

Improving conflict communication for high-conflict couples

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Conflict in Romantic Relationships

- Conflict is inevitable
- When perceived as aversive or threatening, impact seen on
 - Mental health (e.g. depressive symptoms)
 - Physical health (e.g. cardiovascular and immune function)
 - Relationship well-being

(Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; MacKinnon et al., 2012; Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Wright & Loving, 2011)

- Conflict need not be detrimental if managed effectively
 - Better problem-solving skills associated with lower risk for later relationship dysfunction

(Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998)

The Role of Expectations in Conflict

- History of frequent, serious, destructive conflicts shapes expectations for subsequent conflict discussions
- These expectations influence how positively people behave towards their partner – self-fulfilling prophecy
 - Partner's availability (Kobak, & Hazan, 1991)
 - Attributions for partner's behaviour (Bradbury et al., 1996)
 - Rejection sensitivity (Downey et al., 1998)
- The more people believe they are valued by their partner, they more responsive they expect that partner to be (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006)

Intervening with High Conflict Couples

- Conflict skills training useful, but a considerable investment of time, money, effort
- Simpler intervention could target perceptions of value to partner, which would shift expectations of responsiveness and create positive self-fulfilling prophecy
- Abstract Reframing Intervention (ARI; Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007, 2010)
 - Describing the meaning and significance of a partner's recent compliment increased security and satisfaction, and decreased defensive responding to threats, for low self-esteem individuals
 - Effects evident 2-3 weeks later

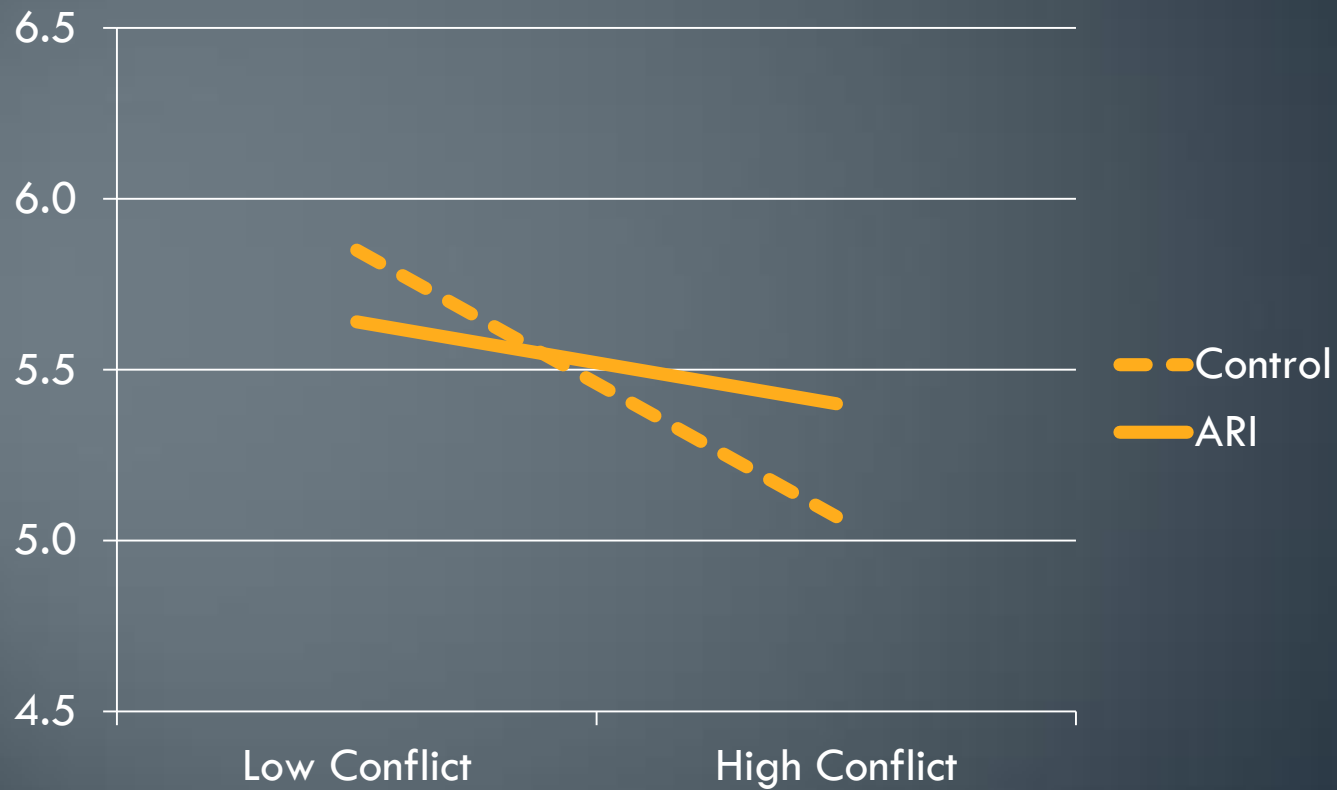
The Current Study

- Hypothesis: Completing the ARI prior to a conflict discussion will make high conflict couples' scores as positive as those of low conflict couples for:
 - A) expectations prior to the discussion
 - B) behaviour during the discussion
 - C) self-reported outcomes of the discussion
- Women will be more strongly affected by the intervention

