



# The negative reciprocity process in marital relationships: A literature review



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature concerning the negative reciprocity pattern present in conflicts in marital relationships. This review assesses issues with defining negative reciprocity within the scholarly community and issues with the limited theoretical developments surrounding this topic. Moreover, the review shows how research findings have contributed to our understanding of marital satisfaction, marital distress, decision-making, and aggression. The review also highlights current gaps and limitations of the negative reciprocity literature in marital relationships. Finally, the review discusses future directions for theorizing negative reciprocity and using different methods to study this communicative pattern.

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## 1. Introduction

Romantic and marital relationships can be the most satisfying and most intimate relationships that life may bring. However, these relationships come with the need to negotiate roles, identities, and needs among other things, which often result in badly managed conflicts leading to relational dissatisfaction. According to the [National Vital Statistic System \(2010\)](#), in the year 2000, more than 2.2 million couples married and about 944,000 divorced. Divorce often occurs when individuals do not manage conflict appropriately within the marriage relationship

context. Scholars have researched conflict and the negative communication patterns used in romantic relationships.

Negative reciprocity represents one of the most researched communication patterns in marital conflict research. Negative reciprocity is loosely defined as the “tendency to reciprocate one another’s negative behaviors” ([Burman, Margolin, & John, 1993, p. 29](#)). Negative reciprocity involves the interchange of destructive marital behaviors such as complaints, criticisms, and nonverbal expressions of negative affect (e.g., rolling of the eyes) ([Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006](#); [Gottman, 1979](#)). The negativity that is exchanged between marital partners is shown to predict marital dissatisfaction ([Gottman, 1994](#); [Kurdek, 1995](#)) and relationship dissolution ([Gottman, 1994](#)). Because people often display negative reciprocity during marital conflict, this literature review will focus on this particular negative pattern. I will first discuss the purpose of studying negative reciprocity and conflict. I will then

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provide a significance statement, a review of the literature, and an assessment of the literature. Finally, I will suggest directions for future research on this topic.

Although multiple definitions of conflict exist, the interpersonal definition of conflict appears to be the most appropriate to the study of romantic relationships. Hocker and Wilmot (1978) define conflict as the “expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (p. 9). The *expressed struggle* means that individuals must communicate either verbally or nonverbally that they are struggling. Unexpressed struggles within a person’s thoughts do not count according to this definition. *Between at least two interdependent parties* means that the two individuals must have a relationship with each other (e.g., friends, romantic partners, co-workers). *Interdependent* means that the two individuals must depend on each other. *Perception of incompatible goals* means that individuals must be consciously aware that their goal(s) (e.g., to borrow money) do not match what the other person wants. *Scarce resources* are tangible (e.g., car) or intangible (e.g., time) resources that inspire competition between the two or more parties. *Interference from others in achieving their goals* refers to perceiving the other person as a barrier or an obstacle to the achievement of what one person wants or needs.

The study of marital conflict is important for human survival. Sanderson (2001) interprets Darwin’s social evolutionary theory to explain that people engage in conflict in order to meet their goal to survive. From this viewpoint, conflict represents one means of surviving in this complicated world. Sanderson (2001) suggests that conflict can promote human procreation. For instance, relational conflict has potential benefits that could intensify partners’ commitment to that relationship. If the conflict turns bitter, each person can choose to procreate with another individual, thus still promoting human survival. Aruka (2001) explains that the usage of negative reciprocity in relational conflict can also serve to solve human dilemmas that hinder societal progress.

Because conflict can escalate from mild exchanges to severe physical violence, reviewing marital conflict research might help individuals avoid physical violence. Conflict research may help individuals to understand strategies to prevent or reduce physical violence in destructive relationships. Coleman and Straus (1986) studied a national sample and found that equality in marriage can reduce violence in marital relationships. Relationships that place too much emphasis on a dominant partner tend to experience violence (Coleman & Straus, 1986). Power imbalances might influence partners’ (male or female) willingness to physically hurt their partner. Stets and Straus (1989) found that violence not only occurs in marital relationships, it also occurs between cohabiting couples. This finding suggests that violence also occurs in long-term non-marital romantic relationships. By continuing the study of marital and long-term romantic relationships, scholars are continuing to expand understanding of how to intervene, mediate, or perhaps discover various ways to equip individuals with information that will help them guard against physical abuse.

