Understanding Conflict Styles: Benefits for Adolescent Relationships

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Abstract

Adolescents mature in large part through their experiences with every day issues. Every day issues evolve into conflict. How conflicts are approached frequently becomes more important than the conflict itself. This review promotes the benefits of understanding the origination and development of conflict resolution styles. Benefits include alleviating and/or preventing risky and negative behaviors, improved relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners.
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Understanding Conflict Styles: Benefits for Adolescent Relationships

Adolescents mature in large part through their experiences with everyday issues. Everyday issues evolve into conflict. Conflict may entail issues as mundane as the in-laws length of stay or who drops the kids off on the way to work. How these issues are approached takes center stage while the initial problem waits in the wings. The original conflict itself then is subsumed by how it is handled, “much research has supported the notion that the way conflicts are managed turns out to be more important than the content of the conflict” (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010, p. 176). Adults act out their roles where the main stage is generally in the home. When the home includes children and dramas unfold; children sit front row, all eyes on the actors before them.

Adolescents have observed, adopted, and tested a style during childhood. Years of observation have lead to “a preferred strategy experienced as producing favorable outcomes” (Kielpikowski & Pryor, 2008, p. 218). This preferred strategy is typically adopted from one of the adults within the home and the home is the main stage where children rehearse their roles as understudies.

As childhood is slowly left behind, adolescents expand their environments. Later curfews and driving the family car create new freedoms. Greater freedoms come with expectations and responsibilities. Parents expect their adolescent to act responsibly which includes learning to handle problems. The old adage, “if you want to be treated as an adult then act like one” is legendary. Adolescents may then attempt to “act” to avoid appearing childish or in fear of losing face and freedoms. Adolescents themselves can feel the need to break the apron strings; to preserve new found freedoms. Accordingly, “for youth who are tasting independence for the first time and for whom peers often overshadow nearly all other concerns, the risks of deceiving
parents…may seem acceptable if the alternative means disrupting their social life” (Warr, 2006, p. 621). This period of adolescence then, “marks the decline of exclusive family influence/control and increased independence from family, greater involvement with peers, and more varied nonfamily influences” (Pleck & Hofferth, 2008, p. 267). These new freedoms regularly produce new and unfamiliar problems. Unexpected challenges will likely produce unease and in adolescent struggles for independence and necessity, evolves some challenging hybrid behaviors.

The focus of this paper is preventative in nature with the thesis that understanding conflict resolution styles can benefit adolescent relationships. As with driver’s education or education on the negative effects of drugs and alcohol, education in conflict resolution is merited. “As conflicts are part of adolescents’ everyday life, appropriately managing these conflicts is essential in maintaining constructive relationships” (Van Doorn, Branje, Vander Valk, De Goede, & Meeus, 2011, p. 157). The theory of Individual Psychology offers adolescents the

To manage conflict effectively one must first understand it. This paper contends that conflict styles are adopted in childhood and tweaked, possibly adapted well into adulthood. Styles are adopted from the foundational parent-child or caregiver-child relationship. Development stems from the constant observation of parental interactions and adolescent rehearsal of their adopted styles based on that observation. Benefits of this conflict style education include; alleviating or preventing risky and negative behaviors including violence and suicide, improving relationships with parents and friends, and building healthier intimate relationships and future parenting skills.
Conflict Styles

Conflict Style Origination

As with any type of subject matter, understanding the mechanics is essential. Understanding conflict styles includes learning where they originate and how they develop. The birth of styles, according to various theories, dawns within the family of origin. Children generally spend their lives watching family dramas unfold before them. The degree, to which these dramas become problematic, in large part, depends on the conflict styles utilized by partners in the conflict. Issues surrounding finances or child rearing will instigate differing conflict styles. Conflict styles can trigger anger expression; the two elements intertwine, frequently becoming inseparable. As they age, children and adolescents are frequently drawn into the conflict even initiating it. Family lines are drawn generally delineating with one of resolutions styles presented by the adults. How these couplings interact establishes the conflict tone within the family system.

Rooted in the family system, the parental-child/adolescent relationship is the foundational relationship through which adolescents build future associations. This foundational relationship is not based solely on biological factors; environmental influences play a role. Partners engage in problem solving techniques and their children, “Through a process of modeling…observe their parents’ attempts to resolve conflicts in the marital relationship and imitate those behaviors in their own conflicts” (Van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2007, p. 426). The concepts of foundational relationships and learned conflict styles are interwoven. The relationships between caregivers followed by the caregiver-child are the first relationship exposures children experience. Generally, this experience resides in the family-of-origin. The family-of-origin is not dictated by genetics alone; nor are learned styles solely inherited, they evolve. The, “parent-child
relationship is the formative relationship and one of the most enduring relationships that most people will experience” (Harlaar et al., 2008, p. 605). This relationship is the dress rehearsal for future life skills and choices.

