, N = 65) =$

51.70,  $p < .001$ ], and personal conflicts [ $X^2(4, N = 65) = 53.54, p < .001$ ]. Of the conflicts, 24% were coded as behavioral, 38% as normative, and 37% personal.

The fifth research question sought to determine the degree to which participants expressed verbal aggression in their imagined interactions. Observed verbally aggressive messages were significantly higher than chance [ $X^2(4, N = 75) = 78.94, p < .001$ ]. About 24% of the messages in conflictual IIs were coded as verbally aggressive. Likewise, the sixth research question sought to determine the amount of physical aggression participants reported in their IIs. Although the observed incidence of physical aggression was low, results revealed that physical aggression was a significantly occurring category in the current sample [ $X^2(4, N = 79) = 268.66; p < .001$ ]. However, only 4% of the conflictual IIs contained reported physical violence. Table 2.1 summarizes these findings.

TABLE 2.1.  
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

RESEARCH QUESTION	PERCENT OF MESSAGES
1. What percentage of participants reported imagined interactions (IIs) that were conflictual in nature?	41%
2. What percentage of individuals reported conflictual IIs that are linked to one another over time?	33%
3. Who do participants identify as their interaction partner in their conflictual IIs?	
Significant other	27%
Friend or acquaintance	18%
Boss	18%
Family member	12%
Co-worker	8%
Stranger	8%
Roommate	7%
Potential relational partner	2%
4. Do individuals report more II conflicts that are characterized as normative or personal rather than behavioral?	
Behavioral	24%
Normative	38%
Personal	37%
5. What percentage of reported IIs utilized verbally aggressive messages in their conflictual IIs?	24%
6. Do individuals report acts of physical violence in their conflictual IIs?	4%

## SUMMARY

The current study examined entries of participants who journaled their II activity over a 16-week term. Participants were told that they could write in their journal as often as they wished and were encouraged to make at least one journal entry per week. Throughout the 16-week term, more than 40% of all journal entries describing a participant's IIs were conflictual in nature. Interestingly, 33% of the conflictual IIs reported were linked across multiple journal entries. These findings provide strong support for Theorem 1 of II conflict-linkage theory; IIs are used to keep conflict alive in interpersonal relationships.

The current study also examined qualitative elements of participants' journal entries. Of the reported interaction partners, 63% were either a significant other, friend, or boss. Participants reported II conflicts that were behavioral, normative, and personal. However, the majority of conflicts were characterized as normative or personal. This finding provides support for Axioms 1-3 because normative and personal conflicts deal with the interpersonal norms, values, and attitudes that permeate thinking about interpersonal relationships and the judgments partners make about the relationship and one another.

Journal entries of conflictual IIs were characterized, to some degree, by verbally aggressive messages and to a lesser extent by incidents of physical violence. The content of the reported IIs was not studied formally, but provided insights into II conflict-linkage theory. Indeed, conflict is managed both productively and unproductively through IIs. For example, one participant reported exclusively about a recurring conflict between herself and her ex-husband that mostly involved issues associated with childrearing. Several participants reported exclusively about dysfunctional, work-related conflicts that involved a verbally abusive boss or co-worker. Others reported about recurring roommate conflicts involving household chores and cleaning responsibilities.

Essentially, the results of this study indicate that recurrent conflicts constitute a significant portion of the IIs that individuals engage in on a routine basis. Recurring conflictual IIs also are more likely to be of a normative or personal level rather than behavioral. This finding indicates that recurring conflictual IIs are deep-rooted in intrapersonal and relational issues. Clearly, the level of conflict of the recurring II is a topic that requires further investigation. Additionally, IIs involving recurring conflict can be characterized by the use of verbally aggressive messages and to a lesser extent imagined acts of violence.

## Future Research

Future research should examine how individuals could be trained to use assertive rather than verbally aggressive messages in their IIs and if such a strategy might influence mood or actual interaction outcomes. Future research should examine, systematically, the content of recurring conflictual IIs and the ability of individuals to use IIs to engage in problem solving, rather than problem harboring.

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