

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Engineering Argumentation In Marriage: Pragma-dialectics, Strategic Maneuvering, And The “Fair Fight For Change” In Marriage Education



## 1. *Introduction*

One of the more important innovations in communication and argumentation theory is the recognition of communication research as a design enterprise (e.g., Aakhus & Jackson, 2005; Jackson, 1998; Weger & Aakhus, 2003). Treating argumentation research as a design enterprise highlights the importance of understanding the reflexive nature between practices and processes - often the quality of argumentation reflects the conditions (individual, situational, social, etc.) under which the interaction occurs. Marital argument constitutes an ideal subject for studying communication design properties because, like most other naturally occurring conversation, it is regulated only by cultural norms and routinized practices developed by the speakers themselves. Interpersonal argumentation generally lacks purposeful design in terms of formal procedures, referees, or rules for appropriate contributions to the dialogue. These starting conditions result in participant-regulated interaction that are sometimes fraught with potential obstacles to productive argumentation. Two of the obstacles which pose particular problems for handling marital arguments are the “hot initiation problem,” and the “coherence problem.” Although these obstacles can get in the way of resolving any interpersonal argument, research suggests that they are particularly associated with dysfunctional conflict in marriage (e.g, Sillars & Wilmot, 1994; Retzinger, 1991).

An approach to marital argumentation that emphasizes the possibilities of designed interventions aimed at alleviating the most common stumbling blocks to

successful conflict management would aid in developing theories of interpersonal argumentation as well as helping people caught in patterns of unproductive argumentation. The practical significance of a successful argument intervention system is huge considering that the consequences of poorly handled marital argumentation potentially impact the mental and physical well being of both married couples (e.g., Roloff & Reznik, 2008) and their children (e.g., Keller, Cummings, Peterson, & Davies, 2009). The “Fair Fight for Change” (e.g., Bach & Wyden, 1969) represents one attempt at communication design that aims to reduce dysfunctional marital argument. In this essay, I intend to examine the problems of hot initiation and lack of coherence, describe the Fair Fight for Change, and import concepts from strategic maneuvering and pragma-dialectics as an example of how argumentation theory can be directly applied to marital intervention strategies.

## *2. Two Obstacles to Successful Marital Arguments*

Before I continue I should briefly explain what I mean by “successful” marital argumentation. Communication theory generally recognizes that messages tend to be organized around simultaneously satisfying three inter-related interpersonal goals (e.g., Clark & Delia, 1979). Firstly, people want to accomplish some task from communicating, such as gaining assistance, receiving/providing emotional support, settling a disagreement, and so on. Secondly, people use communication to present and maintain a desired identity. Thirdly, people use communication to manage their relationships with other people. The success of a marital argument, therefore, can be judged based on the same three criteria. First, does the argument result in settling the disagreement? Second, in the course of arguing, do both people emerge from the discussion able to claim a desired identity? And third, during the course of the argument, do people engage in behaviors known to corrode the relationship? Success is not taken to be a matter of either/or but one of degree since marital arguments can be more or less successful depending on the extent to which these three criteria are met.

One obstacle to successful marital argument is “hot initiation.” Hot initiation refers to arguments instigated under the influence of negative emotional experiences such as anger, shame, frustration, and so forth. For the most part, interpersonal arguments arise in the natural flow conversation, rather than as a planned or pre-scheduled activity (e.g., Newell & Stutman, 1991; Vuchinich, 1990), and function as conversational, identity, or relationship repair mechanisms

(e.g., Jackson & Jacobs, 1980). Arguments between married partners often get smuggled in with other topics that then elicit disagreement. Simple disagreements become problematic when one partner believes that the other is intentionally denying some desired outcome, resulting in feelings of anger, frustration, and rage (Clore, Ortony, Dienes, & Fujita, 1993; Retzinger, 1991). The source of hot initiation need not occur in the current interaction, however. Research suggests that experiencing stressful interactions earlier in the day at work (e.g., Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989) or with one's spouse (Gottman & Driver, 2005) can result in hot initiation later in the day. Emotions like stress, anger, and frustration influence cognition and message production by increasing the likelihood that messages reflect negative affective states instantiated in personal attacks, threats, and other types of belligerence (e.g., Guerrero & La Valley, 2006). Gottman's extensive research on marital interaction points to the importance of initiating arguments in nonaggressive ways. Since partners (especially distressed couples) tend to reciprocate their partner's behavior, hostility at start up strongly predicts a hostile response and the escalation of negative behaviors (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman & Driver, 2005). Over time, serial hostile interactions erode married couples' love and admiration for each other thereby putting their marriage in jeopardy (Gottman, 1994; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010).