Several theories including Adlerian, Attachment, Social Learning, and Family Systems agree that learned conflict styles originate from the family-of-origin. According to Attachment Theory, “individuals develop internal working models based on early caregiving experiences that then guide their expectations and attitudes in other, later relationships” (Steinberg, Davila, & Fincham, 2006, p. 334). These early childhood expectations and attitudes are perpetuated in, “that adolescents construct internal working models of relationships based on experiences in the relationships with their parents and that they will use these relationship models to understand and construct their relationships with friends” (Van Doorn et al., 2011, p. 157).

Social learning looks to the family, especially the relationship between the parents, as the birth place of children’s relational skills. Adolescents have the opportunity to test their styles within the family. These skills are brought forward and used in peer and future intimate relationships.

The transmission of conflict styles from the family-of-origin was examined in a 17 year longitudinal study. This study puts forth that the style adopted from the family-of-origin remains and is utilized by individuals in future relationships.

According to social learning theory, the conflict management skills individuals bring to marriage are learned in the family of origin. By observing and participating in family interactions aimed at resolving tensions between family members, the developing individual acquires conflict resolution strategies that generalize to other
The conflict resolution styles that children exhibit in interactions with siblings and peers tend to mirror their parents’ marital conflict style.

(Whitton et al., 2008, p. 275)

Family systems theory contends a socially structured system; within the structure reside various subsystems. Van Doorn et al. (2007), longitudinal study focused on the transmission of styles and the arrangement of these subsystems. Their research found that, “families are hierarchically arranged, suggesting that parents’ behaviors influence adolescents’ behaviors…that the way parents resolve conflicts with each other influences the way adolescents resolve conflict” (Van Doorn et al., 2007, p.427). Adopted styles are transgenerational in that they imitate past familial patterns. These patterns, “repeat themselves in ongoing patterns that span generations…family members form attachments…deal with power, resolve conflict…may mirror to a greater or lesser extent earlier family patterns” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008, p. 175).

Individual Psychology views childhood as the developmental period. Subjective observations accrue throughout childhood as the child seeks his place within the family. These subjective observations develop into a manual for the child; it is retained and utilized throughout adulthood. The subjective observations become subjective convictions surrounding self concept, self ideal, environmental ideas, and ethical convictions. This personal internal manual is called the life style or personality.

The life style is the “rule of rules” for the individual. It is the cognitive blueprint for behavior which is required when no instinctual blueprint exists. But the life style is not merely a collection of rules, it is the organization of all rules into a pattern which dominates not only the rules but all coping activity. (Shulman & Mosak, 1990, p. 44)
All individuals have a style of life or personality which encompasses all intuitive functions. According to Shulman & Mosak (1990), within the life style, reside functions. These functions, seven in all, surround the psychic activity. Included are the functions of decision making, guiding action, and direction-setting. These along with the selective perceiving, predicting and anticipating, radar function, and archeological function, provide the ability to problems solve; behavior grows from the whole system. The ways in which adolescents learn to problem solve stem from observations made during childhood. “To cope, they must learn the rules of the game in the human community-a community experienced almost exclusively through the family, which seems to represent “life” and the “human condition” (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000, p. 35).

Adolescence is a time of passionate experimentation with learned and observed information. Information is gathered and critiqued throughout childhood awaiting adolescent interaction. Greater freedoms and expectations provide expanded testing arenas. Adolescents start the journey clutching and modeling their unique and personal interpretations. “Children are expert observers but make many mistakes in interpreting what they observe. They draw wrong conclusions and choose mistaken ways in which to find their place” (Dreikurs, 1964, p. 15). These unique interpretations, including communication styles, affect present and future relationships. In order to belong, feel significant, and safe, in a problem setting, I must present a particular style i.e. accommodating or competing.

Types of Conflict Styles

Conflicts can arise daily in a variety of settings involving colleagues, friends, and intimate partners. According to Webster’s New World (2008), conflict entails the clashing of diverged opinions. These opinions are shared through communication delivered in particular
styles. Opposing styles can lead to compromise, physical altercations, verbal arguments, and/or avoidance. Frequently, the problem is lost or subjugated to the stance or style taken by each party.

Individuals approach conflict in varying degrees. The ability to state one’s opinion is crucial though often tempered in particular situations. Situations may require an individual to be less concerned with satisfying his needs over the needs of others. This decision then falls within the two primary dimensions of behavior exhibited during conflict. These behaviors are either assertive in nature or cooperative. Along this axis, lie five distinct modes according to Thomas & Kilmann (1978). These five modes are: 1) Competing is both assertive and uncooperative; precedence for self even at the expense of others. 2) Accommodating is both unassertive and cooperative; neglects self in order to satisfy another. 3) Avoiding is both unassertive and uncooperative; conflict is to be avoided at all costs. 4) Collaborating is both assertive and cooperative; individual concerns are equal, dual satisfaction achieved. 5) Compromising is moderate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness; middle of the road assures partial satisfaction for both.

The choice of the Thomas & Kilmann instrument rests with its durability and continued usage among professionals. In the 1988 article Management Communications Quarterly, Putnam, “suggested that it is the most widely used questionnaire of its type in both research and training in North America” (Putnam, 1988, p. 321). Understanding the differences and similarities of these styles, provides a deeper awareness.

