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COGNITIVE PROCESSES IN INTIMATE CONFLICT: I. EXTENDING ATTRIBUTION THEORY

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When involved in an ongoing family conflict, family members are assumed to ask themselves attributional questions (e.g., "Who or what is causing this problem?") and efficacy questions (e.g., "Can we solve this problem?"). Using attribution theory and social learning theory constructs, this paper presents a conceptual model explaining how the answers to these questions influence family conflict attitudes and behavior. The focus of this paper (the first of a two part series) is on how causal attributions affect blaming behavior, generalization of one negative conflict to other family situations, and family members' sense of efficacy for solving their problems. The author calls for more attention to the role of the individual's cognitions in family conflict situations.

This paper will present a cognitive model of family conflict based on two prominent frameworks in contemporary social psychology: attribution theory and social learning theory. While these two frameworks have stimulated an impressive body of theoretical and empirical work in recent years, they have not been systematically applied to the understanding of family processes. The discussion of the cognitive model in the present paper will focus on attributional issues, while a subsequent paper (Doherty, in press) will deal more extensively with the implications of efficacy expectations—a social learning theory construct—for family conflict.

DEFINITIONS AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Family conflict is defined as a situation in which family members believe they have incompatible goals and are involved in emotionally upsetting interactions aimed at resolving their differences. The modifier "emotionally upsetting" limits the present model to conflicts that are of more than trivial importance to the family members and for which one can assume at least a minimal level of motivation to resolve the issue.

Attribution theories are concerned with how people make causal explanations, especially what information they use in making causal inferences (Kelley, 1973).

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In the area of family conflict, then, attributions are inferences that family members make in assigning responsibility for a conflict. As mentioned before, attribution theory has not been systematically applied to family relationships; however, some related social psychological research is beginning to appear. Orvis, Kelley and Butler (1976), using a sample consisting predominantly of dating couples, studied attributional patterns expressed in partners' unstructured essays about areas of disagreement in their relationship. Following up on this study, Harvey, Wells and Alvarez (1978) examined attributional divergence in a sample of 36 cohabitating couples who were experiencing severe conflict in their relationship. The same authors also reported on a pilot interview study which investigated explanations given by separated persons for the breakup of their marriage. Though constituting a useful beginning, these studies did not attempt to explore the connections between attributional dimensions and other aspects of the couples' relationships, such as satisfaction or conflict behavior.

While family scholars have not emphasized attributional issues, neither have they ignored them completely. In the marital therapy area, Weiss (1978) and Jacobson and Margolin (1979) have proposed that "misattributions" about a partner's intentions serve to exacerbate marital conflict. In the family sociology literature, Hansen (1965) proposed that externalization of responsibility or blame for a stressful event tends to diminish a family's vulnerability to stress. More recently, Gelles and Straus (1979) speculated that the attribution of harmful intent to another family member may be a factor in family violence. The present model will take up both the externalization issue and the harmful-intent issue within a larger theoretical framework.

Social learning theories have been distinguished by their emphasis on cognitive processes, especially expectancies (Bandura, 1977; Rotter et al., 1972). The social learning construct of central concern in this paper is that of efficacy, defined by Bandura (1977) as the individual's expectation for successfully executing the behavior necessary to bring about a desired outcome. In the present family conflict model, efficacy refers to *the individual's expectation for the couple or family as a group to engage in effective problem-solving activity.* This definition emphasizes *relationship* efficacy because successful conflict resolution usually requires collaborative actions and mutual agreement by the participants. Efficacy, it should be noted, refers to the sense of mastery as distinguished from a general hope or optimism that a goal will be attained. Efficacy is also distinguishable from internal-external control expectancies in the following way: High efficacy presupposes an internal locus of control, but as Bandura (1977) has observed, a belief that an outcome is in one's own hands (internal) does not necessarily imply confidence in one's ability to do what is necessary to achieve that outcome. Finally, it is important to distinguish efficacy expectations from causal attributions: Attributions refer to explanations about *past* events, while efficacy refers to beliefs about *future* events.

Like attributional concepts, efficacy issues have been neither emphasized in the family literature nor completely overlooked. Tallman (1970), Reiss (1971) and Klein and Hill (1979) have speculated on the family problem-solving implications of constructs such as "environmental mastery" and "environmental predictability." Little systematic theoretical or empirical work, however, has examined the implications of efficacy for family relationships. In this paper, efficacy will be treated as a dependent variable influenced by attributions; then in the follow-up paper (Doherty, in press) efficacy will be analyzed as a cognitive influence on family conflict.

THE COGNITIVE MODEL

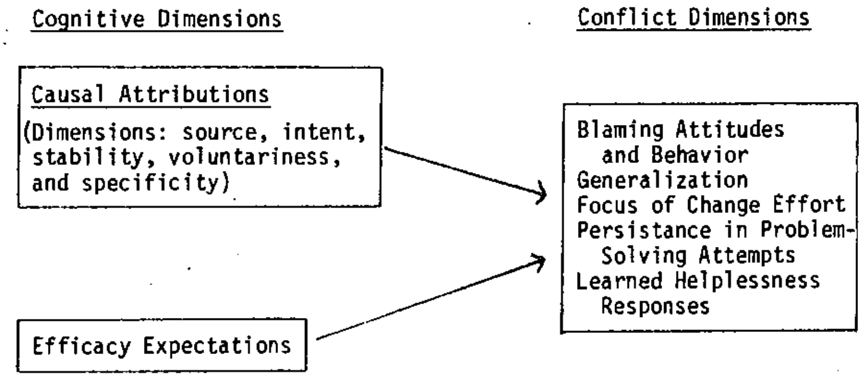
The model presented here assumes that when individuals experience enduring, stressful conflicts in close relationship, they ask themselves two basic questions that have implications for their subsequent attitudes and behavior: 1) *Who or what is causing the problem?* and 2) *Can we solve the problem?* The first is an attributional question—"Why?" Along with attribution theory, the present model assumes that individuals, being "common sense psychologists," ask themselves causal questions about important social events. In Heider's words:

> Of great importance for our picture of the social environment is the attribution of events to causal sources. It makes a real difference, for example, whether a person discovers that the stick that struck him fell from a rotting tree or was hurled by an enemy. Attribution in terms of impersonal or personal causes, and with the latter, in terms of intent, are everyday occurrences that determine much of our understanding and reaction to our surroundings (1958, p. 16).