Although somewhat counterintuitive, hot initiation can also result in arguers withholding arguments or refusing to defend standpoints (e.g., Johnson & Roloff, 2000). Gottman (1994) explains that unpleasant physiological responses might be to blame for the tendency of males to withdraw from arguments at a slightly higher rate than females. High physiological arousal experienced during marital arguments results in people wanting to escape the painful stimulus by withdrawing either physically or psychologically from the discussion. To the extent that males experience somewhat higher physiological arousal at the beginning of marital arguments (e.g., Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998), males are somewhat more likely to withdraw from arguing by refusing to continue engagement once an argument has begun. The anticipation of negative affect results in some people from withholding disagreement (Johnson & Roloff, 2000). Hot initiation, therefore, is an obstacle to successful argumentation because it increases the likelihood of damaged relationships, personal identities, and resolution of the disagreement. Any designed intervention strategy that

interrupts, or at least helps couples manage, hot initiation of marital arguments would represent a giant leap forward.

A second obstacle to successful marital argument involves accidental drifting, or purposely shifting, away from the point at issue in the discussion (i.e., the “coherence problem”). In more institutionalized contexts, rules exist for the kinds of contributions people can make in a turn at talk. In every day interpersonal interaction, however, people make these decisions in response to the unfolding discussion. The couple’s ability to stay on topic through to resolution, in part, determines whether a marital argument is successful. Although the exact “topic” under discussion cannot always be clearly identified (Schegloff, 1990), under most conditions, people seem to orient more to the general issue or point of a conversation partner’s message (i.e., issue/global coherence, Tracy, 1984). In arguments, issue/global coherence involves making contributions germane to the general point at issue whereas event/local contributions take up issues related to details of a partner’s message but which remain peripheral to the general point at issue. Each message in a disagreement opens up multiple “disagreement spaces” (e.g., Jackson, 1992) only some of which pertain to the problem under discussion. Topic drift, or digressions, can occur when people take up disagreement over side issues with limited, or no, relevance to the point at issue. Focusing on irrelevant or insignificant details can come about in many ways. For example, Tracy (1984) suggests that difficulty with comprehending a message elevates the probability that a contribution to a conversation relates to some local point rather than to the main issue. Retzinger (1991) and others find (e.g., Zillman, 1993) “hot” emotions, like anger and rage, reduce people’s attentional capacity and ability to comprehend complex messages. Likewise, Jacobs, Jackson, Stearns, and Hall (1991) demonstrate how personal criticism result in digressions by shifting arguers’ attention from the discussion problem to repairing a damaged identity.

Besides focusing too narrowly, argument coherence can also suffer from focusing on the general issue but ignoring an opponent’s specific argumentation in support of a standpoint. Jacobs and I (Weger & Jacobs, 1995) identify the “drop and shift” tactic as an example. The drop and shift is a pattern in which both arguers offer examples in support of their standpoint in which the examples fail to compete with each other in terms of their impact in deciding the issue. Neither offers argumentation directly relevant to the other person’s defense of the standpoint although each person’s examples bear somewhat on the overall topic. Research

suggests that a lack of topic coherence during conflict is one of several dysfunctional conflict patterns and associates with dissatisfying marital relationships because couples who fail to tackle one issue from beginning to end are less likely to resolve marital disagreements. (e.g., Sillars & Wilmot, 1994). Failing to resolve an issue can result in serial arguing in which couples rehash the same topic over and over leading to more and more hostility in interactions (e.g., Johnson & Roloff, 2000) We can see, therefore, that lack of coherence constitutes an obstacle to successful marital argument.

