



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

“occurrence of aversive behavior on the part of one partner given aversive behavior by the other” (Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993, p. 562). This definition focuses more on the negative aspects of the pattern, precluding positive reciprocity from being included in the definition. Another definition, more specific to marital couples, is that negative reciprocity is a “tendency” and an “expectation” of a partner using a “base rate” of their marital partner’s negative behavior (Sayers & Baucom, 1991, p. 641). Thus far, authors have defined negative reciprocity similarly, some more generally to all human relationships and others more specifically to marital relationships.

4. Negative reciprocity: process versus content

Though the majority of the studies testing negative reciprocity treated it as a process, other scholars treated it as the reciprocation of negative content. Studies have commonly measured the presence of a negative reciprocity pattern as a process, for example, by using Bakeman and Gottman’s (1986) lag sequential analyses. Several authors assess the escalation of negative reciprocity at various lag points and document these points as partners’ negative responses to each other (Cordova et al., 1993; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997; Sayers & Baucom, 1991). Sequential analyses often provide strong evidence of negative reciprocity over time during couples’ interactions. Moreover, sequential analyses are often used through observational and experimental studies (Gottman et al., 1977; Margolin & Wampold, 1981). Sequential analyses can test for negative reciprocity in a quantitative way, and provide high quality evidence of its presence when comparing a particular pattern among various couples (e.g., distressed/nondistressed).

On the other hand, other researchers have treated negative reciprocity as an exchange of negative content. For example, some studies focus more on pointing out the “displeasing” behaviors (e.g., criticism, complaints) of both partners and rating the frequency of their occurrence by summing these negative behaviors in each interaction (Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975, p. 351). Others also have coded negative reciprocity by looking at the content in terms of “super negative” and “negative” (Gottman et al., 1976, p. 18), and of negative cues including “tenseness,” “whining,” “impatient,” “sarcastic” (Krokoff et al., 1988, p. 207). The disadvantage of testing for negative reciprocity as content based alone is that partners might be using negative behaviors at different times, which may not be specific responses to the negative behavior of the other partner. Another disadvantage is that negative reciprocity is not only about content because it occurs over time. Accordingly, the frequency of certain behaviors provides insufficient evidence by which to compare couple types. In other words, it is not reasonable to suggest that because some couples display more negative behaviors, they are engaging in negative reciprocity, without checking to see if the behaviors escalated during the interaction. An advantage of content-based analysis is that it might improve the coding of negative reciprocity by rating the negative behaviors according to specific behaviors, rather than generalizing negativity as any aversive behavior, such as those studies using a process-oriented definition of negative reciprocity. Overall, treating negative reciprocity as a process is still the main way scholars test for its presence.

5. Theoretical contributions

Several theories and models have assessed the validity of the negative reciprocity principle, but not all scholars have reached consensus. Social reinforcement theories explain that partners reinforce each other’s negative behaviors (Birchler et al., 1975). Social reinforcement theory explains that during conflicts, marital couples engage in mutual reinforcement, which can eventually lead to relational breakdown (Stuart, 1969). When couples engage in “aversive control,” that is, punishing the partner who is communicating in a displeasing manner (e.g., coercion), negative interactions can escalate (Birchler et al.,

1975). As a married person demands the compliance of the partner, and the partner reciprocates by demanding in a similar manner, both partners will engage in a negative dispute until one person gives in. Once marital partners display a mutual punishment pattern, they rely on it in future conflict interactions throughout their relationship (Patterson & Hops, 1972; Patterson & Reid, 1970). More recently, social reinforcing frameworks provide the means to ground the evidence of the link between marital couples’ use of negative reciprocity and ongoing relational dissatisfaction (Sayers & Baucom, 1991).

Similarly, social exchange theories are used to understand negativity reciprocity in romantic relationships. Using this theory, marital interactions can be understood as an equation between costs and rewards. Partners’ use of negative or coercive messages during conflict can be perceived as a cost in a relationship, whereas the use of positive messages (e.g., compliments, support) can be perceived as a reward in a relationship, which can lead to marital satisfaction (Bandura, 1969). The social exchange framework explains that negative reciprocity continues an exchange of negative stimuli between both partners (Filsinger & Thoma, 1988). Several scholars found physiological evidence for the exchange of negative affect during marital conflict (Levenson & Gottman, 1989). Likewise, evidence exists for the exchange of negative affect at the psychological level (Filsinger & Thoma, 1988). For instance, as the exchange of negative messages escalates, both partners experience increased skin conductance reactants and heart rate (Levenson & Gottman, 1989). At the same time, partners exchanging negative stimuli create mental stress, which affects individuals’ mental health (Filsinger & Thoma, 1988).