We often need an external perspective in order to develop awareness of our goals and beliefs. Awareness can be extremely helpful. If we know what we are doing and for what
purpose, it is easier to evaluate our actions, and it is then far easier to make new choices and decisions. (Teslak, 2010, p. 122)

Negative Effects of Conflict Styles

Adlerian theory believes conflict is due to problems in one or perhaps more of the three Life Tasks arenas. According to Alfred Adler, the Life Tasks include: social, work, and love. “Adler certainly examined all interpersonal conflicts as reflecting some failure to UNDERSTAND and answer the universal demand for mutual respect between nations, races, sexes, employers-employees, and adults-children” (Griffith & Powers, 2007, p. 30).

When individuals fail to understand each other it produces various emotions, but in particular, it produces anger. Anger invokes a range of behaviors including avoidance, withdrawal, acquiescence, and violence. The negative effects of anger create a cloudy atmosphere which obscures the strengths and positive qualities of individuals. Consistent anger and defensiveness hide the humor, intimacy, and even the respect individuals share. Overtime results include poor interpersonal communication skills, impaired problem solving capabilities, and sometimes divorce. When children are a part of the picture, the atmosphere engulfs them, as well.

Adolescent’s continued exposure to negative and/or hostile inter-parental conflict frequently interferes with emotional competence. Adolescent subjective observations and interpretations will shape response styles, core values and beliefs.

When a child violates what the parents believe she or he ought to do, the parents criticize or punish the child. When the child does not violate his or her parents’ prescriptions, the parents relax controls and demands on the child. This pattern instills a focus on prevention in the child, which is hypothesized to direct the child’s attention to significant
others’ beliefs about his or her duties and obligations. Such duties and obligations form the basis for the domain of self. (Manian, Strauman, & Denney, 1998, p. 1322)

What duties and obligations might an adolescent infer from watching and responding to his or her parents? Could it be that a female, when expressing anger, is the dominant individual? Could anger along with her competing style, proclaim the importance of self above others? How does the male in the family respond when his adopted style is accommodating? Does fear of anger and assertiveness cause him to be compliant and negate self? As styles are not gender specific, do perceived duties and obligations form along gender lines partially based upon the conflict styles presented?

Adlerian theory asserts, “Children form their pictures of what it means to be a man or a woman by experiencing, and assigning meanings to, the differences between mother and father” (Powers & Griffith, 1987, p. 134). For the child what he or she sees and interprets becomes the greater reality. It is the benchmark for what is and is not acceptable. Minimal interactions with other adults then skew the child’s reality. These limited experiences can create a rigid outlook on conflict styles and gender roles.

If the models display a narrow or distorted range of behavior, the child has little opportunity to learn alternatives and tries to use the little information learned to deal with the situation. Thus, a first-born son with an indulgent and submissive mother and a dictatorial tyrannical father is very likely to become a rebellious dictatorial child himself, demanding the mother’s submission and constantly enraging the father who then punishes the child and further reinforces the child’s overvaluation of the importance of being the more powerful one in a relationship. (Shulman et al., 1990, pp. 45-46)
To highlight the effects of a rigid belief system, the film *Ordinary People* is a perfect example. This film examines the transference of gender and conflict style from generation to generation. It also illuminates the effects these beliefs can have on families. The focus will concentrate on Beth the mother in the film. Beth’s issue is her misconception of masculinity. As a child, Beth observes her parents interactions. She grows up believing that males are the weaker sex and solidifies this belief when she marries Calvin, a model of her father. Beth of course steps into the role she watched her mother hold; the dominant figure. “As Adler pointed out, society generally identifies strength, power, aggression, and even health, as being manly, whereas weakness, illness, powerlessness, or inhibition of aggression are considered as typically female traits” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p.8).

Beth and Calvin have two sons, Buck and Conrad. They in turn make observations and conclusions concerning gender roles and resolution styles. Buck, the eldest son, watches his parents interact and decides he has no interest in being like his father. Conrad on the other hand, adopts the style and attitude of his father; women are strong and men are weak.

As the sons grow older, the differences in styles become apparent. These differences open Beth’s eyes and provide a new perspective on gender roles. The majority of Beth’s life found her complacent in her role. As Buck grows older, Beth’s complacency is suddenly jeopardized. He chooses the dominant role which differs from Beth’s beliefs and in contrast to other males within the household.

Children shape images of themselves as adults along the guiding lines, which they come to regard as if tracing a destiny. As the capacities for critical discrimination grow, and the guiding lines are seen to encompass unattractive, unwelcome, or repugnant features, the sense of destiny may reveal itself in an uneasiness, as if the child were thinking, “When I
grow up I’m going to be like that (referring to qualities of the same-sex parent), unless I do something about it. (Powers et al., 1987, p. 135)

Beth’s need to dominate begins to change as she watches her eldest take on the role. Buck is a different type of man than her father or husband. He is a popular and dashing sports legend, wild and reckless. He is the type of male she has always dreamed of but was afraid to marry. Buck exhibits no sign of weakness and Beth finds herself forgoing the dominant role. Beth could have lived vicariously through Buck but he dies in a boating accident. After Buck’s death, Beth feels she must again resume her dominant role; Calvin and Conrad are not real men. This produces immense anger and disdain which Beth unloads on Conrad and Calvin. Family life becomes miserable with Beth’s disdain contributing to Conrad’s attempted suicide. This suicide attempt fuels the concept of a weak male in Beth’s eyes. Life becomes insufferable for all members with Beth eventually leaving the family and Calvin and Conrad starting anew.