The example below illustrates topic drift in an argument between a husband and wife. The argument begins with the wife attempting to negotiate an agreement with her husband regarding the chore of cooking. In turn 2, the husband suggests that he is unwilling to make a deal because he considers cooking meals to be her responsibility. The argument begins to drift almost immediately when the wife takes up the issue of whether she has a responsibility to cook for a person who is sixteen years old by questioning his definition of the word “kid.” Again in turn 5, the wife drifts further by questioning whether he actually cooks “all the time,” and then tries to get the conversation back on track by attempting to get back to the problem. The husband in turn 6 then digresses by introducing a new issue by asserting that she does not shop for groceries. The next three turns of the excerpt deal mostly with the new issue until the wife, at the end of turn 9, reintroduces the issue of cooking by questioning the husband’s motive for wanting her to be responsible for doing the cooking. In turn 10, the husband shifts strategies and suggests his expectations for meals are not being met by his wife. The wife responds in turns 11 and 13 with another digression by teasing her husband about his weight by suggesting he needs to be eating less. The example demonstrates how digressions reduce the probability that initial issue under discussion will get resolved. The wife is offering to negotiate the husband’s initial request but the discussion gets off track quickly and by the time the example closes, we can see a potentially productive negotiation ends with a personal criticism of the husband’s weight.

1	W	Would you like me to make the meals? Then I want something back. That’s all, I’ll make you a deal.
2	H	No, I think you just <i>do</i> it because it’s your responsibility. You’ve got kids to feed and stuff.

3	W	Why do you say that “kids to feed” thing? We have <i>one</i> kid, he’s a grown up. He can cook for himself.
4	H	He is sixteen. He cooks for himself all the time.
5	W	He doesn’t <i>all the time</i> . Anyway, we are supposed to discuss our problem so I . . .
6	H	At least you could go grocery shopping.
7	W	I buy lots of ready to eat things that people don’t eat.
8	H	Like, <i>what?</i> Like corn in a <i>bag</i> .
9	W	That is not true. There is T.V. dinners in there. There’s pot pies. There’s burritos. There’s plenty of sandwich meat and stuff. There’s <i>lots</i> of things that people if they take 10 minutes they can make their own meal. Nobody is starving here. I think you just need to see me <i>cook</i> for some reason.
10	H	I just, it’s just that I grew up eating nice full healthy well balanced meals.
11	W	You don’t need full meals anymore, BURT. You need little bitty meals.
12	H	Don’t say my name! This is going to be broadcast on the internet (laughs).
13	W	You don’t need big meals. You need little meals. You need to have salads for dinner. That’s it - I’ll make a <i>salthe</i> cooking. In turn 10, the husband shifts strategies and suggests his expectations for meals are not being met by his wife. The wife responds in turns 11 and 13 with another digression by teasing her husband about his weight by suggesting he needs to be eating less. The example demonstrates how digressions reduce the probability that initial issue under discussion will get resolved. The wife is offering to negotiate the husband’s initial request but the discussion gets off track quickly and by the time the example closes, we can see a potentially productive negotiation ends with a personal criticism of the husband’s weight.

### 3. The “Fair Fight For Change”

Marriage counselors and family therapists have long recognized the contribution

of dysfunctional argumentation to marital discord and divorce. Over the last few decades, marriage and family therapists have developed a variety of intervention strategies designed to create more structured procedures for resolving disagreements. The focus of this paper is the *Fair Fight for Change* (FFFC) developed by Bach and his colleagues (Bach, 1965; Bach & Goldberg, 1974; Bach & Wyden, 1969). I was introduced to the FFFC when I received training in the PAIRS® (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills) curriculum. I received this training to qualify as marriage education facilitator for the PAIRS® curriculum as part of a large national grant project investigating the effectiveness of marital education programs for low-income couples (i.e., the Supporting Healthy Marriage project funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Over two years, I worked with over 70 couples using the FFFC procedure. Overall, research indicates that couples can be trained to use the FFFC and that the PAIRS curriculum as a whole seems to improve marital functioning, at least in the short run (e.g., PAIRS Foundation, Inc., 2010, May). The version of the FFFC used in the PAIRS curriculum (Gordon, 2008) includes ten steps (see Table 1). The FFFC begins with one spouse inviting the other to engage in a FFFC. This “invitation rule” is designed to minimize the hot initiation problem by making sure each person is mentally and emotionally ready to enter a problem discussion. After thinking for a moment about how to phrase the complaint in a non-aggressive way, the initiator states the complaint in terms of a single problematic behavior. This step is designed to deal with both the hot initiation problem and the coherence problem. Stating the complaint in behavioral terms decreases the chances that the person will respond in a defensive and hostile way because the complaint does not directly attack an aspect of the person’s identity. Limiting the discussion to a single behavior also reduces the likelihood of digression to other issues since only one issue may be discussed at a time.

