

Case Study: Shallow Talk & Separate Spaces

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During conflict in any setting both parties can display massive amounts of different personalities and manage conflict in many ways. This is displayed during Sarah and Russell's disagreement. Sarah and Russell portray a pretty common disagreement between relational partners, Sarah feels that Russell does not help around the house and is too busy playing golf instead of cleaning or doing the dishes. Russell is upset because he feels Sarah is not showing him any attention because she is busy with obtaining her master's degree and he feels that she is shutting him out and not trying to make time for him. Sarah ends up telling her sister and the conflict is resolved by both parties promising to try to make the other feel better with Russell helping more around the house and Sarah trying to make more time for Russell. The cause and resolution of this certain conflict can be defined by each partner's goals, conflict styles and destructive conflict behaviors.

During this conflict the topic goals are straight forward and are even said during the conflict. What Sarah wants is Russell to help with her busy schedule, do things like cleaning the house, taking out the garbage, doing the dishes, help cook, and stop golfing so much because it takes away from time at the house when he could be helping. Russell wants Sarah to spend more time with him, he explains to Sarah that it seems like all she does is complain about her long, busy days and it makes him feel like his days don't matter. Russell wants her to be better about taking time out of her day for just their time, he feels left out so what he wants is for her to feel like his wife again. The relational goals of each partner can be identified as Russell when he says, "We've been married 2 years and you're still not a wife." This is Russell lashing out because he feels like Sarah is not doing all that she can to be a wife to him, this is a direct correlation to the amount of affection she is showing Russell and the amount of attention he is receiving; he does not feel like they are married, he wants her to act more like a wife. Sarah's

relational goals is for Russell to be more supportive in their relationship. Her stance is that she is going through a lot and is very busy up to this point of their relationship and just wants a little bit of support for the work she is putting in to obtain a better education. Transactive goals were portrayed mostly by Sarah after talking to her sister about the conflict because after a while she realized that during her in the process of obtaining her master's degree, she was pushing out Russell. She realized that when she was busy, she was not being the best wife to him, and she ended up realizing that after the conflict initially happened. Sarah and Russell could have worked together to try and stop the conflict before it got to the point of Sarah telling her sister. Initially, Sarah could've looked at it from Russell's point of view to see what he was upset about and what caused the conflict. The same goes for Russell, he could've tried to put himself in Sarah's shoes and get a better understanding of why she was mad. After they accomplish this, they can understand why the other person is angry at each other. They can then work at collaborative goals; this could have been done by identifying the conflict and then coming up with a solution. They ended up coming up with the same solution just after the argument went on longer than it should have. While identifying each other's goals they could have just come up with the solution of Russell working more around the house and Sarah spending more time with them quicker. This could have also come with some problems however, if one partner estimates the problem of the others it could be a wrong assumption which could lead to making the argument a lot worse. Another way that this argument could have been solved a lot quicker, before involving Sarah's sister, could have been both not having personal goals but instead having the goal of understanding the other person. For example, if Russell's goal from the beginning was to listen and understand why Sarah was upset it would've been more beneficial. Also, if Sarah's goal was

to listen and understand why Russell was upset instead of doing destructive behaviors during the argument it could have been beneficial for their relationship.

Russell and Sarah both display a various amount of conflict styles. During the whole duration of argument and solution the conflict styles they display change. In the initial argument when Sarah is making dinner and is having the internal thoughts of Russell she is showing avoidant style conflict because she does not want to make an argument out of it. Then once Russell says a comment about having pork chops for the second night in a row Sarah gets angry at Russell and raises her voice, displaying dominating conflict style. Then Russell is threatening to leave and go out to eat which he ultimately does. He believes he is displaying compromising conflict style but really it can be seen as more avoidant because instead of talking about the issue at hand he ended up just leaving the situation and as a result it made matters last longer. When he ended up coming back from the place, he was eating at the furthermore displayed avoidant conflict style with coming back to the house and just watching TV without saying anything to Sarah. Then he crawled into bed without saying anything to Sarah. Russell justifies this as not wanting to make the argument worse then the point it already was at, and Sarah justifies it the same way and because they knew they both had destructive conflict behaviors so they would just say hurtful things to each other. Ultimately at the end of the argument Sarah and Russell conversate about the situation and choose to resolve things with a compromise conflict style. Sarah says, "Now how about you help me with these dishes and then maybe we can work something out so I can have more free time for us?" This whole interaction and then the other conversations following is an example of compromising. According to Jishuang Wang, the author of a conflict style book, "The compromising style means giving up less than the obliging style, but it does not achieve a win-win situation. It is a compromise between the two parties, and both will lose with respect to some of their interests" (Wang 1). In this case neither Sarah nor Russell "won" because they both had to sacrifice something, in this case a behavior, to make the other person happier and to make then not argue. While compromise seems like it is the best