The second question, "Can we solve this problem?" is fundamentally linked to the attributional question. It refers to an individual's belief in the ability of the family members to solve the problem through their own efforts. People, of course, may be more or less consciously aware of these efficacy expectations, just as they presumably have differing degrees of clarity about their causal attributions. Nevertheless, the present model proposes that answers to the questions "Why?" and "Can?" are operative in intimate conflict and have important implications for conflict attitudes and behavior.

In general terms, the model holds that family members, when involved in an ongoing and stressful conflict, engage in two cognitive processes—causal attributions and efficacy expectations—which affect their subsequent attitudes and behavior in the conflict situation. In addition, these attributions and efficacy expectations influence each other and are in turn continually affected by changes in the ongoing conflict situation. Finally, these cognitive processes are presumably occurring simultaneously with each partner involved in the conflict. The reciprocal nature of all these dimensions having been acknowledged, however, the current focus of the model has been confined to the influence of attributions on efficacy expectations and the separate and combined effects of both of these cognitive

TABLE ONE
The Cognitive Model of Family Conflict


Cognitive Dimensions
Conflict Dimensions
Causal Attributions
(Dimensions: source, intent, stability, voluntariness, and specificity)
Efficacy Expectations
Blaming Attitudes and Behavior
Generalization
Focus of Change Effort
Persistance in Problem-Solving Attempts
Learned Helplessness Responses

processes on family conflict. Table 1 presents a summary of the basic components of the model. The attribution and conflict parts of the framework will be emphasized in the remainder of this paper; the influence of efficacy and of combined attribution/efficacy dimensions on family conflict will be the subject of the subsequent paper.

Overview of the Attribution and Conflict Dimensions

The first attribution dimension in the model is causal source, i.e., who (or what) is responsible for the family conflict. Four attributional sources in the model are adapted from Orvis, Kelley and Butler (1976). Family members may assign responsibility for a family conflict to either:

1) *self,*
2) *other family member(s)*
3) the *relationship,* or
4) the *external environment* (either outside persons or identifiable forces or situations).

Other possible attributional sources are to:

5) *theological causes* (e.g., God's will), and
6) *luck, chance* or *fate.*

These six categories are proposed as exhaustive of the possible sources to which responsibility for events may be assigned, although only the first four will be developed in this paper. Individuals confronting a family conflict, of course, may use more than one attributional category at a time, and it is possible that individuals may cease making attributions about some kinds of habitual conflicts. Empirical work is needed to explore these questions.

In addition to the above attributional sources, the model offers four other attributional dimensions with implications for family conflict:

1) *Intent* refers to the attribution of purpose as a cause of behavior. Intent may be viewed as ranging from very positive or helpful through neutral to very negative or destructive. It is similar to the attribution of positive-versus-negative attitude, a category highlighted by Passer, Kelley and Michela (1978).
2) *Stability,* which has been investigated by Weiner (1974) in achievement situations, refers to the extent to which the characteristics of an attributed source (self, others, etc.) are viewed as very permanent and stable on the one extreme to highly transitory or unstable on the other extreme.
3) *Voluntariness,* a dimension emphasized by Heider (1958), refers to the quality of deliberateness or purposefulness of a person's behavior; such attributions may range from completely voluntary through completely involuntary.
4) *Specificity* denotes the extent to which causal characteristics of an attributed source are viewed as a separate, narrow aspect of this source as opposed to representing a more global characteristic of the source. This dimension, suggested originally by Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale (1978) as a dichotomous variable (global versus specific), may also be viewed as continuous, ranging from highly specific to global.

The conflict dimensions listed in Table 1 represent hypothesized effects of attributional and efficacy processes on the individual's conflict-related attitudes and behavior. Note that the unit of analysis is the individual, not the family. All dimensions are viewed as continuous variables. 1) *Blaming attitudes* are conceptualized as resentful and punitive thoughts and feelings. 2) *Blaming behaviors* are negative, punitive actions directed towards another. 3) *Generalization* refers to the extent to which negative attitudes and behaviors associated with a specific conflict are extended to other aspects of the relationship. 4) *Focus of change effort,* a dimension to be discussed in the second part of the model, refers to the direction of any attempts to improve the conflict situation, that is, whether the individual attempts to change self, other family members, the situation, or some other perceived causal source. 5) *Persistence* and *helplessness responses* will be taken up in the subsequent paper, since they are primarily influenced by efficacy expectations. Briefly, persistence refers to the degree of effort over time that an individual puts into problem solving. Helplessness responses, as used by Seligman (1975), represent a variety of negative consequences of the chronic inability to control aversive events. The above five conflict dimensions may be viewed as linking cognitive processes and family problem-solving effectiveness (a concept discussed by Klein and Hill, 1979). That is, the present model proposes that attributions and efficacy influence family conflict processes; these conflict processes in turn significantly affect the quality of the ultimate problem solution and the degree of acceptance of the solution by family members.

After this overview and definition of concepts, the following sections will delineate the implications of attributional processes for family conflict. To keep the presentation within reasonable limits, only those categories that seem most useful for understanding family conflicts will be discussed in detail.* Furthermore, it should be noted that the scarcity of relevant empirical data requires that this exposition rely primarily on logical and intuitive analysis. Far from being complete, the development of the model has only begun.

Attribution to Self

This category refers to the extent to which the individual believes that he or she is responsible for the ongoing family conflict. A fairly straightforward implication of this attribution would be that any blame connected with the conflict would be directed at self rather than at other family members. It seems reasonable to assume that blame increases with the degree of imputed responsibility.

On an intuitive basis, three of the other attributional dimensions seem to be especially useful for generating further implications associated with attributions to self. Phrased in categorical terms, these dimensions are: 1) voluntary versus involuntary, 2) stable versus unstable, and 3) global versus specific. The intent dimension seems less influential here since people usually assign positive—or at least neutral—intentions to themselves.