The next step requires the spouse hearing the complaint to paraphrase the initiator’s message out loud. This step accomplishes two goals. First, a spoken aloud paraphrase of the complaint helps insure that the spouse understands the complaint. On many occasions couples practicing this step for the first time respond with inaccurate and often defensive paraphrases of the complaint. Often the spouse hears the complaint as a broader personal attack even when the spouse states the complaint in behavioral terms. The paraphrase provides the initiating spouse an opportunity to clarify and/or correct these

misunderstandings. The second goal of the paraphrase is to create a feeling that one's complaint has been acknowledged and understood. This helps maintain a low intensity argument and increases understanding between spouses about their perceptions of the relationship.

Next, the initiator clearly states a request for a different behavior on the part of the spouse. Again, the initiator is limited to a single behavior or course of behaviors that would replace the behavior in the original complaint. This step helps maintain coherence

Step	Behavior
1.	Invite spouse to use FFFC.
2.	Initiator takes a moment to think about complaint.
3.	State one specific behavioral complaint.
4.	Partner repeats/paraphrases the complaint.
5.	Initiator shows appreciation for partner accurately hearing the complaint.
6.	Initiator specifically requests a behavior that is preferred to the behavior identified in the complaint.
7.	Partner paraphrases the requested behavior.
8.	Initiator shows appreciation for partner's accurate understanding of request.
9.	Partner responds by a) accepting the request unconditionally, b) stating conditions under which s/he will accept request, or c) rejects requested behavior. Initiator paraphrases partner's response and may then begin negotiations over conditions.
10.	Continue negotiation and paraphrasing until resolution is reached. Express appreciation for each other's willingness to fight fairly.

*Ten steps to a fair fight for change*

Note: Adapted from Gordon, 2008.

by focusing on a single behavior throughout the discussion. In the second to last step, the spouse hearing the complaint and request for change can decide to accept the request without condition, accept the request with conditions, or

simply reject the request. The last step will be discussed further below.

Three other features of the PAIRS approach to the FFFC are important to its design. First, when learning the FFFC, either instructors or fellow students act as coaches to help the couple avoid “dirty fighting” strategies by stopping the discussion when one or both partners engage in personal criticism, sarcasm, stonewalling, and so forth (all of these behaviors are referred to as “dirty fighting” in the curriculum). The coaches also help couples formulate complaints and responses in straightforward and behavioral terms. A second feature of the FFFC instruction involves an evaluation of the “fight” based on the couple’s ability to avoid digressions, avoid hostile communication (both verbal and nonverbal) and to come to a mutually agreeable solution. Although the couple may or may not have access to coaches outside of class (couples are actually encouraged to call another couple on the phone to help coach if they are having trouble following the FFFC at home), the initial coaching helps couples learn the discussion procedures. A third feature of the FFFC within the PAIRS curriculum involves the timing of its introduction. Built up hostility and a lack of goodwill between spouses can present a major challenge to successfully completing a FFFC. The PAIRS curriculum, therefore, introduces several intimacy and goodwill building exercises before couples are taught the FFFC procedure.

The FFFC is a useful tool for helping couples learn to negotiate mutually acceptable solutions to their relationship problems. The procedures outlined in the FFFC are straightforward and encourage assertive and rational participation in the resolution of interpersonal disagreements. The FFFC helps to avoid both the hot initiation and the coherence problems by reducing the amount of personal attacks and by providing a structure the couple can follow to stay on task. Additionally, it is designed to increase trust by producing mutually agreeable solutions in which each partner has an equal say in the outcome. In my experience, the FFFC is a well designed tool for marital argumentation.