The adoption of gender roles and conflict styles are patterns visible from generation to generation. Problems in these areas produce conflict for partners which spill over into other relationships within the family. Problems include poor parenting. “Parents experiencing marital discord may utilize less favorable parenting techniques” (Barry & Kochanska, 2010, p. 238). The negative effects on children and adolescents are numerous. Low self-esteem, depression, risky behaviors, and poor problem solving skills. Parents caught up in conflict lack consistency and predictability. Involvement in their children’s lives may consist of silence and withdrawal or abusiveness and hostility.

A parent utilizing withdrawal, often withdraws from the family as well. To adolescents this behavior communicates distance and unavailability. A parent’s unavailability, “may adversely affect children by hindering their ability to access source of emotional and
informational support” (Shelton & Harold, 2007, p. 499). Along with limited support, distancing behavior finds adolescents seeking replacements for their parents. “Those who perceive their relationship with their parents as being distant, unsatisfactory, and lacking communication (i.e., low parental warmth) may look elsewhere for companionship and thus be drawn toward high-risk individuals” (Tyler, Brownridge, & Melander, 2011, p. 227).

Silence creates a cloudy atmosphere where resolution never seems to hold. Silence creates walls between family members fostering tensions and anxiety. Though verbal silence is utilized, behaviors express feelings and emotions. In one study out of New Zealand, adolescents described the behaviors their parents engaged in.

Young people described a wide range of behaviours in their parents that were indicative of unspoken conflict. They fell into three categories: actions intended to annoy the partner; reduction in normal or affectionate behaviours; and avoidance of family and partner…banging things around, and slamming doors…not cooking dinner…or avoiding family members by going to another part of the house…by staying at work or visiting relatives. (Pryor & Pattison, 2007, p. 74)

Silence creates uncertainty for adolescents; i.e. is the conflict over and/or resolved. Silence impedes adolescents from learning how to resolve conflict. This spells difficulty for future adolescent relationships. “Factors that place adolescents at risk for problematic transitions to adulthood are viewed as especially important because the trajectories established during early adulthood have profound implications for the quality of later life” (Haynie, Petts, Maimon, & Piquero, 2009, p. 269).

Patterns of silence and withdrawal may provoke an externalized anger response. Externalized anger expression may cause avoidance and/or withdrawal. When aggressive anger
is displayed it is immediate, intense, and impossible to ignore. This intense display of emotion generally catches individuals off guard. Anger displayed verbally and/or physically, generally generates a fight or flight reaction. To dull or avoid the pain, adolescent flight reaction is frequently impulsive and may increases the risk of engaging in risky behaviors.

Anger merits a special attention in decision-making for several reasons. First, anger is one of the most frequently experienced emotions…Second, anger has an unusually strong ability to capture attention…Third, anger has infusive influences on decision-making under risk. (Gambetti & Giusberti, 2009, p. 14)

Angry interactions produce short lived feelings of invulnerability. When adolescents are angry they often become rash with shortened deliberations and the chances of making risky decisions are high. In their 2009 study, Gambetti et al., discuss how emotions, anger in general, cause children and adolescents to be careless in their thoughts. Anger is described as one of the dispositional emotions. Unlike momentary emotions which, “refer to immediate affective reactions to a particular target, dispositional emotions refer to the tendency to react with specific emotions across time and situations” (Gambetti et al., 2009, p. 15). Children and adolescent then make risky decisions based on their emotions and feelings. “The tendency to feel anger in several situations and the style used to express angry feelings may be very important factors in children’s risky decision-making because they emerge early in life and function as chronic schemas for organizing and interpreting events” (Gambetti et al., 2009, p. 15). An adolescent angry with parents constant fighting, might seek solace in alcohol and/or drugs. Though adolescents may be aware of the danger and negative effects, angry feelings may negate any sense of foreboding. “Acting out…refers to “corrective action” is aimed at making the adolescent feel better by reducing the negative emotions” (Sigfusdottir, Farkas, & Silver, 2004, p. 511).
speed of the decision is quick, “evade the felt hurt and pain”. Unfortunately risky behavior can have long term consequences. Self medicating can evolve from usage to abuse. Truancy, dropping out of school, running away from home, and/or teen pregnancy are plausible. These along with criminal activities and/or suicides are possible consequences with life altering effects.