A person who perceives self's problem-creating behavior as voluntary would presumably experience more self-blame than a person who attributed the behavior to involuntary factors; the latter attribution presumably diminishes the sense of personal responsibility and therefore of blame. Despite creating more self-blame, a voluntary attribution would be likely to lead to higher efficacy expectations, assuming that individuals feel more able to change voluntary behavior patterns than patterns perceived as outside of personal control.

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*Readers who are interested in an expanded theoretical treatment of this model may request from the author a copy of the original version presented at the National Council on Family Relations, August, 1979.

As mentioned before, the stable versus unstable causal dimension has been investigated by Weiner (1974) in achievement situations. Weiner has demonstrated that attributing failure to stable characteristics of self (e.g., low ability) is associated with diminished effort in subsequent achievement tasks. For family conflict situations this stability issue may be stated as follows: Does the individual family member, in making an attribution to self, believe that self's problem-causing characteristic is an enduring personality trait or a more ephemeral disposition? Hypothetically, if a man believes that a relatively stable personal characteristic (e.g., a quick temper) is responsible for his marital conflict, he is apt to have lower expectancies for resolving the problem than if he believes that the conflict is caused by more transitory dispositions (e.g., irritability while adjusting to a new job).

The global versus specific attribution dimension comes from the recent reformulation of the learned helplessness construct by Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale (1978). In the present context of attributions to self, it refers to the extent to which the individual generalizes from one undesirable problem-causing characteristic of self to a wider negative self-evaluation. The impotent husband, for example, may confine his view of his disability to a specifically sexual dysfunction with his wife, or he may believe that this sexual difficulty is indicative of a pervasive personal ineffectiveness. This global characterization is likely to have more generalized negative effects on the relationship than would the more specific attribution. Furthermore, global characteristics of self are presumably perceived as more difficult to change than are more limited characteristics.

Table 2 outlines the most important predictions made in this discussion of attributions to self.

Attribution to Other Family Member(s)

This category refers to the extent to which the individual believes that another family member (or more than one member) is responsible for the family conflict. Jones and Nisbett (1971) have proposed that, on an actuarial basis, actors are more apt to attribute causality (responsibility) for another's behavior to that per-

TABLE TWO

Hypothesized Relationships between Attributional Dimensions and Conflict Dimensions when Attribution is Made to Self*

	Blame Toward Other(s)	Generalization	Efficacy
Source - Self	-		
Global		+	-
Voluntary			+
Stable			-

* Table is to be interpreted as follows: the higher the attributional dimension in the rows, the higher (+) or lower (—) the conflict dimension in the columns. Blank slots indicate no prediction for that dimension.

son's stable personality characteristics, whereas they tend to attribute their own behavior more often to environmental factors. Orvis, Kelley and Butler (1976) found some support for this hypothesis in the area of bothersome behavior with a sample of (mostly dating) couples. Whether or not this systematic bias exists, it seems evident that attributing responsibility for interpersonal problems to the other involved person or persons is a common and significant phenomenon ("The woman made me eat the apple"). Hunt and Hunt (1977), for example, reported that the majority of separated and divorced persons interviewed in their national study assigned more responsibility for the marital breakup to spouse than to self.

According to the same reasoning discussed earlier under attributions to self, namely, that blame follows assigned responsibility, the model predicts that attributions to other family members as responsible for a family conflict enhance blaming attitudes and behavior towards those others.

Under this heading of attributions to other family members, the four other attributional dimensions listed earlier are proposed as heuristically useful for understanding family conflict. The first three were discussed previously under attributions to self: Does the individual attribute the conflict to voluntary versus nonvoluntary actions of the other, to stable versus transitory characteristics of the other, and to global versus specific characteristics of the other? The fourth dimension is the attribution of intent to other family members.

Since the *attribution of intent* is viewed as a pivotal issue in this model, it will be developed in some detail. In a family conflict, individuals may be assumed to make inferences about the extent to which the partner is trying to help and cooperate as opposed to hurt, undermine or gain selfish advantage. Although scholars likes Gelles and Strauss (1979) have highlighted the importance of attributions of intent for understanding family violence, there is little relevant research beyond two studies found in the attribution literature. Orvis, Kelley and Butler (1976) reported evidence that individuals in close relationship tend to attribute more benign intent to themselves and more negative intent to their partners when describing behaviors that had negative effects on the relationship. These researchers, however, did not examine implications of these attributions for the couples' attitudes or behaviors. Passer, Kelley and Michela (1979) found empirical support for a previously neglected attribution dimension in their study of college students' attributions about negative behavior in marriage. The authors term this dimension "positive versus negative attitude toward spouse."

What are the implications of attributions to the other's intent? The present model proposes that such attributions affect three conflict areas: 1) the attributor's likelihood of blaming others, 2) the generalization of negative attitudes and behaviors to other aspects of the relationship, and 3) the individual's sense of efficacy for resolving the conflict. Presumably, the more negative the imputed intent, the more the blame, the greater the generalization, and the lower the expectation that the conflict can be settled. Opposite outcomes would accompany attributions to benign or positive intent.

Contrast, for example, the hypothetical reactions of a wife who believes her husband is frequently absent from home because he wants to provide his family with an enjoyable standard of living (positive intent) versus the belief that he is doing what he likes and does not realize that he is hurting anyone (neutral intent) versus the belief that he wants to avoid or punish her (negative intent). Similarly, the wife of the impotent husband is apt to feel much worse towards him if she ascribes his erectile failure to his desire to frustrate and punish her. In parent-child relationships, I believe that the attribution of intent may be a crucial determinant of parental reactions to children's behavior, for example, believing that a girl is trying to assert her healthy autonomy by resisting toilet training (positive intent) versus she doesn't know any better (neutral) versus the conviction that she is trying to show her parents that she is boss (negative intent).