#### *4. Potential for Re-design: FFFC and Pragma-Dialectics*

Although the FFFC as taught in the PAIRS curriculum is helpful, it is not without problems, especially from an argumentation point of view. In my limited experience teaching this structured argumentation activity, the final two steps in the process become a sticking point for many couples. Addressing two related stumbling points could help to improve the effectiveness of the FFFC. The first obstacle can be located in step 9 of the FFFC. If the spouse accepts the initiator’s request, the FFFC ends uneventfully and the couple expresses their appreciation

for each other in handling the problem well. However, if the spouse being asked to change their behavior rejects the request or states conditions for agreement, problems often arise because the FFFC does not include a clear conversational structure for negotiation or dealing with rejection. Although the coaches can help suggest strategies for negotiating an agreement, frustration and old habits can derail the discussion. Step 10 simply suggests that the couple continue to communicate with empathy and understanding until an agreement is reached, but other than prohibiting dirty fighting, little help is provided to structure the spouses' conversation from this point on.

The second, broader, problem from an argumentation theory perspective concerns the lack of any discussion regarding the role of argumentation in support of standpoints. Requiring each spouse to support her/his standpoint could be beneficial in at least two ways. First, the requirement to extend an argument past rebuttal is a key procedure for moving disagreements past the initial standpoints and argumentation offered by each party (e.g., Weger & Jacobs, 1995). By requiring participants to either offer a rebuttal with new evidence/reasoning or surrender a standpoint, arguments are less likely to get bogged down by stonewalling or endless repetition of each person's position. Second, research suggests that couples who offer support for assertions enjoy the conversation more and are more satisfied with the relationship (e.g. Weger & Canary, 2010). Given these shortcomings, two main improvements to the FFFC can be facilitated by incorporating principles from pragma-dialectics.

By now many articles and books regarding about pragma-dialectics exist (e.g., van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992) making a fresh explanation here seem redundant. Briefly, pragma-dialectics is a theory of argumentation that introduces an ideal model of argumentation procedures. As the name suggests, the theory combines elements of discourse pragmatics, primarily speech act theory, with classical and modern theories of dialectic, rhetoric, and informal logic resulting in a set of procedural guidelines for conducting a "critical discussion." Unlike the FFFC, the critical discussion model is a critical tool for the analysis and reconstruction of argumentative dialogue and not considered a prescription for actual behavior. Strategic maneuvering, introduced by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1999), offers as an additional tool for reconstructing argumentation. From a theoretical standpoint, the concept of strategic maneuvering adds to the critical discussion concept by identifying rhetorical strategies people use to resolve a disagreement in their own favor. In reconstructing argumentation,

analysts examine arguers' methods of strategic maneuvering to gain insight into how and why some arguments fair better than others. In addition, analysts examine the balance between an arguer's effectiveness (as indicated by strategic maneuvers) with their reasonableness (as instantiated by the arguer's adherence to the ten rules for critical discussion).

In recent work, van Eemeren (2010) introduces the concept of "activity type" to the analysis of strategic maneuvering, "Communicative activity types are conventionalized communicative practices whose conventionalization serves through the implementation of certain 'genres' of communicative activity the institutional needs prevailing in a certain domain of communicative activity" (pp. 144-145). Each activity type has its own set of conventionalized norms and practices that both constrain and enable certain kinds of messages. Understanding strategic maneuvers as rational responses to the affordances of an activity type help the analyst make sense of the moves made by arguers in context. Situational affordances that shape the possibilities for critical discussion via strategic maneuvering depend on the constellation of three components working to balance effectiveness with reasonableness. These three elements include *topical potential*, *audience demand*, and *presentational devices* (van Eemeren, 2010). Topical potential refers to the choices available to an arguer for constructing a line of defense for a standpoint. For example, a husband might defend his standpoint that his wife should make dinner by arguing that it is her turn since he made dinner the night before, or that his wife should make dinner because he had a rough day at work and he is too tired, or that his wife should make dinner because he believes meal preparation is women's work. Audience demand refers finding arguments that will resonate with the audience and is consistent with the audience's beliefs, attitudes, and values. Continuing the example above, appealing to the wife's sense of fairness by suggesting it is her turn to prepare dinner would certainly be more effective with more women in the United States compared to the argument that meal preparation is somehow women's work. Presentational devices represent stylistic choices for presenting standpoints and argumentation. Here we are talking about the exact wording, phrasing, and tone of the message (which includes nonverbal cues that accompany the message, such as facial expression, posture, tone of voice, and so forth). Assuming the husband in the example above chooses to use the fairness strategy, his success could depend on whether he whines, talks in "baby-talk," speaks in an even tone of voice, shouts, or communicates his message in some