Children and adolescents exposed to conflict anger not only make risky decisions but often respond to others with anger. “When feeling angry, the adolescent is…likely to react spontaneously on the basis of previous experience. The anger is felt, the response has been mentally rehearsed, and through learned and rewarded behavior, the adolescent lashes out” (Wolf & Foshee, 2000, p. 311). The expression of anger is formulated during childhood. “Because many children spend a significant amount of time with family members, they may learn how to respond to anger by observing how family members respond to anger and thus establish an anger expression style” (Wolf, p. 311). Observing parental anger and engaging in family anger, find adolescents utilizing the same styles in other relationships. The use of anger and aggression towards non-family members may have adverse effects on these relationships.

The use of aggressive behaviors by children exposed to marital conflict to distract parents’ attention could generalize to the use of aggression in conflict situations with peers. The same behavior used in interactions with peers is likely to elicit aggressive responding by others and peer rejection. (Shelton et al., 2007, p. 498)

When the expression of anger turns violent, adolescent are at risk for continuing the pattern of violence. Witnessing continued violence in the home may find children interpreting the behavior as justifiable. “Children are born into a world that is already inhabited, and into families that already have histories. In these families they encounter standards for a quality of interaction with others…” (Powers et al. 1987, p. 149). Sadly, violence in the parental
relationship may spill over into the parental/child relationship. This spillover effect has numerous negative effects for adolescents and, “has been shown to be a predictor of later aggressive behavior, attention problems, anxiety/depression, and low levels of popularity” (Murphy, 2011, p. 593).

Children exposed to violence not only perpetrate violence but may become victims. Those becoming victims, “learn the social scripts necessary for becoming victims of violence as they have internalized rationalizations for interpersonal aggression”(Tyler et al., 2011, p. 226). Adolescent perpetrators and victims of violence need accepting environments. Violent behaviors are not generally acceptable therefore, “adolescents…may also feel more similar to and seek out peers who share their own views and who are also tolerant of violence” (Quigley, Jaycox, McCaffrey, & Marshall, 2006, p. 598). Adolescent victims also find solace in this group of peers; their status as victim is accepted. Adolescents especially girls, become and often remain victims of violence. The thought can be, “at least I have a boyfriend”. The need to belong and feel accepted is paramount.

Adolescents may experience intense peer pressure to conform to social norms, which strongly encourage participation in intimate dating relationships. Deviating from that norm by terminating a dating relationship may lead to ostracism and, therefore, a teen may feel pressure to continue even a violent relationship. (Cornelious, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010, p. 441)

Poor parenting expressed in any form holds negative consequences for children and adolescents. Aggressive anger, withdrawal, and/or silence may lead children and adolescents to seek solace in risky behaviors. Damaged and suppressed feeling and emotions may send adolescents seeking replacements for parents and/or caregivers. Lack of supervision may allow
others to pressure adolescents towards risky behaviors. “Besides resulting in inconsistent parenting, frequent parent conflict also reduces adolescents’ opportunities to observe and practice appropriate interpersonal problem-solving and negotiation skills” (Whittaker & Bry, 1992, p. 50).

**Does Gender Affect the Influence of Negative Interactions**

All adolescents experience forms of conflict within the home. Do negative and violent interactions though differ between males and females? Does the reaction from a male to negative conflict differ from that of the female? Studies do support the notion that the two sexes do respond differently.

Females react as strongly to negative interactions as males do. Their responses though differ according to various studies. These studies cite depression, fear, and societal expectations as explanations for the differences. One study by Sigfusdottir et al. (2010), found females, especially adolescent females, experienced far more depression than their male counterparts. This is due in part to, “…that although girls experience higher levels of anger than boys, they also experience higher levels of depressed mood. Their depressed mood hence may counteract their anger” (p.512).

Female’s responses are also driven by fear. Instead of sharing actual emotion, it is often negated out of apprehension. This apprehension is frequently due to aggressive behaviors experienced in the family of origin. Females may withdraw from aggressive conflict or acquiesce in hopes of smoothing over conflict. “Girls’ tendency to smooth over real or potential conflict may be more closely tied to fear. Self-blaming appraisals may lead to fear of retribution, and appraisals of threat may reflect fears of physical or psychological harm” (Simon & Furman, 2010, p. 204).
Society plays a part in the way females respond to anger. The response takes into consideration, observed females guiding roles, family perception of females, and external displays of anger are less acceptable to society. This along with fear leaves many females adopting compliance styles and internalizing anger. “Conversely, males may simply express their anger outwardly, without first trying to hold it inside, because there is less social pressure for males than females to suppress their anger” (Wolf et al., 2003, p. 314). The outcomes often result in higher levels of anger expression and perhaps eventual violent anger expression. High school shootings would be a perfect example where adolescents who have suppressed their anger for extended periods of time, suddenly explode. Regrettably, anger internalized may also result in suicide when the possibility for change appears unattainable.