Of course, attributions of intent are made for liked and desired behavior as well as negative behaviors. The classic example is the attributional dilemma of the wife whose husband brings her flowers on his return from an out-of-town convention. Guilt or love? Having acknowledged the importance of attributions in the area of pleasing behaviors, however, I will leave this issue behind.

In briefer fashion, implications will be delineated for the other three attributional dimensions when responsibility is ascribed to other family members. First, the *stable-unstable* dimension: Presumably, if an individual attributes responsibility for a family conflict to the other's stable personality characteristics, then that individual is apt to have less confidence in being able to resolve the problem. Conversely, an attribution to the other's more transitory state or characteristic is apt to lead to higher efficacy expectations for improvement. The assumption behind this position is that more stable traits are perceived as less amenable to change.

The *global-specific* dimension of attributions to others would seem to affect not only efficacy expectations (global characteristics being perceived as less changeable) but also the extent of generalization to other aspects of the relationship. If the wife regards her husband's impotence as not only his own responsibility but also as reflecting a flaw in his masculinity as a whole, then this global attribution is likely to lead to other negative attitudes and behavior directed towards him. Similarly, if parents view their son's toilet resistance as a sign of perverse nature manifesting itself at an early age, they are apt to respond more punitively in related discipline situations than if they confine their view of his intransigence to the toilet situation.

The *voluntary-involuntary* dimension of attributions to others seems to relate most clearly to the extent of blaming others. If the problem-causing behavior or characteristic is viewed as outside of the person's voluntary control, then that person is less apt to be blamed for the family conflict. Although Passer et al.'s (1978) findings suggest that this may not be a central dimension for attributions to spouse in a marital conflict (perhaps because adults tend to believe that other adults' behavior is usually voluntary), the voluntary-involuntary issue may be more important in parent-child conflict. Specifically, parents can be assumed to continually make judgments as to whether their young child's behavior is under intentional control, i.e., whether the child is doing it "on purpose." Common examples are a child wetting his/her pants, crying when left with babysitters, and refusing certain foods because they taste "bad." The voluntary-involuntary dimension probably influences blaming attitudes and behavior by influencing the proportion of responsibility for a conflict that is attributed to others versus to natural or environmental forces. The more the other's behavior is judged involuntary, the more responsibility must be sought elsewhere, and the less the blame directed towards the other. Table 3 summarizes several of the implications of attribution-to-others for family conflict.

Attribution to the Relationship

This category refers to the extent to which the individual believes that the couple or family as a unit is responsible for the family conflict. Conceivably, an individual involved in an interpersonal conflict could attribute the source of the conflict

TABLE THREE

Hypothesized Relationships between Attributional Dimensions and Conflict Dimensions when Attribution is Made to Other Family Members*

	Blame Toward Other(s)	Generalization	Efficacy
Source - Other(s)	+		
Voluntary	+		
Negative Intent	+	+	-
Stable		+	-
Global		+	-

* Table is to be interpreted as follows: the higher the attributional dimension in the rows, the higher (+) or lower (—) the conflict dimension in the columns. Blank slots indicate no prediction for that dimension.

neither to self nor partner separately nor to a simple addictive effect of the partners (e.g., one-part self + two-parts other), but to the couple or family itself. Attributing responsibility to the couple/family would involve the belief that some element in the nature of the couple/family as an interacting unit is resulting in unresolved interpersonal conflict. For example, the wife of the impotent husband may attribute their sexual problem to incompatibility of their sexual needs and interests rather than to a characteristic of either spouse individually.

I suspect that this fairly sophisticated attribution is infrequently employed by intimates and therefore it will not receive much treatment in this paper. In the only empirical examination of the use of this category, Orvis, Kelly and Butler (1976) found few attributions to the relationship in their study of couples' spontaneous attributions about bothersome behaviors. This notion of relationships as responsible for family conflict, however, is extensively utilized by marital and family therapists, who employ such causal concepts as structure, transactional patterns and implicit rules in family systems.

Attribution to the External Environment

This category refers to the extent to which the individual believes that the source of the family conflict is a person, situation, institution or other force outside the family. Examples: holding an interfering mother-in-law responsible for the toilet-training problem; holding the boss responsible for the husband's absence from home; blaming the doctor for giving the husband medication which caused his impotence; ascribing a child's toilet-training failures to natural, developmental factors which influence all children.

Attributions to external forces presumably would lead to less blaming of self and other family members. Hansen (1965) made this prediction in speculating about the advantage of external attributions for stressful events affecting the family. The present model, using multiple attributional and conflict dimensions, also suggests a

TABLE FOUR

Hypothesized Relationships between Attributional Dimensions and Conflict Dimensions when Attribution is Made to the External Environment*

	Blame Toward Other(s)	Efficacy
Source - Environment	-	
Stable		-

* Table is to be interpreted as follows: the higher the attributional dimension in the rows, the higher (+) or lower (—) the conflict dimension in the columns. Blank slots indicate no prediction for that dimension.

possible disadvantage which may accompany such external attributions. Specifically, if the problem-causing characteristic of the environment is viewed as stable, then the individual may experience diminished efficacy expectations. Weiner's (1974) research on achievement behavior, referred to earlier, provides indirect support for this conclusion, which assumes an inverse relationship between perception of stability and perception of controllability. Table 4 summarizes the implications of attributions to the environment for family conflict.

CONCLUSION

A second paper (Doherty, in press) will integrate the attribution dimensions into the overall cognitive model and briefly touch on implications for therapy. However, two other issues not addressed so far merit comment. The first derives from the fact that in close relationships individuals do not typically make causal attributions in a vacuum. They do not always keep their interpretation to themselves. Therefore, we can assume that intimates are continually influencing each other's causal attributions about their relationship difficulties. One example of this influence would be what Kelley (1967) terms "the certifying influence of social consensus." If both spouses agree that the husband's impotence reflects a permanent and global aspect of his character, then that attribution will likely be accepted and acted upon as an established fact. Secondly, it appears that a lot of marital conflict is expressly concerned with disagreement over attributions about each other's behavior, especially attributions about motives and intentions.