other way. Besides the nonverbal vocalic dimension of the message, his success could also depend on whether he uses some negative or positive politeness strategy, states his case in a plain and straightforward way, states his argument in the form of a haiku, or if he uses some other linguistic presentational device. In his conceptualization of strategic maneuvering, van Eemeren explains that each of these three components are interdependent and reflexive. Each choice made by an arguer about one component creates implications for choices about the other components.

Through this lens, I want to briefly lay out the standpoint that marital argument can be considered a kind argumentative activity type. Conventionalized interpersonal associations (such as friendships, clubs, sororities, etc.) constitute cultural institutions that carry with them identifying labels and rules for membership. Marriage is perhaps one of the most formal interpersonal associations as it is usually publically recognized, legally sanctioned, and regulated by the state. People in each culture can identify shared norms and values associated with this institution. Argumentation (or conflictual interaction) is an important regulatory activity in interpersonal associations. Interpersonal associations are, in part, defined by the degree of interdependence between or among the parties (e.g., Kelley, 1979). Because people associate with each other to meet their interpersonal needs (e.g., Schutz, 1966), and because people sometimes differ in their needs, argumentation plays an important role in the relationship by communicating these differences so that the partners can change their behaviors, attitudes, and/or beliefs to better meet the needs of the other. Furthermore, at least in the United States, research suggests that people can identify commonly understood rules for conducting arguments in personal relationships (e.g., Jones & Gallois, 1989). Perhaps the most relevant genres of communication activity within this activity type would be negotiation, conflict (defined here as the attempted resolution of perceived incompatible goals, see Wilmot & Hocker, 2000), quarreling (see Walton, 2008) and complaining (e.g., Drew, 1998). Certainly marital argument has many overlapping qualities with other contexts for interpersonal argument, but the unique requirements that arguments not only solve problems but also strengthen (or at least do no damage to) the marital union adds an important twist to this genre of argumentation.

Although strategic maneuvering and critical discussion are not meant to be prescriptions for behavior in real interactions, I want to make the case that these

concepts can be useful in the design of argumentation interventions for marital arguments. Perhaps the best place to begin is to reconstruct the FFFC in terms of strategic maneuvering. I will do this by laying out the FFFC using the stages of critical discussion as an organizing principle and examining how the FFFC fits into these stages. The first stage in a critical discussion is the confrontation stage in which the protagonist communicates the potential disagreement and both parties attempt to clarify the issue at hand (e.g., van Eemeren , 2010). This stage maps on well to the first step in the FFFC in which the initiator communicates her/his desire to discuss a potential problem and invites spouse to engage in the discussion. In the FFFC, topical potential, audience demand, and presentational device are constrained by the requirement that the initiator invite the spouse. The initiator is not allowed to demand or cajole because the responding spouse must freely chose to engage in the FFFC so any presentational device that appears coercive is off-limits.

The opening stage follows the confrontation stage in a critical discussion. In the opening stage, the two parties “...establish an unambiguous point of departure for the discussion. The point of departure consists of mutually accepted procedural starting points regarding the division of the burden of proof and other agreements regarding the conduct of the discussion and material starting points regarding the premises of the discussion, which can be viewed as ‘concessions’ that may be built upon in the discussion” (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 45). As van Eemeren (2010) recognizes, many of the tasks in each stage are accomplished implicitly or are prescribed ahead of time by precedent or by reference to a formal procedural rule.

