ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Pragma-Dialectics And A Unified Understanding Of Interpersonal Disagreement

1. *The Demand/ Withdraw Pattern and Serial Argument*
The demand/ withdraw communication pattern (D/W) is a familiar concept in the marital interaction literature (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Christensen & Heavey, 1990, 1993; Gottman, 1994; Canary et al., 1995; Heavey et al., 1995; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999, 2000; Bradbury et al., 2000; Caughlin, 2002; Caughlin & Huston, 2002). Johnson and Roloff (2000a) link D/W to the concept of a serial argument through the notion of an argumentative role. Their interest lies in the extent to which occupying different interaction roles leads to different perceptions about the resolvability of serial arguments. For example, might it be the case that a partner who is in the initiator role in a serial argument is more likely to believe that the argument is resolvable than the partner who occupies the resistor role? The link to D/W is achieved when Johnson and Roloff (*Ibid*., 3) claim that one way the initiator and resistor roles can be enacted is through the embodiment of D/W.

Of course, pointing this out is not to claim a particularly strong conceptual connection between D/W and serial argument. Serial arguments may not involve D/W at all; for example, neither Trapp and Hoff (1985) nor Trapp (1990) mention it. However, a defensible view of D/W is that it implies serial arguing. When Johnson and Roloff (1998, 3) discuss the process of arguing in serial arguments, they mention three argument patterns that reduce the chances of reaching agreement, one of which is D/W.

Second, individuals may enact a demand-withdraw pattern (Christensen & Shenk, 1991). Sometimes, a complainant confronts another in a very direct and aggressive way, and the perpetrator responds by withdrawing from the conversation or by becoming defensive. In effect, by withdrawing, no resolution is reached, and the argument *may* reemerge at a later time. (My emphasis).

There is a question here about the motivational force of D/W, such that we can

ask whether or not it is plausible to think that D/W typically occurs without serial arguing. The theoretical background of D/W (C.f. Bateson et al., 1956; Watzlawick et al., 1967; Jackson 1965a, 1965b) suggests that the relationship between D/W and the reemergence of the argument is stronger than a correlation (Cf. Friemann, 2005). From this older literature we can suppose a causal claim is being made for not only does it reduce the chances of a couple reaching agreement, but it *more than likely* causes the argument to reemerge at a later time. Such a claim is implicit in more recent statements like the following: "Also, recall that dissatisfied couples enact patterns of negativity, which are likewise attributed to global, stable, and internal properties of the partner or the relationship" (Canary et al., 1995, 121).

If it is acceptable to claim that a couple caught in a D/W pattern are motivated to continue to enact the pattern (ignoring for the moment the issue of just how the pattern 'motivates'; but see Johnson and Roloff 2000a, for an interesting analysis of how this motivation may develop), then we might suppose that the subsequent argument episodes will somehow reflect the fact that they are the product of D/W. What happens when we broaden the perspective from an argument episode to a serial argument? Caughlin and Huston (2002, 114) lay out the possibilities.

K. L. Johnson and Roloff (2000) suggest, for example, that engaging in positive behaviors *during, after*, and *between* serial arguments may be an effective way of coping with the otherwise deleterious effects of recurring arguments (My emphasis).

Caughlin and Huston, through Johnson and Roloff, are suggesting that after an argument episode partners may mediate the negative effect of D/W with positive behavior. We can understand this mediating process in two ways. First, imagine an argument episode has just ended involving D/W, other negative behaviors, but positive ones as well. Suppose that after a while one partner, call him Peter, engages in some positive behavior (perhaps the same kind of behavior he expressed in the argument or different ones) toward his partner, call her Martha. These post-argument positive acts may have the effect such that Martha reevaluates the negative behaviors she experienced in the argument episode. Second, the buffering effect could run in the other direction: Peter's positive behaviors after an argument episode influences how Martha will think about the next argument episode. So even if Peter behaves negatively toward her the next time, she might not think that his negative actions are as significant as she might have, if he had not previously behaved positively toward her. In such a case, we

are supposing that Peter's positive actions are done between argument episodes. The two examples assume that whatever behavior was exchanged during the argument episode was not enough to ameliorate the negative effect of D/W. For only if that is the case does it make sense to discuss behavior that could be exchanged between episodes. This must be part of the account of how D/W causes serial arguing.