conflict style it is still a hard place to get to and a hard deciding factor on what to decide. It can also have a lot of undecided areas; in Sarah and Russell's example they are using firm compromising where the behavior they are both trying to accomplish is very specific rather than a broad statement. Compromising can also serve short term solutions but in the long term it is not the best, the promises that each party agreed on slowly go back to how they were before, and it can be worse then it was before. This conflict style could only be possible if both parties are interested and have a high level of concern for the other. In some ways too, compromise cannot be the most ideal solution, "The interests the parties sacrifice will give rise to some dissatisfaction, hence harming relationship quality" (Wang 1). This is when one party feels they are forced to make a compromise to end the argument and take desperate measures, giving up something that is impossible to get rid of. This could be in example at the end when Sarah and Russell have compromise. Sarah explains that she will make time for Russell but really this may be impossible because it is an outside force that is not allotting her time with him. Both parties are very desperate and are looking for anyway for the argument to just stop. The reason that both turned to compromise is because, in most situations compromise is usually the last course of action when all the other styles don't work. In this example, in the beginning they used avoidant then that turned into dominating, then it went back to avoidant then finally they chose to try compromise based off what Sarah says to Russell. In the beginning of the argument Russell and Sarah could have used obliging conflict style so Sarah could accommodate her free time to spending it with Russell and Sarah would be better. Russell would also be accommodating with his time and instead of maybe golfing all the time he could help around the house and talk to Sarah about her schooling.

During the "climax" of the argument, when Sarah and Russell are displaying dominant conflict styles, they are showing destructive conflict patterns and behaviors. When they're going back and forth in the kitchen saying hurtful things to each other that is when they are displaying these behaviors. One of the destructive behaviors seen in this specific argument is Gottman's four horsemen. Sarah and Russell go through all steps of the four horsemen with the first part

being criticism, this is the initial part of the disagreement when Russell wants to go out to eat instead of eating porkchops for the second night in a row. Sarah takes this as a criticism to her cooking and gets offended over the time it took for her to make the food and he does not take that into consideration when saying he was going out to eat. That action was the start of the nonverbal actions as well. This is the second part of Gottman's four horsemen, Sarah gets mad and so does Russell, so they begin rolling their eyes at each other and it gets further and further into a conflict. The third part is defensiveness, both Sarah and Russell show this during the conflict. Sarah doing it first right after Russell tell her to "lighten up". She gets defensive by then saying how can she lighten up when she has so much on her plate between school, while also throwing a jab at Russell with him not taking care of the house again while she is doing so much. He then displays his defensive part with saying how she's always complaining, then she says something to Russell about helping around the house and not golfing. He displays more defensiveness by saying "oh so its my fault nothing ever gets done? Maybe I do my work all week because I am not allowed to make any noise in this precious house," he then shows how she is always telling him to stay quiet because of the schooling. There is then more forms of defensiveness when sex is brought up, Russell asks her why he should have to beg her to come to bed when other woman would offer freely. Sarah replies to this with wondering if he is saying that there is other woman that he is looking at, this is displaying defensiveness because she is saying something that is not true. It later says, "Sarah knew there were problems in the bedroom and that was partly for her to blame," this is her trying not to lose the argument but at the same time trying to save face. The last part is like the avoidant conflict style in that both parties turn to stonewalling, where they do not respond to the other, verbally, or nonverbally. Russell and Sarah both show this by after the argument they do not speak to each other until the next night after the conflict cools down. Another destructive conflict behavior displayed is poor listening. They seem like they are listening to each other, but it is being done in a way that is not actually taking in any information. When Sarah asks Russell to not golf as much, he replies with not saying anything about golfing and more about how all he does is work. Another example is when Russell yells

how they have problems in the bedroom, with how often they have sex, but she just replies with asking if there is other woman in the picture even though she knew she should not have said that. This conflict also shows different examples of negative reciprocity, one of them being gunnysacking. This is when all the unresolved conflicts come out at once and this happened with both Sarah and Russell. They were both frustrated of the actions of the other and it did not get fixed after a while, so it was getting worse and worse until it finally came out during the argument about dinner. They also showed kitchensinking, this is when a couple rehashes old arguments. Russell and Sarah both do this by bringing up things in the past when the things in the past should just stay in the past. They also both do button pushing during the kitchen conflict. They both willingly say things to the other when they have prior knowledge that it will appear to hurtful to there partner. When Russell brings up sex, he knows that it will upset Sarah because she is feeling busy and already feels a lot of pressure with everything. There is a way to help all these negative reciprocities and they can be by allowing the other person to talk and to be open with the other person. One way that Sarah and Russell could improve there poor listening is becoming more empathetic towards one another and working harder to acknowledge what the other person is feeling. One way to help overcome Gottman's four horsemen is considering each other when the time gets tough. Also thinking before you speak is a good way to make sure you are not hurting the other persons feelings when saying certain things.

Sarah and Russell's conflict is a visual representation of a common household disagreement, where an individual needs, expectations, and communication styles intersect and do not blend very well. Initially, they decided to try to navigate there conflict with avoidant style they then ended up compromising which resolved the conflict at least for at least the short term, the long-term resolution is still unknown. By addressing destructive behaviors such as poor listening, defensiveness, and negative reciprocity, couples can achieve healthier communication patterns. Ultimately, empathy, open dialogue, and a commitment to collaborative problem-solving are essential for transforming conflicts into opportunities for relational growth and

deeper connection. Goals, conflict styles, and destructive conflict patterns are three examples of things that can be the cause of an argument but can also be used to fix conflict.

Work Cited

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