Conflict affects the couple and their children. Revisiting conflict and the negative communication patterns in the marriage can help partners maintain the health of their family (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Conflict can impact parents’ ability to care for and pay attention to their children (Erel & Burman, 1995). Houseknecht and Hango (2006) found that marital conflict can help maintain the wellbeing of the children. Research has also demonstrated that parents who manage their conflicts constructively can exemplify emotional security for their children and also help prepare them to be able to make prosocial adjustments in future relationships (Houseknecht & Hango, 2006; McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009). Children can learn the communication patterns of their parents during conflict, which can affect how they deal with conflict as adults (McCoy et al., 2009). These findings suggest that the study of conflict is important to the maintenance or disruption of the health of couples, as well as their children.

More specifically, the negative reciprocity process has been shown to distress marital relationships in two important ways. First, when one spouse offers negative complaint to his or her partner, the partner may feel defensive, and thus, return the offense with a counter-complaint, which stirs the negative reciprocity process in a couple’s conflictual interactions (Gottman, 1979; Krokoff, Gottman, & Roy, 1988). As a result of engaging in negative reciprocity, marital partners report being dissatisfied in their relationship and their overall quality of communication about the relationship (Alberts & Driscoll, 1992; Pike & Sillars, 1985). For instance, the negative reciprocity process has been shown to escalate destructive conflicts and the intensity of negative affect toward one’s romantic partner (Alberts & Driscoll, 1992; Ting-Toomey, 1983). Negative reciprocity is also shown to be a predictor for marital dissolution including separation and/or divorce (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Filsinger & Thoma, 1988; Gottman, 1994). Thus, examining negative reciprocity in conflict interactions is an important area of marital conflict research.

Accordingly, this literature review focuses on the following research question: *Do research findings support the use of negative reciprocity during romantic conflicts?* More specifically, this review will focus on long-term romantic relationships such as marital relationships.

Prior to reviewing the literature, I searched for relevant articles with the computer database searches Communication and Mass Media Complete, PsycInfo, and Academic Search Premier using the following key words: “negative reciprocity,” “negative reciprocity and marital relationships,” “reciprocity and couples,” and “reciprocity and marital relationships.” Next, I cross-referenced by gathering other articles derived from the references of published articles. Quantitative peer-reviewed publications were selected to fulfill the inclusion criteria for the review to gather the strongest evidence available. Only studies published between 1975 and 2014 were included to fulfill the inclusion criteria for this review. The studies also needed to have dyadic data because the goal of this paper was to focus on negative reciprocity in marital relationships, therefore studies about friends, siblings, co-workers, and business relationships were not included in this study. The inclusive criteria yielded 16 studies for review. The method that was used to conduct this review was a thematic literature review that sought to provide an investigation of literature that emphasized the presence of negative reciprocity in marital couples. The findings that were extracted for this review were informed based on the findings reported by the author(s) of each selected manuscript in terms of their support (or lack of) support of their hypotheses given the analytical tool that was used (e.g., regression, ANOVA).

## 2. Literature review

The next few sections review the literature addressing conflict and negative reciprocity. First, I address current definitional issues regarding negative reciprocity and how definitions affect the findings based on how conflict is operationalized. Second, I address the current theoretical issues that frame how conflict scholars interpret the findings. Last, I address the findings supporting negative reciprocity by discussing how findings affect marital satisfaction, distress, decision-making, and aggression.

## 3. Defining negative reciprocity

Authors have provided several definitions for negative reciprocity. First, Gottman (1979) explains negative reciprocity in the following way: “If we know that organism Y has given behavior A to organism X, there is a greater probability that organism X will, at some later time, give behavior A to organism Y than if the prior event had not occurred” (p. 63). This definition is one of the most cited definitions in the literature, in part because it explains the dyadic nature of the reciprocity pattern. Other scholars define negative reciprocity similarly, yet more specifically. For example, one research team defines it as the

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