With this understanding of the causal process consider the following quote from Caughlin and Huston (*Ibid*).

Alternatively, in some cases, it may be more realistic to enhance the positive aspects of a marriage by increasing affectionate behaviors than it is to eliminate demand/withdraw, especially if the demand/withdraw occurs as part of discussions of intractable and recurring disagreements.

Given what has just been said about what we have to suppose when D/W causes serial arguing, this passage should be interpreted to mean that the affectionate behaviors referred to are to be expressed *between* argument episodes. Moreover, since Caughlin and Huston are talking about *intractable* serial arguments here, it is not only unrealistic to expect to eliminate D/W, but also unlikely that couples can motivate themselves to express enough or the appropriate kinds of positive behaviors to ameliorate its negative effects *during* argument episodes. In intractable disagreements – where emotional flooding would regularly occur (C.f. Gottman, 1999, 231) – the motivation sufficient for positive behavior during argument episodes is unlikely. Indeed, such lack of motivation would be the prime indicator that a couple's arguments have become intractable. So in these situations we are left with the possibility that couples can behave positively *after* and *between* argument episodes, where such actions are part of the larger serial argument.

2. *D/W in Pragma-Dialectics*

Weger Jr. claims that the pragma-dialectical approach to fallacies "maps on well to the known identity and relational outcomes associated with problematic interpersonal conflict behavior" (2002, 198). I see Weger Jr. making the following point: pragma-dialectics has identified ways in which interlocutors can violate the dictates of rationality in a discussion, and it turns out that when couples commit fallacies they not only harm their argument – considered as a logical product – but their relationship as well. Thus logic has consequences for marital satisfaction.

Keeping this in mind, I want to consider the consequences of theoretically

integrating D/W, as a species of problematic interpersonal conflict behavior, into the pragma-dialectical approach to fallacies. The issue here is how we are to understand reconstructing D/W as a dialectical fallacy. By reconstructing D/W as entirely negative in its effects, Weger Jr. achieves an integration with pragma-dialectics in the sense that we can now say that a straightforward sanction applies to the enactment of D/W (as a violation of rule 2) in discussions.

What are the consequences of this integration for pragma-dialectics? Since D/W is reconstructed as a rule violation, we are taking a position on the motivational force of D/W. This just means that we must suppose that it is possible to not violate the rule. This is implicit in any normative injunction for there would be no point to a rule if it were not possible to follow it. So the motivational force of D/W is not so great as to think that it cannot be overcome, for it must be possible for a couple to resist the effect of D/W. One way of understanding the situation where a couple resists D/W is to say that a serial argument is not created as a result of whatever negative effect it had. And hence the kind of D/W we would be talking about would not be what Caughlin and Huston (2002, 114) in a previous quote referred to as "discussions of intractable and recurring disagreements." For recall that for these types of discussions, my suggestion was that D/W was the dominant aspect of the argument episode, and that it was implausible to suppose that the couple could sufficiently motivate themselves to express enough of, or the right kind of affection during the episode to negate the effects of D/W, one which is the creation of a serial argument.

Is there a serious tension here between the nature of rule violation concerning our freedom of action and the motivational force of D/W in intractable disagreements? (For a general discussion of related issues cf. Wilson, 2002; and Dunning, 2005) There is a tension, but its seriousness can be overcome by incorporating more elements from the marital interaction literature into pragma-dialectics. If we are going to grant any unique motivational force to D/W at all, then I see three ways of understanding D/W and couple arguments.

First, there is the possibility that D/W exerts some influence on the couple yet they are able to control its effect to the extent that they do not violate any discussion rules. If D/W is in play in an argument episode, and a couple does not in fact violate rule 2 (or any other rule where D/W could plausibly be thought to have influence), then we can suppose that the couple were able to handle their diffuse physiological arousal (DPA) or emotional flooding. However, from the

perspective of pragma-dialectics, there is no significant difference between this kind of argument and any other where no rules are violated. Pragma-dialectics grants that in real discussions interlocutors will feel tempted to violate the rules; but if they resist the temptation then nothing about the physiological aspects of emotional control is relevant.