Finally, the cognitive model presented in this paper is intended to extend our understanding of the psychological component of family systems beyond the traditional contributions of psychoanalytic theory and social exchange theory. Attribution theory, however, is an individually-oriented framework which must be applied cautiously to ongoing family relationships. The well-documented danger of individual psychological approaches to the family is that they tend to lose sight of the family as a system, thereby missing the forest for the individual trees. Family systems theories and family sociological theories, on the other hand, tend to miss the trees for the forest. They lose the individual in the system and thereby commit reductionism in the opposite direction (Doherty, 1980). While making no claims to have successfully dealt with these difficult conceptual problems, this paper does introduce a mini-theory of at least one important ingredient in family conflict, that is, what the participants think about their struggle.

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COGNITIVE PROCESSES IN INTIMATE CONFLICT: II. EFFICACY AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

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This paper, in presenting the second part of a cognitive model of family conflict, discusses the influence of efficacy expectations on conflict attitudes and behavior. It proposes (a) that high efficacy enhances persistence in family problem solving, while low efficacy inhibits such efforts, and (b) that chronic low efficacy may lead to learned helplessness responses in family members. Drawing together the cognitive model of family conflict, the author discusses the joint impact of causal attributions and efficacy expectations on family conflict, then describes the two relevant research studies and discusses several implications of the model for family research and family therapy.

This is the second of two papers presenting a cognitive model of marital and family conflict. The first paper (Doherty, 1981) outlined the model and then focused on the influence of causal attributions on family conflict. This earlier discussion proposed that family members' attributions influence both their expectations for being able to solve their problem (efficacy) and their likelihood of blaming other family members and generalizing one conflict to other aspects of the relationship. Efficacy, which was treated as a dependent variable in the earlier paper (i.e., an outcome of causal attributions) will be used as an independent variable in this paper (i.e., as an influence on family conflict). Table 1 presents the cognitive model outlined in the earlier paper.

EFFICACY AND FAMILY CONFLICT

Family members' attributions answer the question, "Why are we having this persistent conflict?" Efficacy expectations answer a further question, "Do we have the ability to bring about a solution?" Efficacy is defined as *the individual's expectation for the couple or family as a group to engage in effective problem-solving activity*. The efficacy construct, adapted from Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, refers to the sense of *joint mastery* rather than to a general hope that problems will somehow be solved.

Revision of a paper prepared for presentation at the Theory Development and Methods Workshop, National Council on Family Relations Annual Meeting, Boston, Massachusetts, August 15, 1979. The author wishes to thank Don Carlston, Hal Pope, Steve Wieting, Neil Jacobson, and Robert Ryder for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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TABLE ONE

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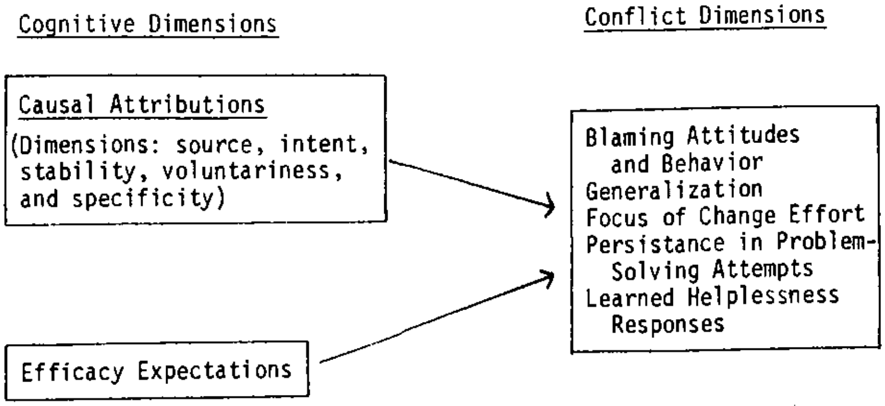
Cognitive Dimensions
Conflict Dimensions
Causal Attributions
(Dimensions: source, intent, stability, voluntariness, and specificity)
Efficacy Expectations
Blaming Attitudes and Behavior
Generalization
Focus of Change Effort
Persistance in Problem-Solving Attempts
Learned Helplessness Responses

Bandura (1977) has proposed that efficacy is a central determinant of coping behavior. He postulates that a key element in every approach to psychotherapy is the enhancement in the client of a sense of mastery over his or her problems. In support of this theory, Bandura offers laboratory evidence with snake phobics indicating that self-reported mastery or efficacy expectations were highly accurate predictors of success in subsequent threatening tasks, more accurate in fact than prior success or failure in the same task. Making a distinction between efficacy and locus of control, Bandura holds that high efficacy expectations always imply internal control expectancies, whereas low efficacy expectations may involve either internal or external control beliefs.

As discussed earlier, the present model is concerned with individuals' expectancies that the couple or family can master the interpersonal conflict—in other words, with relationship efficacy expectations. One useful distinction is between specific efficacy expectations and generalized efficacy expectations. In close relationships like marriage and family, presumably there is both some generalizing of efficacy expectations across situations as well as some specificity between situations. Spouses, for example, may have a high sense of being able to master most of their specific interpersonal disputes but at the same time regard a few "sensitive" areas as not resolvable, probably because they have tried and failed in these areas. Thus, generalized efficacy expectations may not carry over to a particular issue. Successful marital therapy, on the other hand, is based on the process of generalization of efficacy expectations (and behavioral competencies and other factors) from the therapy context to situations not dealt with directly in therapy. Unless otherwise noted, the foregoing discussion will deal with specific efficacy expectations for specific family conflicts.

A final clarification: There is probably a legitimate usage of efficacy as a family characteristic, just as family problem-solving theorists use locus of control and mastery as family variables (Klein and Hill, 1979; Tallman, 1970). However, the present model is more conservative on this point, limiting efficacy expectations to an individual variable while leaving family group efficacy for further conceptual and methodological development. Although efficacy expectations are conceptualized as a continuous variable—ranging from very low to very high—for the sake of clarity the following presentation will discuss efficacy in terms of high and low categories.