Furthermore, the communication skill deficiency model explains why individuals use negative reciprocity during conflict episodes. That is, the major reason people use negative communication patterns is because of lack of communication skills. The argument is that if one and/or both partners lack effective communication skills (e.g., conflict management, assertiveness), then these individuals are more likely to communicate negatively because they are frustrated and unable to express their needs clearly to their partner. For example, if one partner uses hostile comments and another uses supportive comments, over time the supportive partner might get resentful and begin using hostile comments too, which will lead to negative reciprocity. Scholars have found evidence for the argument that having poor communication skills results in unsatisfying interactions, which ultimately can lead to relational dissatisfaction (Fitzpatrick, 1983). This behavioral approach focuses on the verbal components of the romantic relationship, which highlights that couples with effective communication skills can solve their relational issues, whereas couples who lack these skills can make the problems worse by avoiding them or escalating them (Gurman & Knudson, 1978).

Moreover, research findings suggest that a lack of communication skills not only leads to an increase in verbal aggressiveness, but also to physical aggression. For example, Sabourin (1995) found that, during relational arguments, people who used negative reciprocity patterns were more likely to experience physical aggression than those who used more effective communication patterns. Scholars following this previous model focus their research to promote skill-based prevention training programs (Sabourin, 1995) that can help both partners to reduce their likelihood of using negative patterns, or at least to be able to communicate more positively during conflict.

The literature provides good evidence of negative reciprocity and conflict resolution in marital relationships. In many studies, negative reciprocity was triggered by instructing couples to solve problems in their relationships, and it was found that distressed couples engaged in more negative reciprocity using hostile and coercive communication than nondistressed couples did (Billings, 1979). In contrast, nondistressed couples engaged in more positive reciprocity using friendly remarks than distressed couples did.

Several studies have assessed the effects of negative reciprocity on marital satisfaction. A three-phase laboratory study compared the

negative reciprocity of distressed versus nondistressed couples and strangers by providing for discussion a vignette with a hypothetical conflict (Birchler et al., 1975). This study provided evidence of negative reciprocity in distressed couples. Moreover, the study found evidence that negative reciprocity rarely occurs between strangers, which suggests that negative reciprocity is primarily present in intimate relationships. Overall, the wives displayed more negative communication behaviors than did their husbands, which conflicts with other recent studies' findings (Leonard & Roberts, 1998). Although husbands reciprocated the negativity, the wives used negativity more frequently during the interaction (Birchler et al., 1975). Hence, the research is not conclusive on whether husbands and wives initiate reciprocate negativity.

In addition, studies have investigated the interaction among roles of gender, negative reciprocity, and relational satisfaction. A study found that wives who displayed more femininity were more likely to express higher levels of negativity and to reciprocate negative communication in their marriage (Sayers & Baucom, 1991). On the same note, men's femininity was also associated with greater negative reciprocity than their wives displayed (Sayers & Baucom, 1991). Additionally, the study found that masculine women were less likely to reciprocate negative behavior toward their husbands (Sayers & Baucom, 1991). Whether partners communicate using feminine or masculine styles might influence their tendencies to communicate negatively in a relationship.

Other research has investigated the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of couples who display negative reciprocity patterns in their marital relationships. Gottman et al. (1977) compared clinical (i.e., couples registered in marital therapy) and nonclinical couples' (i.e., couples not registered in marital therapy) verbal and nonverbal behaviors and their reports of marital satisfaction. The study found that clinical husbands and wives were the worst listeners and the least satisfied by comparison with nonclinical couples (Gottman et al., 1977). Though the study found high rates of negative affect between husbands and wives, the study did not find strong evidence for negative reciprocity, and the authors concluded that a high rate of negativity is not necessarily correlated to the exchange of negative affect (Gottman et al., 1977). Similarly, Margolin and Wampold (1981) extended this study with similar results, finding high base rates of negative affect using both verbal and nonverbal behaviors, yet this study found more explicit sex differences. This study recorded the display of negative reciprocity in dissatisfied marriages up to Lag 4 using sequential analysis (Margolin & Wampold, 1981). The nondistressed couples displayed negative reciprocity, but only until Lag 2, meaning that these couples were able to break out of this destructive communication pattern.

Studies have also found that couples who report being satisfied in their relationship display higher rates of conflict avoidance and neutrality than unsatisfied couples. The more important the topic being discussed, the more dissatisfied couples initiated and displayed negative reciprocity (Pike & Sillars, 1985). Topic saliency moderated whether couples engaged in avoidance, distributive, or integrative conflict styles. Partners used avoidance when the topic was not considered important, and other partners used an integrative and distributive style when the topic was considered important. Satisfied couples used more integrative behaviors overall, which suggests that they possess better conflict management skills (Pike & Sillars, 1985).