In terms of the FFFC, steps three through eight seem to most neatly (but not perfectly) fit into the opening stage of a critical discussion. This is stage at which the initiator (i.e., protagonist) clearly states her/his complaint, where the partner (potential antagonist) communicates her/his understanding of the complaint via paraphrase, and so on up until the point in which the initiator requests a specific change to the partner’s behavior. In terms of strategic maneuvering, FFFC constrains topical potential by requiring the complaint refer to a particular behavior, eliminating criticism of personality characteristics as line of argumentation. The FFFC also limits presentational devices to straight forward complaints with one specific behavior identified. Couples are further encouraged to think carefully about how to present the complaint so that there negative

implications for the partner's identity are limited. Couples must also face each other and make eye contact. Expressing criticism or contempt through pained facial expressions are also off limits as a presentational device.

As a way to facilitate and streamline the discussion it might be helpful to add one step to the FFFC at this stage of the discussion so it more closely resembles the opening stage of a critical discussion. After the partner (i.e., antagonist) reflects the initiator's complaint using a paraphrase in step four, it would be helpful for the partner to respond to the complaint in some way. The partner can offer an explanation, justification, and/or apology for the behavior and the initiator should then reply with a paraphrased understanding of the partner's response. This step would allow the spouses a moment to talk about the problem and their feelings about it before arguing for a particular solution. In Stanley, Markman, Jenkins, and Blumberg's (2008) Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP®), couples are encouraged to do problem talk before they engage in talk about solutions to the problem. Stanley et al. suggest this approach allows couples to connect with each other and also helps to prevent couples from taking up positions and arguing for those positions rather than searching for mutually agreeable solutions as a team. As discussed below, it would also present the couple an opportunity to decide whether argumentation about the complaint is necessary. Although each partner voices his/her feelings about the issue, no argumentation takes place at this point. The initiator and partner do not challenge each other's feelings, they simply listen and respond with paraphrasing to communicate each person's understanding of the other as well as establishing common ground for potential argumentation. By the end of the opening stage, the couple can proceed in at least four different ways:

Possibility 1: The couple decides there they do not disagree, the complaint is taken to heart by the antagonist and the couple moves to the concluding stage where the antagonist offers to accept a change in his/her behavior without further discussion.

Possibility 2: The initiator (i.e., potential protagonist), after discussion with the partner, decides that the complaint is actually a statement of grievance about some past behavior that does not require any change on the part of the partner. In this case, the couple skips the argumentation stage all together and move straight to the concluding stage.

Possibility 3: The couple agrees to enter the argumentation stage to resolve a

disagreement regarding the legitimacy of, or over facts underlying, the complaint...

Possibility 4: The partner agrees that a change in his/her behavior would benefit the initiator, the relationship, or both and the couple enters the argumentation stage with the goal of using arguments to choose a solution. For example, the couple might disagree about what sort of change in one (or possibly both) spouse's behavior would be most effective in solving the problem identified in the opening stage. The fourth possibility might follow a resolution in favor of the protagonist regarding the legitimacy of the complaint.

So far, we can see how the FFFC can be seen as a special set of guidelines in response to topical constraints, audience demands, and acceptable presentational devices. The most significant contribution pragma-dialectics makes to redesign of the FFFC involves conceiving of step ten in the FFFC (in which the couple argues/negotiates a solution) as an analog to the argumentation stage. In my experience, this is where the couples' FFFC conversations often flounder. The couples are not offered any procedural guidance for testing competing arguments. As a strategic maneuvering activity, the topical potential is generally open to any line of attack or defense as long as the argument does not threaten the partner's motives or character (i.e., audience demands) and as long as the message is delivered respectfully (presentational devices). Importing the rules for critical discussion into step 10 of the FFFC can help couples resolve issues in a more effective, efficient, and rational way because it provides some structure to this step. Critical discussion rules might also help to reduce other problems as well, such as stonewalling or simple repetition of the same argument with more volume since these behaviors would constitute rule violations and be called out of bounds by a coach or therapist assisting a couple learn the procedure. The critical discussion rules help transform the FFFC from a purely socio-emotional model of discussion to one that blends the emotional needs of the partners with a more rational approach to problem solving.