High Efficacy

Whatever the attributed source of the relationship difficulty, the individual with high efficacy expectations presumably will be more apt to initiate, persist in, and cooperate with attempts to resolve the family conflict. This prediction is based on the assumption that individuals are more apt to pursue goals perceived as achievable through personal effort than goals perceived as unachievable through personal effort. There is widespread support for this proposition in the psychological literature on locus of control (Lefcourt, 1976).

In addition to influencing persistence in problem solving, high efficacy in combination with causal attributions determines the focus of any change attempts. Attributions determine the *cause* of the problem and efficacy determines the amount of *effort* directed at modifying the cause of the problem. Depending on the attributed source of the conflict, this effort may involve attempts to change self, other family members, the relationship, the external environment, or supernatural powers. Of course a person with a high sense of efficacy for resolving a family conflict might believe that the most effective response would be to refrain from change attempts; the important point is that this person would be "doing nothing" with high expectations that this strategy will eventually bring about a successful outcome.

It is worth noting that high efficacy is not necessarily realistic or "good" to have, simply that persons with such expectations are more apt to engage in problem-solving attempts if they are motivated to resolve their interpersonal difficulties. Part of that motivation may stem from commitment to the relationship as well as from the judgment of what benefits will be achieved by the resolution of the conflict. These motivational variables are outside of the reach of the present model, as is the issue of family members' behavioral competencies to carry out their problem-solving efforts.

Low Efficacy and Learned Helplessness

Low efficacy denotes the belief held by an individual that the family members cannot effectively cope with their conflict, either because of external constraints or because of inability, lack of motivation, or other factors internal to the relationship. Low efficacy expectations in the present model are associated with diminished conflict-resolution efforts as well as a variety of learned helplessness responses to be delineated below.

Learned helplessness is a concept proposed by Seligman (1975) to describe the psychological state resulting from an individual's inability to control recurring aversive events. The classical learned helplessness animal experiments involve uncontrollable shock; the human experiments involve aversive stimuli like loud noises. Seligman proposes that individuals who have experienced uncontrollable aversive stimuli show negative effects in cognitive, motivational and affective areas. Specifically, they fail to learn as readily how to avoid pain in similar situations; they may lose the desire to modify other events; and they show signs of dysphoric mood. These effects are found when the subjects are confronted with *controllable* tasks after having been removed from the uncontrollable situation.

The learned helplessness analogy in the present model may be characterized as follows: Persons in close relationships, like marriage and family, experience recurring painful conflict interactions which they try to resolve. Depending on the degree of pain and the salience of the issue, continual failure to resolve these painful encounters may generate low efficacy expectations and a state similar to learned helplessness. In an ongoing relationship outside the laboratory, however, individuals have a measure of freedom of association; hence, they may be able to engage in avoidance or other behaviors not available to Seligman's dogs or undergraduates. Relationship partners thus may prevent fully-developed learned helplessness effects by maintaining a degree of control over the nature of their pain. Furthermore, the effects of low efficacy will depend on the salience and pervasiveness of the unresolved issues.

While the learned helplessness model based on laboratory experiments must be applied with caution to everyday experiences in close relationships, I nevertheless believe that a similar effect often does accompany recurring failure to resolve important interpersonal conflicts. The low efficacy resulting from these failures leads to a sense of uncontrollability about the conflict; escalation seems to occur "on its own." Cognitive deficits may occur in the sense that the individual *ceases to learn any new information* about the interpersonal issues involved: He or she has "heard it all before." Motivationally, the individual ***gives up trying to resolve the problem***. Behaviorally, low efficacy may lead to *avoidance of the issue and perhaps of the partner*, or to *ritualized conflict* (repetitive negative interactions with little hope for change). Diminished satisfaction with and commitment to the relationship are common responses to such serious, apparently unresolvable difficulties in marriage and family interaction.

Personal Versus Universal Helplessness

Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale (1978) have recently integrated the learned helplessness model into attribution theory in some helpful ways. They posit three attributional issues which are useful in understanding the learned helplessness phenomenon. Two of these dimensions—stable-temporary and global-specific—have been discussed elsewhere in this model. The third dimension is Seligman's recent distinction between the personal helplessness and universal helplessness. An individual, according to Seligman, experiences stronger learned helplessness effects when he/she believes that he/she cannot solve "solvable" problems and thereby attributes the failure to low efficacy. (This assumes, of course, that the person is strongly motivated to solve the problem.) The attribution about solvability is based on a judgment about whether relevant others could solve the problem. If I think that people who are like me in important ways are able to solve the problem, then I will be more likely to attribute my failure to personal inadequacy—personal helplessness. If, on the other hand, I attribute my past failures to the unsolvability of the problem (nobody in my position could handle it), then I will experience universal helplessness, which involves less threat to my self-esteem and less severe learned helplessness deficits.

The attribution to personal or universal helplessness has several implications for close relationships. Basically, the distinction is between internal and external attributions about a recurring failure to resolve an interpersonal conflict. In response to such failure, the partners are apt to experience a low sense of efficacy. The partners' response to their experience of low efficacy will be determined in part by their evaluation of how well people in similar relationships (like other married couples) seem to handle these problems. A judgment that the problem is not resolvable would presumably lead to an attribution to external sources and therefore to a universal helplessness effect—characterized by passivity, and by some degree (perhaps mild) of cognitive, motivational and affective decrements. The alternative belief that the problem *should* be solvable by the partners, based on an attribution to self, other or relationship, would lead to a sense of personal helplessness—with a correspondingly stronger negative impact on the partners and on the relationship. Examples: Universal helplessness would result if the wife of the busy husband concludes that she cannot spark life into her marriage because "that's the way marriage is after 20 years." Cuber and Haroff's (1965) "resigned-devitalized" couples reflect this attitude. Personal helplessness, on the other hand, may accompany the failure to toilet train one's child by age four if all the other four-year-olds in the neighborhood were trained. A final note on this issue: Cultural expectations communicated in magazine articles about "How This Marriage Was Saved" and books teaching "Toilet Training in 24 Hours" may make universal helplessness attributions less available to contemporary couples and parents.