When anger has been suppressed for a long time, it is likely to take especially severe and grisly forms when it is finally released. As such, an adolescent may consciously try to avoid destructive direct responses to anger, but after suppressing the anger for a period of time, may aggress even more violently than one who directs the anger outwardly immediately. (p. 311)

Contrary to these studies, there are studies that negate these findings and argue that females react more forcefully. Studies argue that females respond to conflict more aggressively due to relational roles. Females are socialized to relate to interpersonal relationships, males relate more to individual autonomy. Females then, according to this hypothesis, are more willing to engage in confronting behaviors. According to Mackey’s (2000) study, 63% of women compared to 32% of men exhibited a confrontive style. These numbers increased as the years went on, 76% of women and 46% of men. This increase is especially true when women enter into second marriages. The desire for a more equal relationship drives the behavior. “Women may
aggressively seek more power in a remarriage to avoid situations similar to those operated in a previous marriage” (Chen et al., 2006, p. 423).

Males generally respond differently than females. Males experiencing family violence were more than likely to express anger directly and aggressively. Societal expectations are that males are more likely to express their anger and are generally more aggressive and physical. In their 2003 study, Wolf et al. describe how males perpetrate violence. “Experiencing family violence is weakly associated with dating violence perpetration by females and strongly associated with dating violence perpetration by males. Witnessing family violence is associated with dating violence perpetration by females, but not males” (313).

Men may react to anger and violence according to the level of socialization expressed in the family of origin. “To the extent that boys’ socialization emphasizes agency, assertion, and individual well-being, power assertive acts (e.g., verbal or physical aggression) or self-focused regulations behaviors (e.g., withdrawal) may become favored in the face of negative conflict appraisals”(Simon et al., 2010, p. 204). The conflict-anger style expressed in the family of origin then has a direct affect on the outcome expressed by the adolescent.

Males frequently employ the avoidant conflict style. This is in part because males find it more difficult to express their feelings and when confrontations arise choose to avoid instead of engage. Societal expectations still acknowledge the expression of emotions and feelings as a female attribute. Males who come from divorced families also employ the avoidant style. These men may have poor interpersonal communication skills and are aware of it. “Men who have experienced parental divorce tend to cope with disagreement in romantic relationships by avoiding such conflict” (Chen et al., 2006, p. 423). It may be that in an attempt to avoid the learned aggressive behavior, they opt for avoidance.
Summary

Families of origin provide the learning environment for all individuals. Patterns of interwoven conflict and anger styles are traceable from generation to generation. These patterns are then absorbed by children and they model the behavior. “These relationships become prototypes of all human relationships for the child and the manner of relating the child learns at home is often carried into its later life” (Shulman et al., 1990, p. 44).

Regardless of the styles, the parental relationship crafts the family atmosphere. Children observe parents and then based upon their observations, arrive at numerous conclusions. These conclusions include, who they are as a male or female, parenting behaviors, how to interact when presented with a problem, and how to express their thoughts and ideas. “If the parents are not able themselves to cooperate, it will be impossible for them to teach cooperation to their children” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 435). The relationship between parents creates overlapping patterns of behavior. These patterns affect children’s various forms of development. “Research has consistently indicated that the interparental relationship has important consequences for the children’s socioemotional development, including attachment and emotional security adjustment and behavior problems, coping styles, social competence with peers, and academic functioning” (Barry et al., 2010, p. 238).

Parents caught up in their own conflict exhibit poor parenting skills. Parenting responsibilities may lack consistency and reliability both necessary and advantageous for children and adolescents. Parents may be unavailable, neglectful, and/or violent; there is often lack of supervision and accountability. The opportunity for any observation of a healthy intimate relationship may be impossible. “Frequent parent conflict also reduces adolescents’ opportunities
to observe and practice appropriate interpersonal problem-solving and negotiation skills”
(Whittaker et al., 1992, p. 50).

Adolescents exposed to anger and/or violence frequently react impulsively. To avoid pain and suffering, they engage in risky behaviors. They seek out peers engaging in the same behaviors in order to belong and feel accepted. Whether an adolescent is perpetrator or victim, the role chosen is often a learned and rehearsed behavior.

Styles are observed, adopted, and adapted from the observations of the parental relationship. These relationships combined with the parent/child relationship are the foundational relationships from which children learn. Conflict styles combined with parenting styles create the family atmosphere. These styles are carried into future intimate and marital relationships where an atmosphere is established. How might an atmosphere vary if both partners understood where and how their unique styled developed?

Males and females exposed to high conflict in the foundational relationship, respond differently. Males generally respond with more aggression than females often because it is more socially accepted. Males respond with violence when they themselves have been victim compared to females who respond more aggressively when witnessing violence. This is partly due to the fact that more females than males express fear of physical and/or psychological retaliation. Females are generally more in-tune to relationships, where males are more concerned with independence and autonomy. Females do express aggressive styles when they feel the distribution of power is unequal.

Adlerian Theory and Tools for Understanding Conflict Styles

“But long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle’s claw, if
only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants” (Silko, 1977, p. 126). Change is inevitable and can be a powerful. Self-awareness brings about change which provides choices and opportunities. Understanding one’s conflict style and the affect it has on one’s behavior provides avenues for change.

…What needs to happen to make a relationship work is to: (1) increase the positivity of the affect with which each person approaches the conflict discussion, and (2) decrease each person’s emotional inertia, which is the extent to which their own emotions affect not the partner, but one’s self. (Madhyastha, Gottman, & Hamaker, 2011, p. 299).