The second possibility involves D/W exerting enough influence so as to cause a violation of rule 2. For an example of this we can look to Weger Jr. (2002, 207).

F: But how come you never want to go out with my friends? You never told me.
M: 'cause I don't like 'em.
F: Why?
M: Different
F: How?
M: I don't like 'em
F: Why though?
M: Don't like the stuff they say.
F: What do they say?
M: I don't know

Here D/W has enough force to cause the violation of rule 2, but Weger Jr. does not provide any more information about the argument in order to make a determination about whether or not it turned into a serial argument. Assuming that it did not turn into a serial argument, we can suppose that the couple were able to control their DPA to the extent that for instance, neither partner physically left the argument space. Does this issue, which is really about the duration of the argument, add anything to Weger Jr.'s analysis? Can any practical advice come out of supposing that the argument developed along these lines, i.e., that it did not become serial? How does pragma-dialectics address a couple's resistance to following the rules when they are motivated by D/W? Does pragma-dialectics have anything more to say than just "don't violate them"? If we look to the marital interaction literature tied to D/W, we find that we can say more than that. We can point to the work of Markman (1991), Gottman (1994, 1999) and others, who have suggested that negative affect is a key player in destructive patterns of marital interaction. Is it unacceptable to say that it is important for pragma-dialectics to acknowledge what research has identified is likely to be going on when couples violate rule 2 because of D/W? Its importance lies in the fact that this research can help us in determining intervention strategies for couples feeling DPA *during*

argument episodes. In those instances where emotion gets in the way of clear thinking, being able to physically calm ourselves facilitates thinking. So, is there a place in pragma-dialectics for recommendations that deal with emotional flooding? Such recommendations would not look like the other rules for critical discussion, for they would be about, for example, recognizing when one is in a state of DPA by one's heart rate (Gottman, 1994, 437). Nevertheless, if we are looking for behaviors that can be undertaken during argument episodes where D/W causes violations of the rules, such physiological considerations are relevant.

The third possibility concerns arguments where the influence of D/W leads to a violation of rule 2, resulting in a serial argument. What position should be taken here on the motivational force of D/W? If we restrict ourselves to the most intractable of serial arguments where the duration is measured in decades and lifetimes, we can suppose the force of D/W so strong as to take Caughlin's suggestion and not try to do anything about the effects of D/W *during* argument episodes. In these cases claiming that violating rule 2 is a fallacy becomes problematic since the couple could not have done otherwise than what they did. However, recognizing such determinism during argument episodes does not prevent us from making normative claims about what should *happen* between them. So how should pragma-dialectics think about couples' thinking and behavior after the partners physically leave the argument space but before they return to the argument at a later time? One might think for example that behaviors constitutive of 'making up' might be appropriate here in the sense of ameliorating the negative effects of D/W (But see Johnson & Roloff, 2000b, 683). One suggestion that has some empirical support is that partners should not rehearse negative thoughts about the relationship between argument episodes (Cloven & Roloff 1991). Considering the impact of the thoughts of partners between argument episodes is essentially what marital theorists are concerned about when they talk of pre- and post-interaction appraisals (Bradbury & Fincham 1991).

Now by saying that when D/W causes serial arguing we can only think of suggesting behaviors to be employed between argument episodes, it might seem that I am treating all serial arguments in the same way. That would be a mistake, for I want to promote the notion that there are different degrees of intractability within serial arguments. Hence, even if D/W causes a serial argument, depending on how intractable we think it is, we may not want to claim that the couple could

not have behaved otherwise. In such cases it would be appropriate to charge a couple with committing a fallacy. Yet, for serial arguments that we believe are seriously intractable, considering behaviors between argument episodes is the right move. But how does the couple know whether or not they are in a seriously intractable serial argument? I suggest that if partners find that they cannot stop rehearsing negative thoughts between argument episodes, they are caught in a seriously intractable serial argument which may be a marker for couple counseling (Canary et al., 1995, 121). On the other hand, partners who can control their negative thinking between episodes are in a serial argument where they can suppose the normative rules of pragma-dialectics still apply.