JOINT INFLUENCE OF ATTRIBUTIONS AND EFFICACY

In the present model, causal attributions and efficacy expectations are viewed as simultaneous, interacting cognitive processes. As proposed earlier, a number of attributional dimensions have an effect on efficacy expectations. For example, assigning responsibility for a conflict to the stable negative intentions of the other will be likely to lead to low efficacy expectations. Conversely, attributions may sometimes serve as rationalizations for already formulated efficacy expectations. For example, a spouse who has low confidence in the couple's ability to resolve an ongoing dispute may find it convenient to assign responsibility for the problem to the other spouse or to external forces rather than to self.

In addition to this mutual influence, the model proposes that attributions and efficacy expectations also have interactive effects on conflict attitudes and behavior. In fact, the most sophisticated predictions from the present model can be made with the combination of the attributional and efficacy variables, which are the individual's answers to the questions "Why?" and "Can?" Each variable adds essential information to the other. In general, while efficacy is proposed to predict persistence and helplessness effects, attributions influence both the direction and the affective valence of the individual's problem-solving attempts.

Table 2 presents hypothesized implications for the individual's conflict attitudes and behavior of several attributional dimensions combined with high and low efficacy. Under each of the attributions to self, other family members, and external environment, the theoretically most salient additional dimension was included for cross-tabulating, namely, *stability* under attributions to self and environment, and *intent* under attributions to others. Table 2 suggests that when efficacy expectations are high, attributions primarily affect the object of the problem-solving attempts—self, other or environment—with the stability dimension influencing the perceived magnitude of the required change.

Under attributions to other family members, high efficacy is seen as predicting persistent problem-solving attempts focused on changing the other, with the positive-versus-negative quality of those attempts being determined by the attribution of intent. Negative inferred intent and high efficacy would yield negative but energetic efforts to change the partner. (Problem-solving actions may be loosely characterized as negative to the extent that they involve blaming and coercive behaviors.)

Low efficacy expectations in Table 2 are associated with learned helplessness responses. With attributions to self and others, low efficacy may also be associated with negative attitudes and behavior, since helpless individuals probably feel resentful of the one viewed as causing the unsolvable problem. Low efficacy expectations combined with attributions to the environment, on the other hand, would cor-

TABLE TWO

Conflict Implications of Combinations of Efficacy and Three Attributional Dimensions—Source, Stability and Intent

Attribution	Efficacy	Conflict Implications
I. Self		
Stable Characteristics	High	Persistent problem-solving attempts, focusing on changing self's entrenched personal patterns
	Low	Strong self-blaming and helplessness responses
Unstable Characteristics	High	Persistent problem-solving attempts, focusing on changing self
	Low	Moderate self-blaming and helplessness responses
II. Other Family Member(s)		
Positive or Neutral Intent	High	Persistent, relatively positive problem-solving attempts, focusing on changing partner
	Low	Helplessness responses
Negative Intent	High	Persistent, relatively negative problem-solving attempts to change partner (e.g., blaming, threatening)
	Low	Helplessness responses, with relatively greater likelihood of retaliatory violence
III. External Environment		
Stable Characteristics	High	Persistent problem-solving attempts, focusing on changing entrenched environmental characteristics
	Low	Strong helplessness responses
Unstable Characteristics	High	Persistent problem-solving attempts, focusing on changing the environment
	Low	Moderate helplessness responses

respond more closely to Seligman's animal experiments. Apathy, passivity and demoralization would be expected to occur, especially if the environmental characteristics are viewed as stable, but little blame of self or other family members. Finally, note that low efficacy and negative intent may be a volatile combination, corresponding to the helpless rages of much family violence.

GENERALIZED AND SPECIFIC ATTRIBUTIONS AND EFFICACY EXPECTATIONS

The two cognitive processes discussed in this model may be conceptualized both as general cross-situational cognitive "sets" and as situation-specific judgments/expectations. Most of the previous discussion has used the situation-specific approach. Generalized attributions and efficacy expectations, however, may also be important determinants of problem-solving attitudes and behavior. The assumption here is that individuals, on the basis of past experience in close relationships, develop general attributional styles and global efficacy expectations which influence and are modified by subsequent experiences. An individual, for example, may hold a generalized belief that interpersonal conflict is usually caused by the other person's selfish or hostile intentions (generalized attribution to other and to negative intent) or that trying to resolve long-standing conflicts is a useless endeavor (low efficacy expectations).

According to the present view, these generalized judgments and expectations are relatively stable individual-difference dimensions. They affect problem-solving behavior by influencing the creation of specific judgments and expectations for concrete interpersonal conflicts. This brief analysis of generalized attributional and efficacy dimensions has borrowed heavily from Rotter's Social Learning Theory, which stresses the role of generalized expectancies in predicting behavior (Rotter, Chance and Phares, 1972).

INITIAL EMPIRICAL SUPPORT AND RELATED RESEARCH ISSUES

Two studies by the present author, one of which is not yet published, have addressed measurement and validation issues connected with this model. They will be described briefly. The first study (Doherty and Ryder, 1979) related spouses' generalized locus of control and interpersonal trust orientations to their assertive/competitive behavior during marital conflict. Though conceptually distinct, locus of control is operationally very close to a generalized efficacy expectation; similarly, interpersonal trust may be interpreted as generalized attribution concerning other persons' intentions. These dimensions were measured by Rotter's I-E Scale (1966) and Rotter's Interpersonal Trust Scale (1967), respectively. Conflict behavior was measured by coding spouses' verbal interaction behavior in the Inventory of Marital Conflicts procedure (see the second study below for a description). Assertiveness was operationalized as attempts to change the partner's viewpoint, and included both persuasive and critical comments. Only two results will be reported here: 1) internal-low trust wives (believing in personal control over life events and having low confidence in the honesty of other people's expressed intentions) engaged in more assertive marital conflict behavior than other wives; and 2) the mirror-opposite husband group—external-high trust—were the least assertive of the husbands.