6. Marital decision-making

Negative reciprocity has also been studied with regard to marital decision-making. In one study, both distressed and nondistressed marital couples were instructed to solve a problem by making decisions together (Gottman et al., 1976). The spouses later coded their own interactions with their partners and rated their partners' and their own behaviors. Two separate studies confirmed that distressed couples' interactions were perceived to be more negative by the coders than

nondistressed couples' interactions. Moreover, distressed individuals reported that they were not being too negative, rather, that is how the partners received it. In other words, distressed couples might have not been aware of the negative nature of their interactions and how they were received by their partners (Gottman et al., 1976). The study also found disconfirming results, finding that nondistressed couples also engaged in negative reciprocity. Authors called for future research to use high-conflict tasks to make the decision-making process more difficult for couples, which could help distinguish the negativity displayed by distressed and nondistressed couples (Gottman et al., 1976). The findings added to the literature in regards to the importance of how negative reciprocity is interpreted by both partners.

Other research has investigated job status and decision-making, and their effects on negative reciprocity in marital relationships. Krokoff et al. (1988) study compared blue-collar and white-collar married couples' decision-making based on their happiness levels and their display of negative reciprocity. The study found that blue-collar husbands engaged in more negative communication patterns with their wives during decision-making than did the white-collar husbands (Krokoff et al., 1988). Blue-collar husbands reported being stressed in their jobs, which might have influenced their use of negative communication patterns in the home (Krokoff et al., 1988). On the other hand, the study found that white-collar wives displayed more negativity toward their husbands when they were unhappy with the problems in the marriage than did blue-collar wives (Krokoff et al., 1988). Overall, this study provided only limited evidence of negative reciprocity as the white-collar husbands did not communicate negatively in the study, which reduced the presence of negative reciprocity in white-collar marriages. Future research needs to investigate job status and negative reciprocity because this was the only study that examined both simultaneously.

7. Aggression and gender

Much research has tested the negative reciprocity hypothesis in the context of aggressive and abusive marital relationships. Some studies provide mixed findings comparing negative reciprocity within abusive relationships and nonabusive relationships. One study examined the communication patterns of partners in abusive marriages to investigate the presence of negative reciprocity over time (Cordova et al., 1993). Cordova et al. found that violent partners used more negative communicative responses than did nonviolent partners. The study also found that wives in violent relationships reported that they confronted their aggressive partners and communicated in a hostile manner in response to their husbands' aversive communication (Cordova et al., 1993). Wives in both violent and nonviolent relationships tended to reciprocate negative responses to their partners, with no significant difference among the wives' use of negative reciprocity (Cordova et al., 1993). Negative reciprocity also lasted longer with the violent couples, up to Lag 7 on the lag sequential analyses (Cordova et al., 1993), in comparison to nonviolent couples.

In addition, some researchers extended the previous study by finding that the escalation of negative symmetrical patterns is more common in abusive relationships. In one study, abusive partners reciprocated aggressive communication patterns (e.g., criticism, yelling), while nonabusive partners reciprocated more positive communication patterns (Sabourin, Infante, & Rudd, 1993). Moreover, abusive partners were more likely to initiate negativity by using one-up power moves, which spiral into negative reciprocity (Sabourin, 1995). Abusive partners also did not display any positive reciprocity (Sabourin, 1995), which suggests an absence of positive communication in abusive marital relationships. Sabourin (1995) also found that the more-educated couples were less violent and more skillful in argumentation, suggesting that people with poorer communication skills used negative reciprocity more often than those who were more highly skilled.

Other researchers have assessed negative reciprocity and abusive relationships using observational studies and naturalistic studies. One

study videotaped several couples' re-enactments of conflicts in the privacy of their own homes (Burman et al., 1993). Burman and colleagues found that physically aggressive couples engaged in more reciprocity of hostile communication and that their patterns were longer lasting than those of nonviolent couples (Burman et al., 1993). The authors found that nonviolent couples still engaged in negative reciprocity, but that these patterns dissipated faster than with violent couples (Burman et al., 1993). The study found that nonviolent couples can exit negative reciprocity more effectively than violent couples, who rely on it until somebody gets physically attacked (Burman et al., 1993). A physical attack (e.g., hit, slap) stops the negative reciprocity cycle. Violent couples use physical attacks as a strategy to stop the escalating negative reciprocity pattern when they do not know how to stop it otherwise. This study confirms the skill deficiency model in that skillful couples are more likely to resolve their conflicts in more effective ways than through physical aggression.

