How couples recover after an argument stems from their infant relationships

February 18 2011

When studying relationships, psychological scientists have often focused on how couples fight. But how they recover from a fight is important, too. According to a new study published in Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, couples' abilities to bounce back from conflict may depend on what both partners were like as infants.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota have been following a cohort of people since before they were born, in the mid-1970s. When the subjects were about 20 years old, they visited the lab with their romantic partners for testing. This included a conflict discussion, when they were asked to talk about an issue they disagreed on, followed by a "cool-down" period, when the couples spent a few minutes talking about something they saw eye to eye about.

Although the cool-down period was included just to make sure the researchers weren't sending the couples away angry, Jessica E. Salvatore, a Ph.D. student at the University of Minnesota, noticed some interesting things about the couples' communication styles during this recovery time. "As part of another project where we looked at how couples fight, I would often catch a few minutes of this cool-down period," she says. Salvatore noticed that some couples had intense conflicts, but made a perfectly clean transition to chatting about something they agreed on. In other couples, one or both partners seemed "stuck" on the conflict discussion and couldn't move on.

With Sally I-Chun Kuo, Ryan D. Steele, Jeffry A. Simpson, and W. Andrew Collins, all from the University of Minnesota, Salvatore embarked on a closer look at what happens after a conflict supposedly ends. By looking back at observations of the participants and their caregivers from the 1970s, when they were between 12 and 18 months old, the researchers discovered a link between the couples' conflict recovery behaviors and the quality of their attachment relationship with their caregivers. People who were more securely attached to their caregivers as infants were better at recovering from conflict 20 years later. This means that if your caregiver is better at regulating your negative emotions as an infant, you tend to do a better job of regulating your own negative emotions in the moments following a conflict as an adult.

The researchers also found that there is hope for people who were insecurely attached as infants. "We found that people who were insecurely attached as infants but whose adult romantic partners recover well from conflict are likely to stay together," remarked Salvatore. "If one person can lead this process of recovering from conflict, it may buffer the other person and the relationship." The health of a relationship can be salvaged if one person can quickly disengage from conflict and avoid dwelling on negative thoughts and emotions.

This is some of the first evidence that romantic partners play an important role in buffering the potential harmful effects from poor experiences earlier in life. "That, to us, was the most exciting finding," Salvatore says. "There's something about the important people later in our lives that changes the consequences of what happened earlier."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: How couples recover after an argument stems from their infant relationships (2011,