

Faculty Development Research Grant Proposal for Summer 2008

Courtney Waite Miller, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Communication Studies
Communication Arts & Sciences Department

The What and Why of Irresolvable Interpersonal Conflicts

Abstract. Irresolvable interpersonal conflicts occur when at least one of the individuals involved believes the argument is impossible to resolve (Miller, 2006). This study investigates the issues individuals commonly believe to be irresolvable and why individuals believe these issues are irresolvable.

I. Project Summary

Irresolvable interpersonal conflicts occur when at least one of the individuals involved believes the argument is impossible to resolve (Miller, 2006). Such beliefs can negatively impact the way individuals communicate about a problem (Gottman, 1999) and ultimately these beliefs and the associated communication patterns can decrease relational satisfaction (Gottman, 1999; Johnson & Roloff, 1998, 2000a, b). Therefore, it is crucial researchers and practitioners better understand irresolvable interpersonal conflicts.

However, no research that I have found has thoroughly investigated irresolvable conflicts. My prior research (Miller & Roloff, 2006) applied macro perspectives on intractable conflict (e.g., Coleman, 2000, 2003; Putnam & Wondolleck, 2003), but did not address the unique characteristics of irresolvable interpersonal conflicts on a micro level. Examining irresolvable conflicts on a case-by-case basis will provide important insight into these difficult conflicts.

As a result, this investigation will examine two areas I believe to be critical to identifying and better understanding irresolvable interpersonal conflicts. First, I will look for topics of conflict that tend to become irresolvable. Second, I will study why individuals perceive these issues to be irresolvable. This data will provide the first steps in developing effective coping mechanisms and resolution strategies.

II. Narrative

1. Current Situation:

Disputes occur commonly in interpersonal relationships (e.g., W. L. Benoit & P. J. Benoit, 1987; Miller, 1997). For example, Averill (1982) reported that a majority of people (66%) become angry with someone in any given week; on any given day, 44% of people become annoyed by a relational partner. Many everyday disputes end quickly (e.g., Vuchinich, 1987), but some end without resolution (e.g., W. L. Benoit & P. J. Benoit, 1987; Gottman, 1999; Johnson & Roloff, 1998; Lloyd, 1987; Montemayor & Hanson, 1985; Raffaelli, 1992; Trapp & Hoff, 1985; Vuchinich, 1987, 1990). For example, W. L. Benoit and P. J. Benoit stated that approximately 40% of the everyday argumentative episodes described by college students ended when the interactants stopped arguing or when one interactant left the scene. Similarly, Lloyd (1987) found that 32% of disagreements described by dating couples stopped when one partner left the

scene or refused to continue discussion of the issue. Vuchinich (1990) described that 66% of family dinner table quarrels concluded in a standoff in which the participants implicitly agreed to disagree; 2% halted with one party leaving the dinner table or refusing to continue arguing. In Raffaelli's (1992) study of sibling disputes, 37% of conflicts ended without a resolution. Adolescents reported that 50% of arguments with parents or siblings finished with the interactants withdrawing without resolution (Montemayor & Hanson, 1985). Finally, 79% of Gayle and Preiss' (1998) participants responded that their workplace conflicts were not resolved.

When a dispute ends without resolution, it might re-emerge (W. L. Benoit & P. J. Benoit, 1987; Roloff & Johnson, 2002). In fact, almost half of the college students in W. L. Benoit and P. J. Benoit's study reported that they had the same argument with the same person fairly often. Respondents in Johnson and Roloff's (1998) study described disagreeing with a romantic partner an average of 13 times on a particular issue.

Repeated disputes can negatively impact individuals and their relationships. Relational conflicts that extend over several days aversely impact a person's mood state (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). Moreover, individuals in distressed marriages report more ongoing conflicts than do those in nondistressed marriages (Birchler & Webb, 1977), and frequent arguing positively relates to relational termination (McGonagle, Kessler, & Gotlib, 1993). Furthermore, after multiple arguments on the same topic without progress toward a resolution, individuals often conclude that they cannot resolve a conflict (Johnson & Roloff, 1998). Such beliefs and attempts to manage perceived irresolvable conflict hinder relational satisfaction (see related arguments by Gottman, 1999; Metts & Cupach, 1990).

Although research clearly indicates that some interpersonal conflicts are difficult to resolve and that these conflicts can have negative effects, much of the scholarship is scattered across varied contexts. More importantly, prior research has not examined common irresolvable issues or why these issues are perceived to be irresolvable. My study seeks to fill these gaps in current research. Better knowledge of difficult-to-resolve conflicts will help to scholars and practitioners in a variety of areas.