Finally, where specifically can these considerations fit into pragma-dialectics? Gilbert (1997; 2003) has provided ways to think about emotion in pragma-dialectics. One of the issues here is the role, if any, expressive speech acts play in critical discussions (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, 39; Van Eemeren et al., 1993; Gilbert 1995, 1997). Do they have a full-bodied legitimate role, or only a secondary one as instances of indirect speech acts? Whatever one's position is on this, everyone agrees that emotion can affect the resolution process. So if we are interested in not having that process spiral out of control, we should have procedural rules to prevent this from happening. And while it may be true that most arguments do not involve heated emotion accompanied by raised voices, the kind of argument that is the topic of this paper often does. Thus, while it is understandable that the pragma-dialectical model would not immediately lead one to think of behaviors geared to handle one's DPA, from a marital interaction perspective, this is an obvious issue.

So let's consider DPA. In discussing the importance of re-negotiating the opening stage of a discussion, Gilbert (2003, 3) notes that re-negotiation may not occur, "in no small part, because we are conditioned to ignore the emotional aspects, to pretend they are not there or are peripheral to the real activity of the discussion." In the context of serial argument, an important part of being prepared to re-negotiate the opening stage is recognizing DPA, and expressing how you feel in order to let your partner know what you are experiencing. Taking a basic idea from the marital interaction literature, we can suggest that the partner should stop arguing for a while to allow him or her to calm down. Gottman (1999) suggests 20 minutes, while Yovetich and Rusbult (1994, 163) cite the clinician's rule of thumb that you should count to 10. And the time issue matters for pragma-dialectics because if the break was initiated by one partner and it lasts too long,

that partner may violate rule 2: "a party that advances a standpoint is obliged to defend it if the other party asks him to do so" (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, 208). Here the proposed remedy for dealing with the physiological effect of D/W may be in danger of having the same consequence as breaking rule 2. However, if we can assume that partners are able to determine when a break is being used to calm down rather than being used to avoid defending or opposing a standpoint without argument, should we suggest that the technique of asking for a break be part of the considerations surrounding the opening stage? Or perhaps it should be appended to rule 2? The benefit to tying the technique to rule 2 is that here there is explicit acknowledgment of an interaction. We have one partner asserting something, and the other expressing the desire for a defense of that assertion. The way this exchange happens may cause a partner to become emotionally flooded. On the other hand, we might want to say that this technique applies to the interaction at a meta level since partners may become flooded at any point. Hence, the technique should be available to partners at all times.

What about the behaviors that were suggested for use between argument episodes? The whole notion of behaviors engaged in after and between an argument episode in a serial argument, raises the issue of an argument's end. About this, Gilbert (2003, 5) states that, "One of the difficulties we face with emotional argumentation is deciding just when an argument with strong emotional content is over." We can suppose that for a conservative interpretation of pragma-dialectics, a partner walking out of the room or ending the argument episode in some other fashion constitutes a settlement of the dispute. Yet, since we are considering a serial argument the settlement does not last. What can be said here? I do not think pragma-dialectics has taken any position on what should be done by partners between argument episodes. Assuming it is a legitimate concern for pragma-dialectics – which it is since a plausible view of D/W is that it typically leads to serial argument – perhaps we can claim that in these kinds of discussions there are behaviors that reduce the likelihood of turning your serial argument into an intractable one. Here it seems correct to tie these considerations to the resolution stage of those arguments that constitute serial argument, and not to suppose they are relevant to disputes generally.

3. *Conclusion*

I have tried to bring the fields of argumentation theory and marital interaction closer together, for this is necessary if we are going to understand arguments

between couples. Weger Jr. has made an important step by incorporating D/W into pragma-dialectics. I have argued that D/W is a concept that has been used to imply serial arguing. By examining the issues that serial argument raises, we can suggest that partners be aware of emotional markers so they themselves can recognize that sometimes the most rational course of action is to take a break. As argumentation theorists it is up to us to promote the idea that it is proper to have the attitude that re-negotiating the opening stage can have a positive impact on the process of arguing. Furthermore, to be able to suggest rational courses of action for those caught in a serial argument is part of argumentation theory's purview. As a step in that direction, if partners can recognize they are engaging in negative mulling between argument episodes, their success or failure in countering such thoughts will indicate to them whether or not their relationship requires more than willpower to repair.

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