How can the information gathered, i.e. origination, styles, and negative effects be presented to adolescents to promote understanding? The theory of Individual Psychology provides the perfect vehicle to promote understanding. The Basis-A, genograms, and miniature lifestyle assessment combined with the Thomas Kilmann inventory allow for a step by step educational process. Lifestyle is equated with personality and personality includes a conflict style. The question that may be raised is there a connection between lifestyle, conflict style, and aggressive behavior?

**Conflict Styles and Lifestyle**

If we start with the fact that all relationship experience conflict, then can conflict be perceived in a positive light? “Interpersonal conflict may offer opportunities for development of marital relationships if spouses learn mutually acceptable ways of negotiating and managing differences between them” (Mackey, Diemer, & O’Brien, 2000, p. 135). Accordingly then understanding styles promotes opportunities for development.

In 2003, Morris-Conley & Kern looked at the relationship between Lifestyle and conflict resolution strategy. They integrated the Thomas-Kilmann conflict styles with the Adlerian
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personality inventory, the Basis- A. The argument made is that the manner, in which one behaves and acts, is dependent on their unique and personal interpretations.

The construct of lifestyle within Individual Psychology supports the belief that an individual moves through experiences with consistent perspective and responses to daily incidents. Therefore, an individual’s lifestyle would be related to his or her reactions and expressions of thought and behavior within conflict situations. (Morris-Conley & Kern, 2003, pp. 477-478)

Similar to the Thomas-Kilmann inventory, the Basis-A consists of five scales for measuring personality or lifestyle themes but with five supporting scales. These five scales provide insight into the lifestyle. The five main scales are; Belonging/Social Interest, Taking Charge, Going Along, Wanting Recognition, and Being Cautious. The scales measure individual priority themes, i.e. the need for social connectedness, the amount of control required the need to follow rules, validation needed from others, and the measure of trust. A particular characteristic is indicated by a high score on one of the themes. The five supporting scales, Harshness, Entitlement, Liked by All, Striving for Perfection, and Softness, provide augmentation of the five main themes.

The Morris-Conley study found correlations between conflict styles and lifestyle themes. The Taking Charge scale positively correlated with Kilmann’s competing style. Liked by All and Being Cautious correlated with the collaborating style. Being Cautious and Softness correlated with the compromising style. Being Cautious coupled with Liked by All correlated with the avoiding style. The Basis-A inventory showed no relation to Kilmann’s accommodating style and was found to need further study.
This study established the connection between Lifestyle and conflict resolution styles. The two inventories taken together can be useful tools to help individuals understand the connection between personality and conflict style. “Therefore, from the perspective of Individual Psychology, one’s lifestyle provides the interpretation and process employed by an individual during situations involving conflict experiences” (Morris-Conley et al., 2003, p.478).

Conflict, Anger, and Lifestyle

In another study, the Basis-A was used to study lifestyle profiles and the aggressive behaviors of identified aggressive adolescents. Adolescents when feeling hurt and angry react impulsively. As reported earlier, this impulsivity includes expressions of anger and/or violence. The use of anger in Adlerian theory signals an individual’s attempt to hide their feelings of inferiority through power and domination. “According to Adler’s aggression theory, a person’s intensified belief that he or she is weak leads to feelings of inferiority that may contribute to feelings of anger and a drive for aggression as a means of compensation” (Smith, Kern, Curlette, & Mullis, 2001, p. 225).

The study produced three types of aggressive adolescents groups based on the results of the Basis-A inventory, STAI, the STAXI, and the Aggression Questionnaire. The STAI in the State-Trait anxiety inventory measures state and trait anxieties. The STAXI inventory measures the intensity of anger as an emotion while the Aggression Questionnaire measures physical and verbal aggression along with anger arousal and hostility.

Similarities among the inventories showed connectedness between lifestyle and aggressive behaviors. The group labeled extreme, exhibited high levels on Taking Charge and Entitlement scales. A high scale of the Taking Charge theme is also high on the competing conflict style. The second group labeled essentially flat, exhibited high levels on the Wanting
Recognition scale. The Wanting Recognition theme shows no correlation with the Kilmann conflict styles. Further research should investigate a correlation with the accommodating style. Interestingly the flat group accommodates, “because these adolescents have such a desire to cooperate, they may be more vulnerable to influences by their peer. They may be so eager to help others…” (Smith et al., 2001, pp. 237-238). The final group was labeled tilted and exhibited the highest on Being Cautious scale. This correlates with the avoiding styles which showed a high score on Being Cautious. Again the Basis-A inventory combined with conflict and/or anger inventories, provide correlations between a chosen lifestyle, conflict style, and anger expression.

**Atmosphere**

When contemplating the future, it is often wise to examine the past. “According to Individual Psychology, family-of-origin experiences are fundamental in understanding an different interpretations from their family-of-origin atmospheres; each carries an expectation of individual’s lifestyle” (Weber, 2003, p. 252). Every family has an internal mood or atmosphere. Partners establish an atmosphere when they enter an intimate relationship. Both arrive with different interpretations from their family-of-origin atmospheres; each carries an expectation of how a relationship should be. This expectation continues when children enter the relationship. Child rearing and behavioral expectations follow parent’s experiences from their family atmosphere. Each brings an interpretation and models it for their children to adopt or dismiss.