Other research has tested the influence of alcohol consumption on the negative reciprocity pattern. Leonard and Roberts (1998) four-year longitudinal study also confirmed negative reciprocity in violent marital relationships. The study videotaped and coded the interactions of couples who were given alcohol, a placebo drink, or no alcohol. The aggressive couple who received alcohol showed strong evidence of negative reciprocity for both men and women during problem-solving scenarios (Leonard & Roberts, 1998). The men who were given alcohol communicated more aggressively than the men who were not given alcohol. Overall, the aggressive couples showed increased negativity with alcohol consumption, including criticisms, disagreements, mind reading, and putdowns (Leonard & Roberts, 1998). On the other hand, couples in the placebo group and the nonalcoholic group did not engage in a negative reciprocity pattern. This study found evidence that alcohol might be a factor that predicts the escalation of negative communication patterns in marital relationships.

8. Discussion and future directions

As the research shows, negative communication patterns are often displayed during conflicts in close, romantic relationships. According to the literature, dissatisfied couples often display the negative reciprocity pattern, which then escalates a couple's current relational issues. The literature provided some insight into the strong effects of negative reciprocity on marital relationships, which helps illuminate the current gaps and weaknesses in the literature, which, in turn, suggests directions for future research.

To begin, the literature suggests that authors are using slightly different definitions of negative reciprocity, which can interfere with scholars' ability to assess the presence of negative reciprocity in relationships. Some scholars are unable to distinguish between negative reciprocity as a process or as content, which may cause difficulty in understanding this phenomenon. For the most part, scholars have studied negative reciprocity as a pattern using sequential analyses, which offers a strong basis for comparing negative reciprocity usage among satisfied and unsatisfied couples. The use of sequential analyses provides quantitative evidence of the presence of negative reciprocity and reduces the likelihood of bias in the coding scheme by viewing couples as interdependent units, rather than independent units. For instance, instead of looking for the frequency of an aversive behavior of one partner, scholars can assess the dyadic nature of the pattern. Negative reciprocity is primarily a dyadic pattern; therefore, it should be coded as such.

Although using content-based observational methods is useful in understanding what constitutes a "negative" or an "aversive" behavior, understanding negative reciprocity, as a process seems more appropriate for assessing its presence in interpersonal relationships. In the studies reported in the literature, scholars did not develop integrative ways of assessing the presence of negative reciprocity. For instance, many scholars did not use both content-based and process-based approaches. Perhaps an integrative approach, rather than selecting

one definition over another, might provide deeper insight into negative reciprocity, which would affect how scholars can interpret the evidence in the future.

The literature suggests that scholars have relied on a few main theoretical perspectives. Social learning and social exchange theories have been widely used to study negative reciprocity and use of other theories would expand understanding of this dysfunctional communication pattern. Scholars have argued that individuals learned to respond to others' critical remarks negatively. Social learning theory has suggested that individuals learned to use negative responses using others as role models, including parents, friendships, and past romantic relationships. Social learning theory has served as a heuristic framework to understand negative reciprocity.

Social exchange theory has also been used to expand understanding of negative reciprocity. Negative reciprocity is explained as the "tit for tat" interaction, where one partner exchanges an "aversive" behavior for the other partner's "aversive" behavior. The theory explains that negative reciprocity is like a "banking system" of give and take. The strength of this theoretical perspective is that it offers scholars a parsimonious way to conceptualize and theorize about negative patterns displayed in marital interactions during conflict episodes.

Furthermore, the skills deficiency model has been used as a framework for understanding this behavior. This model explains that partners lack appropriate skills of argumentation and conflict management when entering a romantic relationship, which can affect their ability to handle conflict. If both partners are unskilled, the relationship has the potential to suffer from one or both partners' dissatisfaction. The model suggests that individuals can learn the skills to reduce their tendency to use negative reciprocity. The previous psychological theories are useful, yet using more communication-oriented theories might provide further insight into the nature of negative reciprocity. Thus far, this model is the least used by scholars in the covered literature. Scholars have focused more on the psychological aspects of negative reciprocity, and not enough on individuals' lack of skills. If negative reciprocity represents an interactive pattern, the skills deficiency model could provide further insight into how gaining skills can reduce the likelihood of individuals' using negative interactive patterns during conflict. More longitudinal studies are needed in conjunction with skill-based training interventions to assess whether negative reciprocity can be reduced in some dissatisfied relationships. Although increased communication skills might not solve all of the relationship's problems, the partners' increased aptitude could help them escape negative patterns before these lead to further verbal and/or physical aggression.