2. Project Plan:

Several years ago, I surveyed more than 200 individuals regarding their irresolvable conflicts. I used quantitative measures and qualitative measures in this survey. However, my graduate training only covered quantitative methods and thus, my work to date regarding irresolvable conflicts (Miller & Roloff, 2006) employed solely quantitative methods. This allowed me to look at these conflicts in the aggregate and compare these conflicts to other types of conflicts. However, this research did not answer many of the specific questions I and others have regarding irresolvable conflicts.

To answer these questions, I need to use qualitative methods. This requires teaching myself these methods and going through the time-consuming process of employing a research method for the first time. I also would like to work with at least one student in the data analysis phase. This student will assist me in categorizing the data.

Ultimately, I hope to develop a catalog of the common issues that become irresolvable and the reasons why individuals perceive these issues to be so problematic. Recognition of common issues will aid researchers and practitioners in developing effective coping mechanisms and resolution strategies.

There are several benefits of this project for students, myself, and Elmhurst College:

Students. There are several benefits of this project for students. First, the student(s) who work with me will gain valuable experience with hands-on research. This will be helpful for a student who is considering graduate work in Communication Studies or related fields. Second, I plan to discuss this research in my Communication 114: Interpersonal Communication course. We spend a week discussing interpersonal conflict. I always describe my dissertation research during this week. Inevitably, students ask about the types of issues participants reported in my study. At the present time, I can only provide a few scattered examples of the kinds of issues individuals reported. After undertaking this project, I can provide students with a list of these common issues types. I envision using this list for a class exercise or discussion on students' personal experiences with irresolvable conflicts. Finally, discussing my research in class and showing a clear application of it allows me to set an example for students by taking joy in intellectual work.

Myself. This project has at least three benefits for my professional development. First, as a new faculty member, I will gain valuable knowledge of and experience with a new research method. This will be helpful for future research projects and also in my teaching. I briefly discuss research methods in one of my courses. Having a personal example of qualitative research will strengthen this lesson. Second, the conference presentation and publication I hope to produce with this grant will provide me with increased visibility in the field of communication and relationship research. This is important not only for my career advancement but also in making new research partnerships with other colleagues. Finally, the conference presentation and publication I expect to write based on this project will serve as evidence of my scholarly work for my tenure case at Elmhurst College.

The College. The topic of this research easily lends itself to the advancement of the College's mission. By engaging in this research, I am demonstrating my commitment to learning through scholarship. Presenting this scholarship in front of national and international audiences provides excellent visibility for the College among individuals who might not be familiar with the College. The topic of this research is broadly applicable to a variety of life circumstances and demonstrates how liberal education and professional learning can enhance each other.

3. Faculty Expertise:

I have extensive expertise in the area of difficult-to-resolve conflicts. I conducted my dissertation research on this topic. I also have conducted four other research projects focused on conflict and communication within relationships. As detailed below, I have presented my work at peer-reviewed national and international academic conferences and have published my research in peer-reviewed journals, peer-reviewed volumes, and peer-

edited volumes. I also have contributed to a textbook and an instructor's manual. As stated previously, this project will greatly enhance my research expertise by adding new data analysis techniques to my skill set.

4. Plans for Evaluation and Dissemination:

This project will be successful if it leads to at least one peer-reviewed presentation at a national or international academic conference in Communication Studies or Relationship Research and at least one peer-reviewed publication in a journal focused on Communication Studies or Relationship Research.

As noted above, I plan to share my findings with Elmhurst College students in my Interpersonal Communication course. I also would welcome the opportunity to present my research to the Elmhurst College community in other venues.

III. Time Line

I do not expect to have any other major commitments during the time of this project. This is the timeline I expect to follow:

May-June:

I will teach myself the data analysis techniques necessary for this project. I also will prepare the data accordingly.

June-July:

I will work with at least one student to categorize the data using the above methods.

July-Aug:

I will write an article-length manuscript detailing my findings. I will send this manuscript to colleagues for review and feedback. After receiving and incorporating this feedback, I plan to produce a work ready for submission to a peer-reviewed national or international academic conference in Communication Studies or Relationship Research. After receiving feedback from our conference presentation, I will submit the manuscript to the editor(s) of a peer-reviewed publication in Communication Studies or Relationship Research.