Although this study did not employ the terminology of the present model (having been completed before this model was developed), the results may be interpreted as supporting certain aspects of the model. In particular, the findings suggest an empirical link between theoretical meaningful combinations of efficacy and attributions-to-intent and subsequent marital conflict behavior. In present terminology, generalized high efficacy and generalized negative-intent attributions were associated for wives with more persistent efforts to change their partners' viewpoints; for husbands, generalized low efficacy together with generalized positive-intent attributions led to the fewest attempts to change the spouse, as well as the most yielding behavior.

The second study (Doherty, 1981) used interaction data from the previous study to test the relationship between generalized attributional style (to negative traits and negative intentions) and negative marital conflict behavior. In the Inventory of Marital Conflicts (IMC) procedure, couples are asked to discuss and reach consensus about a series of 18 vignettes describing other couples' everyday marital conflicts. The criterion variable for the analysis in this study was derived from a Disapproval of Spouse interaction code. Disapproval of Spouse behaviors were conceptualized as disparaging remarks about the other spouse's ideas or character.

The independent variable, developed from the present conceptual model, was the spouse's tendency, in describing the persons in the IMC vignettes, to attribute negative traits and negative intentions or attitudes to these individuals which went beyond the data given in the original vignette. Negative trait attributions were operationalized as the frequency of stated inferences that the undesirable behavior engaged in by the spouse in the vignette was indicative of a stable personality characteristic, e.g., characterizing as a "lazy slob" a spouse who in the vignette had failed to pick up after himself/herself. Negative intent/attitude attributions similarly were operationalized as imputations of undesirable intentions or attitudes which went beyond the information provided in the IMC vignette.

The trait and intent attributions were combined into a frequency score for negative attributions. Since these are attributions about a variety of persons in a variety of situations, they were conceptualized as measuring a generalized attributional style. The study hypothesized, in accord with the present model, that a spouse's generalized negative attributions would be positively associated with negative conflict behavior directed toward the partner. Results of this study indicated that wives with more negative attributional styles were more negative to their husbands in the problem-solving interaction. The correlation for husbands was not significant.

Still needed are studies testing the model with specific attributions and efficacy expectations for couples' and families' own problems. Planning for one such study is underway.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper concludes the presentation of a framework for understanding the influence of two cognitive processes on family conflict. The framework has extended attributional and efficacy constructs from social psychology to the study of marital and family relationships. Rather than offering a general theory of family conflict, the model presented here has deliberately focused on cognitive processes. My goal has been the fine-grained analysis of one segment of the family conflict landscape. I make no argument that these cognitive processes are more important than other situational, interpersonal and individual factors. Family conflict is created and sustained by multiplicity of influences not explicitly considered in this model, e.g., cultural orientations, normative role prescriptions, individuals' motivation to resolve conflicts, individual and family problem-solving competencies, as well as other properties of the family as a system. In this context, it should also be noted that the present model does not address the issue of the determinants—situational, familial or individual—of the attributions and efficacy expectations of family members, although such an investigation is obviously useful and important.

One value of an attributional and efficacy model of intimate conflict may lie in its heuristic usefulness for studying the immediate determinants of conflict behavior. The child abuse literature, for example, has documented the social, economic and other environmental antecedents of parental violence. Researchers have also focused on unrealistic parental expectations of the child. Less is understood about the cognitive processes which facilitate abuse, although theorizing on this issue has begun (Gelles and Straus, 1979). The present model would help a researcher or therapist to isolate two factors that may accompany most child abuse incidents: 1) an attributional judgment by the parent that the child is engaging in the offensive behavior out of negative intentions, such as the desire to harass, punish or undermine the parent; and 2) a low efficacy expectation by the parent for effectively coping with the child's behavior. This model would predict that, when environmental and dispositional factors are "ripe" for child abuse, negative attributions and low efficacy expectations (both generalized and specific) on the part of the parent will increase the probability of parental violence against the child. A similar argument could be made for marital violence. In both cases, violence may ensue from a perception of the other family member as wanting to harm self and as beyond conventional means of influence.

An additional utility of the present model may be for the area of theory and research on marital and family therapy. Several examples will suffice here. Many schools of marital and family therapy postulate that families' definitions of their problems serve to maintain and exacerbate these problems (Jacobson and Margolin, 1979; Minuchin, 1974; and Watzlawick et al., 1974). These "definitions" are essentially attributions made by family members about the source of the family problem. Scapegoating, for example, can be conceptualized as a family attributional consensus that one member is primarily responsible for serious family problems. If attributions are important for maintaining the family dysfunction, then the therapist will try to influence the family members to modify their causal explanations. Examples of attributional interventions: attributing a child's acting-out behavior to the child's desire to keep the parents together (positive intent); atributing an anorexic's starving behavior to a refusal to obey parents (voluntary) rather than a bizarre psychiatric condition (involuntary) over which the parents can exercise no control. In each case, re-attributing or "reframing" the problem is likely to lead to a greater sense of efficacy or mastery over the problem.

If Bandura is right, efficacy is probably a central determinant of successful family coping as well as individual coping. Family therapists typically try to facilitate "here and now" successful conflict-resolution experiences in the therapy context so that discouraged family members can regain confidence in their ability to master their problems. Especially when family members' learned helplessness state has diminished their coping efforts, the therapist may need powerful therapeutic tools to create an atmosphere where change is seen as possible.

One research advantage of using attribution and efficacy concepts to describe the process of family therapy is that they come out of a rich empirical tradition in cognitive social psychology. Empirical measures may be used to determine whether cognitive changes in family members mediate between the therapist's interventions and the family's behavioral change. For example, the influence of the therapist's reframing on the family's structural change may be examined for intervening changes in family members' attributions and efficacy expectations. In addition, changes in family members' cognitions about their problems—especially their efficacy expectations—could be used as outcome variables in research on the effectiveness of family therapy.

Finally, this model is offered as a demonstration of the utility of theorizing across disciplines, in this case between cognitive social psychology and family studies. The two disciplines have complementary needs: Family theory seeks a way to retain the individual within a family systems orientation, whereas social psychology is struggling to relate cognitions to important social behavior. The marriage of these two disciplines in a cognitive model of family conflict has an uncertain future but, I hope, a promising beginning.

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