Scholars need to explore other communication-oriented theoretical perspectives to extend understanding of negative reciprocity. For example, Burgoon's (1978) expectancy violations theory might provide insight into negative reciprocity at earlier stages of a relationship (e.g., premarital). For instance, when individuals engage in "aversive" communication, they might not expect their partners to respond in the same manner. Ting-Toomey's (2005) face negotiation theory might provide additional insight into how individuals save and fight for face during negative reciprocity. Taylor and Altman's (1975) social penetration theory might explore the escalating intensity of the negative affect in the interaction based on relational intimacy and self-disclosure. Moreover, using other theories such as the extended parallel process model can be beneficial by adding new perspectives to the current literature, instead of using the same few theories over the course of 30 years.

The literature revealed that couples who display negative reciprocity report being unsatisfied with their relationship, suggesting that negative reciprocity is correlated with marital dissatisfaction (Birchler et al., 1975). Although many studies support this assumption, not enough studies have measured satisfaction over the development of the relationship, which might bring to light other factors that played a role in the dissatisfaction. For example, researchers need to ask the following: Does negative reciprocity lead to dissatisfaction or does

dissatisfaction lead to the use of negative reciprocity? The current literature would answer that negative reciprocity leads to dissatisfaction, but whether the reverse is the case has not been properly investigated. If dissatisfied partners are generally more negative, then it would be expected that they might also use negative communication patterns in their relationship. Some research did observe that partners in some satisfied relationships engage in negative reciprocity, but at less frequently and for shorter lengths of time. Furthermore, negative reciprocity is not necessarily the solo cause of marital dissatisfaction. If partners did not display negative reciprocity in their relationship, this did not mean that both were satisfied in the relationship, either. Future studies might examine other variables along with negative reciprocity, including optimism, trust, love, and commitment.

In addition, the literature linked negative reciprocity with marital distress. Every study had samples of distressed and nondistressed couples, which indicates the issue that scholars are more interested in investigating. The literature provides evidence that distressed couples are more hostile toward each other than nondistressed couples are (Billings, 1979). The distressed couples appear to be more reactive toward their partners' communication and less able to manage their own communication. Most of the literature assumed that couples were distressed solely because of their marital problems rather than other problems outside of the relationship. For example, sometimes a third party (e.g., mother-in-law) living in the same house as the couple might promote distress in the marital relationship. Other scholars point out that sometimes distress occurs due to high job demands, which also transfers into the home (Krokoff et al., 1988). Sometimes the distress might be internal within one individual due to health problems and/or any discordance with the self.

Research shows that when confronted with problems couples make decisions based on whether they are distressed or nondistressed. The research highlights the need to use more high-task problems to trigger negative reciprocity. Thus far, many studies have had couples solve hypothetical problems to engage in decision-making, rather than using problems that are more realistic. The results were that if the problems are not salient for the partners, negative reciprocity is not triggered fully (Gottman et al., 1976). For instance, if a couple is having a conflict about a topic they do not care about, then the couple might not engage in the escalation of negative communication. This suggests that negative reciprocity might occur during conflicts about important matters, rather than hypothetical or irrelevant ones. Future research might need to use a recall method to target realistic issues, re-enactments of previous conflicts, and/or live recording of real-time conflicts.

Mainly individuals in abusive marriages display negative reciprocity. The findings suggest that abusive individuals are more likely to reciprocate negativity in their relationships. Although abusive men are more likely to be more negative, the research found that women are as likely to reciprocate the negativity (Cordova et al., 1993). The research suggests that sex does affect whether or not individuals use dysfunctional communication patterns. Verbal aggression can easily turn into a negative cyclical pattern where both partners are mutually criticizing and damaging each other using hurtful words (Sabourin et al., 1993). This pattern then becomes difficult to break for some couples, which can often lead to the deterioration of long-term romantic relationships. Future research might want to add additional mediating variables to continue to investigate this problematic pattern. For example, scholars can examine individuals' personality traits, culture, and other long-term nonmarital relationships (e.g., same-sex, cohabiting). Surprisingly, the literature did not contain many differing mediating variables across the board.

To conclude, this paper reviewed the literature around negative reciprocity in marital relationships and provided some insight for future areas of research in this topic. Negative reciprocity is a dysfunctional pattern that does not lead to marital satisfaction or happiness. On the contrary, negative reciprocity harms individuals and the research suggests that prolonged use of negative reciprocity should be avoided

in romantic relationships. Marital partners are better off communicating positively with each other, as positive messages have a positive effect on satisfaction, rather than simply avoiding the urge to reciprocate negatively. Partners who rely on negative reciprocity might want to learn effective ways to manage their conflicts to avoid deteriorating their relationship, as time goes on.

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