Although adding elements from pragma-dialectics to the FFFC can have some practical advantages, training couples to produce logically sound arguments and filter out misapplied argumentation schemes or other fallacies of reasoning could prove very challenging for marital education teachers. The FFFC as it is usually requires several practice attempts for the couples to understand and feel comfortable with the procedure. Adding a layer consisting of training in

argumentation would be a complicating factor. Perhaps it would be enough to first teach couples something like a “because” rule in which any statement for or against a complaint or proposed behavior change be accompanied by a “because” statement that supports it. Already some versions of the FFFC require the initiator to phrase the complaint by saying, “When you (enact some behavior), I feel (angry, sad, frustrated, etc.), because (an explanation for the link between behavior and feeling).” For example, a husband might say, “When you call our daughter lazy when she is late for school I feel sad because I can remember how much it hurt my feelings when my mother called me lazy when I was Julie’s age.” Without explicitly teaching argumentation theory, the couples are being taught to provide support for the substance of their complaints. The because rule usually does not appear in other steps of the FFFC so perhaps a similar formulation of this rule in the argumentation stage could help couples argumentation in support of standpoints. Of course, couples need coaching on the “because rule” since some couples will simply link “because” to some dirty fighting strategy such as, “You should make dinner tonight *because you are so lazy that I have to do everything around here.*”

It might also be helpful to use some version of the pragma-dialectics discussion rules presented in an abbreviated and plain language way. Table 2 provides a list of potential rules stated in plain language. Here I have eliminated some of the rules for brevity others for practical reasons. For example, unless the marriage education program wants to include a short course on logic, it seems impractical to ask couples to submit their arguments to tests for logical fallacies. Research suggests average people can see obvious logical fallacies (van Eemeren, Garssen, & Meuffels, 2009), so hopefully couples will see problems inherent in fallacious arguments and call them out during discussion. At this point, this list is tentative at best. The development of clear and easily understood discussion rules for couples working out marital disagreements would mark an important advance in marriage education.

1. No arguments attacking the other person’s character or personality.
2. Let the other person have his/her say.
3. Stay on topic by directly addressing the points made by your spouse.
4. Don’t base your argument on your interpretation of the other person’s behavior unless the other person agrees with your interpretation

5. All statements for or against change must be use the “because rule.”
6. Only agree when you truly agree but when you are wrong, you must admit it.

*Table 2*

*Proposed discussion rules for step 10 in the Fair Fight for Change*

1. No arguments attacking the other person’s character or personality.
2. Let the other person have his/her say.
3. Stay on topic by directly addressing the points made by your spouse.
4. Don’t base your argument on your interpretation of the other person’s behavior unless the other person agrees with your interpretation
5. All statements for or against change must be use the “because rule.”
6. Only agree when you truly agree but when you are wrong, you must admit it.

Finally, once the couple has exhausted their tests of each other’s standpoint, the couple moves from the argumentation stage to the concluding stage. At the concluding stage, the couple can determine whether the protagonist’s (initiator) complaint and request for change stands up to the antagonist’s argumentation against them. If the discussion results in protagonist’s favor the topics for discussion at this point in the concluding stage should focus on setting the conditions under which the change will occur as well as how the couple will decide whether the enacted change has indeed resulted in a mutually agreeable solution.

*5. Conclusion*

Engaging communication as a design enterprise can help scholars integrate practical and theoretical issues in useful ways. In the case of the FFFC, a clear attempt is being made to engineer the way married couples argue. Of course, not all couples need to use artificial procedures for resolving their problems. For the couples who desire to maintain life-long marital relations but cannot seem to find a way to resolve their problems without inflicting mortal damage to the relationship, procedures like the FFFC have proven to be both practical and beneficial (e.g., Halford & Moore, 2002). Designing ideally rational procedures for marital argument, however, pose some challenges that will require special attention in terms of extending and refining the nature of specialized activity types as well as posing challenges in the practical application of these activity types in everyday arguments between intimates.

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