In Adlerian terms, the word atmosphere is used as a metaphor describing the relationships between partners and/or family members i.e. the family members always fought a stormy atmosphere. The atmosphere is comprised of three elements; mood, order, and relationships. “Mood refers to the overall emotional tone…it is generally an expression of the mood of one or both parents…Order refers to the hierarchical relationships…Relationships refer to the consistent
forms of interaction present in the family” (Shulman et al., 1990, p. 43-44). The family atmosphere plays a foundational role in the development of children’s lifestyles.

Within the family construct, children observe and interpret a variety of interactions. Here they learn gender guiding lines from watching their parents’ i. e. this is how men should be. They adopt the values taught and displayed i. e. education, honesty, or perfectionism. The development of a conflict style is based on the interactions displayed by the adults’ i. e. I should avoid conflict. “The child’s early experiences with the family atmosphere influence what it will expect later in life” (Shulman et al., 1990, p.45). To assist adolescents in understanding the effects of the family atmosphere, a mini lifestyle assessment along with a genogram will work.

**Genograms**

“The family atmosphere possesses significance…because it affects the assumptions that people make about situations and people outside the family and, consequently, can affect how they choose to fit in and to pursue the life tasks” (Oberst et al., 2003, p.65). To help distinguish patterns, a genogram is created to follow family blueprints. If one considers the old statement that “the apple hasn’t fallen far from the tree”, a genogram is a diagram of the family tree. Patterns of shared values or the importance of male superiority are traceable from generation to generation. “Genograms are diagrammatic representations of several generations of the family of origin” (Oberest et al., 2003, p.62). Though not developed by Adler, genograms are a tool utilized by Adlerian therapists.

The construction of a genogram creates opportunities for adolescents and their parents to understand family dynamics together. The educational benefit comes not only in observing patterns but the sharing of family histories and stories. This sharing can result in a deepening of the parent-adolescent relationship. It allows adolescents and perhaps even their parents a new
and wider comprehension of their behaviors. Choices promote opportunities for change; Adler believed that anything can be different.

**Summary**

Individual Psychology offers easily understood theory and tools for assisting adolescents’ understanding of conflict styles. The Basis-A inventory offers insight into the lifestyle themes of individuals. It establishes the correlations between one’s lifestyle and conflict style as well as patterns of aggressive behavior.

The family of origin establishes a atmosphere were relational constructs develop. Parents model behaviors which the child observes and interprets. These interpretations accompany the child into adulthood. The roles of men and women, their interactions within an intimate relationship, and how to raise children are learned from the parental interactions. Family values are passed from generation to generation; one must always be obedient or be the boss. The foundational parent-child relationship sets the tone of future parent-child relationships. Patterns of behavior become visible with the use of genograms. Established patterns are traceable from generation to generation. The opportunity for improved family relationships arises through the creation and examination of family patterns. Self-awareness creates choices resulting in change. Adolescents and even adults can adapt or react differently to conflict when they understand how their style developed. “It is as if a mirror were being held up in front of them, and they were able to then decide which basic convictions they want to keep and which basic mistakes they choose to alter”(Dinkmeyer et al., 2000, p.38).

**Final Summary**

Adolescents’ need, “to learn that it is conflict style, rather than conflict event, that maintains interpersonal tension and will set the stage for individual appraisal of one’s conflict
Conflict styles and anger expression are frequently interwoven and inseparable. Learning is based on a child’s observations of caregiver/parental interactions. Children adopt and adapt their styles based on their personal interpretations of the observed behavior. Children model and practice this learned behavior within the family system and the family is the dress rehearsal for all future human interactions.

Adolescent’s reaction to conflict can be altered by providing conflict education. Education includes providing tools to heighten understanding. The Basis-A and Thomas-Kilmann inventories are such tools; both provide insight into personality. Genograms trace the patterns of personality and Individual Psychology examines and interprets the patterns. Examining patterns can open avenues for positive interactions and dialog including family stories and histories. Stories and histories recount behaviors becoming mirrors for self appraisal. Self appraisal progresses into self-awareness which provides opportunities for change. Change can create insight and empathy concerning the reactions of another. Empathy for and of others constructs healthier relationships.

**Conclusion**

Though the correlation between conflict style and lifestyle exists, additional research is recommended. In addition to this research, a correlation between conflict style and the number one priority should be examined. Could there be a connection between an accommodating style and a pleasing priority or the avoiding style and the priority of comfort? M Pew (1976) writes, “The number one priority is a bridge to understanding, to helping people understand themselves” (p. 3). The theory of Individual Psychology provides a bridge to personal self-awareness. Self-
awareness of one’s conflict style becomes visible through the TKI and Basis A tests combined with genograms and a lifestyle assessment. Adolescents could benefit from role playing conflict styles followed with interactive conversations.
References