IV. Budget

| | |
|----------------|---------|
| Student wages | \$ 400 |
| Supplies | \$ 100 |
| Salary support | \$3,000 |
| Total | \$3,500 |

Student wages: I am requesting money to pay at least one student worker to assist in categorizing the qualitative data I have collected.

Supplies: I am requesting support for paper, toner cartridges, copying, file folders, and other office supplies I will need for this project.

Salary: I am requesting salary support equal to one course overload at Elmhurst College. This research project will preclude me from teaching summer school at Elmhurst. In past summers, I have taught summer school or conducted funded research. This is necessary to supplement my family's income. I received a grant for research during the summer of 2007, I taught one course at Elmhurst College during the summer of 2006, and two courses at the University of Illinois at Chicago during the summer of 2005. In addition, conducting this research will require me to spend extra money on child care.

V. Current and Previous Grants

Travel Grant, Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty (2007)

Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, IL

- \$150 provided to present research at the National Communication Association annual meeting in Chicago, IL.

Faculty Research Grant, Faculty Development Committee and the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty (2007)

Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, IL

- \$3,500 provided to social allergens in co-worker relationships.

Travel Grant, Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty (2006)

Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, IL

- \$1,000 provided to present research at the National Communication Association annual meeting in San Antonio, TX.

VI. Publications

Miller, C. W., Roloff, M. E., & Malis, R. S. (2007). Understanding interpersonal conflicts that are difficult to resolve: A review of literature and presentation of an integrated model. In C. S. Beck (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 31* (pp. 117-171). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. [peer-reviewed]

Miller, C. W., & Roloff, M. E. (2007). The effect of face loss on responses to hurtful messages from romantic partners. *Southern Communication Journal*, 72, 247-263. [peer-reviewed]

Miller, C. W., & Roloff, M. E. (2006). The perceived characteristics of irresolvable, resolvable and resolved intimate conflicts: Is there evidence of intractability? *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 17, 291-315. [peer-reviewed]

Miller, C. W. (2006). Irresolvable interpersonal conflicts: Students' perceptions of common topics, possible reasons for persistence and communication patterns. In K. M. Galvin & P. J. Cooper, *Making connections: Readings in relational communication* (pp. 253-259). Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company. [invited/peer-reviewed]

- Roloff, M. E., & **Miller, C. W.** (2006). Mulling about family conflict and communication: What we know and what we need to know. In L. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook* (pp. 143-182). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [invited/peer-reviewed]
- Roloff, M. E., & **Miller, C. W.** (2006). Social cognition approaches to understanding interpersonal conflict and communication. In J. Oetzel & S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of conflict communication: Integrating theory, research, and practice* (pp. 97-128). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [invited/peer-reviewed]
- Miller, C. W.**, & Roloff, M. E. (2005). Gender and willingness to confront hurtful messages from romantic partners. *Communication Quarterly*, 53, 323-337. [peer-reviewed]
- Waite, C.**, & Ruan, R. (2004). Tumbling down the cascade: A case study and activity. Included in K. M. Galvin & B. J. Brommel, *Instructors manual for family communication: Cohesion and change* (6th ed., p. 76-84). Boston: Allyn & Bacon. [invited]
- Ruan, R., & **Waite, C.** (2004). Blended relationships: Managing competing loyalties. Included in K. M. Galvin & B. J. Brommel, *Instructors manual for family communication: Cohesion and change* (6th ed., p. 73-75). Boston: Allyn & Bacon. [invited]

VI. Presentations

- Reznik, R. M. & **Miller, C.W.** (under review). Social Allergens: Exploring the Impact of Emotions, Apologies and Resolvability on Relational Well-being and Communication. Paper under review to be presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, San Diego, CA.
- Roloff, M. E., **Miller, C. W.**, & Reznik, R. M. (2007, November). The interplay of serial argument, relational quality, and health. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.
- Miller, C. W.**, Roloff, M. E., & Malis, R. S. (2006, November). Understanding interpersonal conflicts that are difficult to resolve: A review of literature and presentation of an integrated model. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, San Antonio, TX. [peer-reviewed]
- Malis, R. S. & **Miller, C.W.** (2006, July). Social allergens in romantic relationships: The role of communication and emotion. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association of Relationship Researchers, Crete, Greece. [peer-reviewed]
- Miller, C. W.**, & Roloff, M. E. (2005, May). *Intractable interpersonal conflicts*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New York City, NY. [peer-reviewed]

Waite, C., Plenge, N. E., & Roloff, M. E. (2004, November). *Moving forward by coping with the past: Mediating the impact of hurtful messages on interpersonal relationships*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL. [peer-reviewed]

Thank you for considering my work.

References

- Averill, J. R. (1982). *Anger and aggression: An essay on emotion*. New York: Springer.
- Benoit, W. J., & Benoit, P. J. (1987). Everyday argument practices of naïve social actors. In J. W. Wentzel (Ed.), *Argument and critical practices* (pp. 465-473). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.
- Birchler, G. R., & Webb, L. J. (1977). Discriminating interaction behaviors in happy and unhappy marriages. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 45*, 494-495.
- Bolger, N., DeLongis, A., Kessler, R. C., & Schilling, E. A. (1989). Effects of daily stress on negative mood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 57*, 808-818.
- Coleman, P. T. (2000). Intractable conflict. In M. Deutsch & P. T. Coleman (Eds.), *The handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and practice* (pp. 428-450). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Coleman, P. T. (2003). Characteristics of protracted, intractable conflict: Towards the development of a meta-framework – I. First paper in a three-part series. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 9*, 1-37.
- Gayle, B. M., & Preiss, R. W. (1998). *Assessing emotionality in organizational conflicts*. *Management Communication Quarterly, 12*, 280-302.
- Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic: a scientifically-based marital therapy*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Johnson, K. L., & Roloff, M. E. (1998). Serial arguing and relational quality: Determinants and consequences of perceived resolvability. *Communication Research, 25*(3), 327-343.
- Johnson, K. L., & Roloff, M. E. (2000a). Correlates of the perceived resolvability and relational consequences of serial arguing in dating relationships: Argumentative features and the use of coping strategies. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 17*, 676-686.
- Johnson, K. L., & Roloff, M. E. (2000b). The influences of argumentative role (initiator vs. resistor) on perceptions of serial argument resolvability and relational harm. *Argumentation, 14*, 1-15.

- Lloyd, S. A. (1987). Conflict in premarital relationships: Differential perceptions of males and females. *Family Relations*, 36, 290-294.
- McGonagle, K. A., Kessler, R. C., & Gotlib, I. H. (1993). The effects of marital disagreement style, frequency, and outcome on marital disruption. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10, 385-404.
- Metts, S., & Cupach, W. R. (1990). The influence of relationship beliefs and problem-solving responses on satisfaction in romantic relationships. *Human Communication Research*, 17, 170-185.
- Miller, C. W. (2006). Irresolvable interpersonal conflicts: Students' perceptions of common topics, possible reasons for persistence and communication patterns. In K. M. Galvin & P. J. Cooper, *Making connections: Readings in relational communication* (pp. 253-259). Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- Miller, C. W., & Roloff, M. E. (2006). The perceived characteristics of irresolvable, resolvable and resolved intimate conflicts: Is there evidence of intractability? *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 17, 291-315.
- Miller, R. S. (1997). We always hurt the ones we love: Aversive interactions in close relationships. In R. M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Aversive interpersonal behaviors* (pp. 11-29). New York: Plenum Press.
- Montemayor, R., & Hanson, E. (1985). A naturalistic view of conflict between adolescents and their parents and siblings. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 5, 23-30.
- Putnam, L. L., & Wondolleck, J. M. (2003). Intractability: Definitions, dimensions, and distinctions. In R. Lewicki, B. Gray, & M. Elliott (Eds.), *Making sense of intractable environmental disputes* (pp. 35-59). Washington, D.C.: Island Press.
- Raffaelli, M. (1992). Sibling conflict in early adolescence. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54, 652-663.
- Roloff, M. E., & Johnson, K. L. (2002). Serial arguing over the relational life course: Antecedents and consequences. In A. L. Vangelisti, H. T. Reis, & M. A. Fitzpatrick (Eds.), *Stability and change in relationships. Advances in personal relationships* (pp. 107-128). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Trapp, R., & Hoff, N. (1985). A model of serial argument in interpersonal relationships. *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 22, 1-11.
- Vuchinich, S. (1987). Starting and stopping spontaneous family conflicts. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 49, 591-601.

Vuchinich, S. (1990). The sequential organization of closing in verbal family conflict. In A. D. Grimshaw (Ed.), *Conflict talk: Sociolinguistic investigations of arguments in conversations* (pp. 18-138). New York: Cambridge University Press.