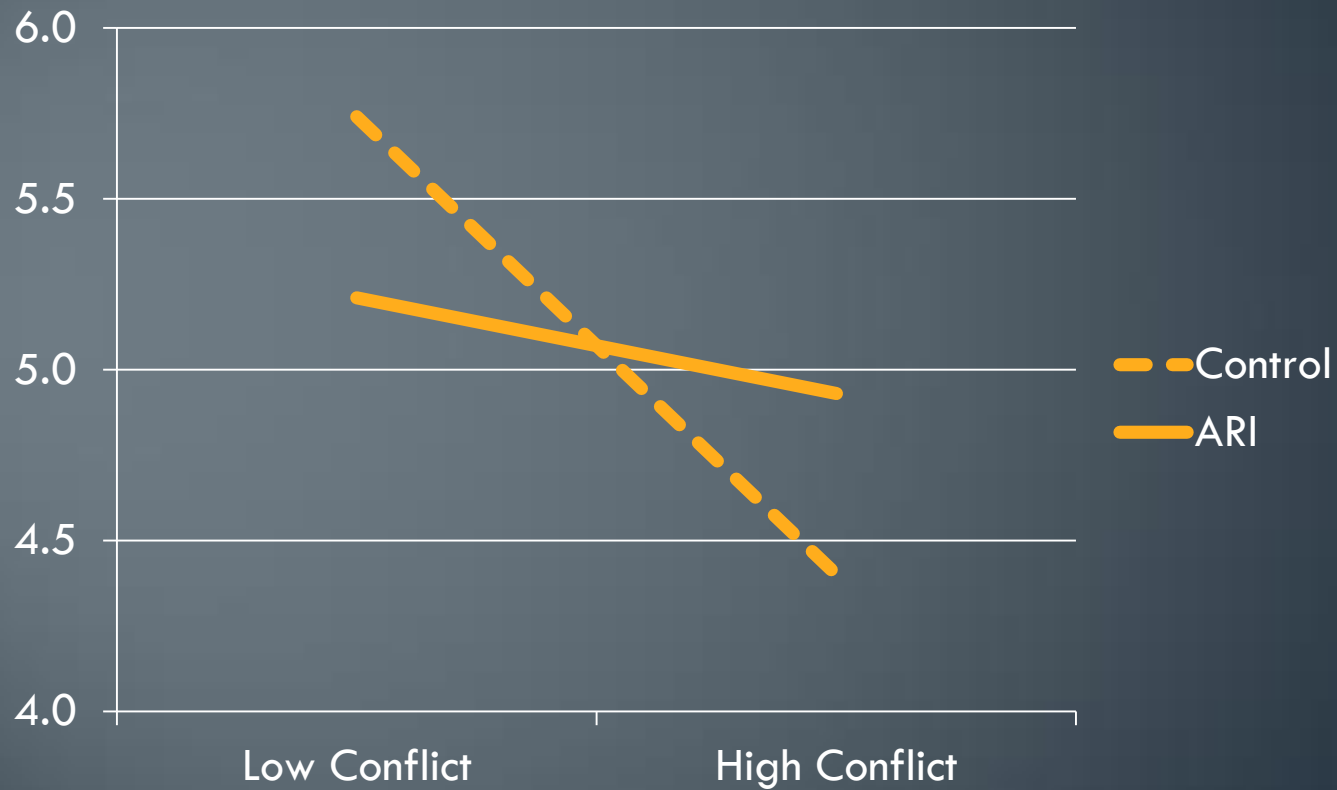
Participants and Procedure

- 96 couples (majority dating)
 - M age = 20 years, M relationship length = 19 months
- Background measures
 - Couple conflict severity (adapted from Braiker & Kelley, 1979)
- Generate list of issues in relationships
- Decide on issue for discussion
- Complete ARI (47 couples) or control condition
- Report expectations for discussion
- Have discussion (10 minutes, videotaped and coded)
- Rate experience of discussion, and overall relationship
- Prize draw entries

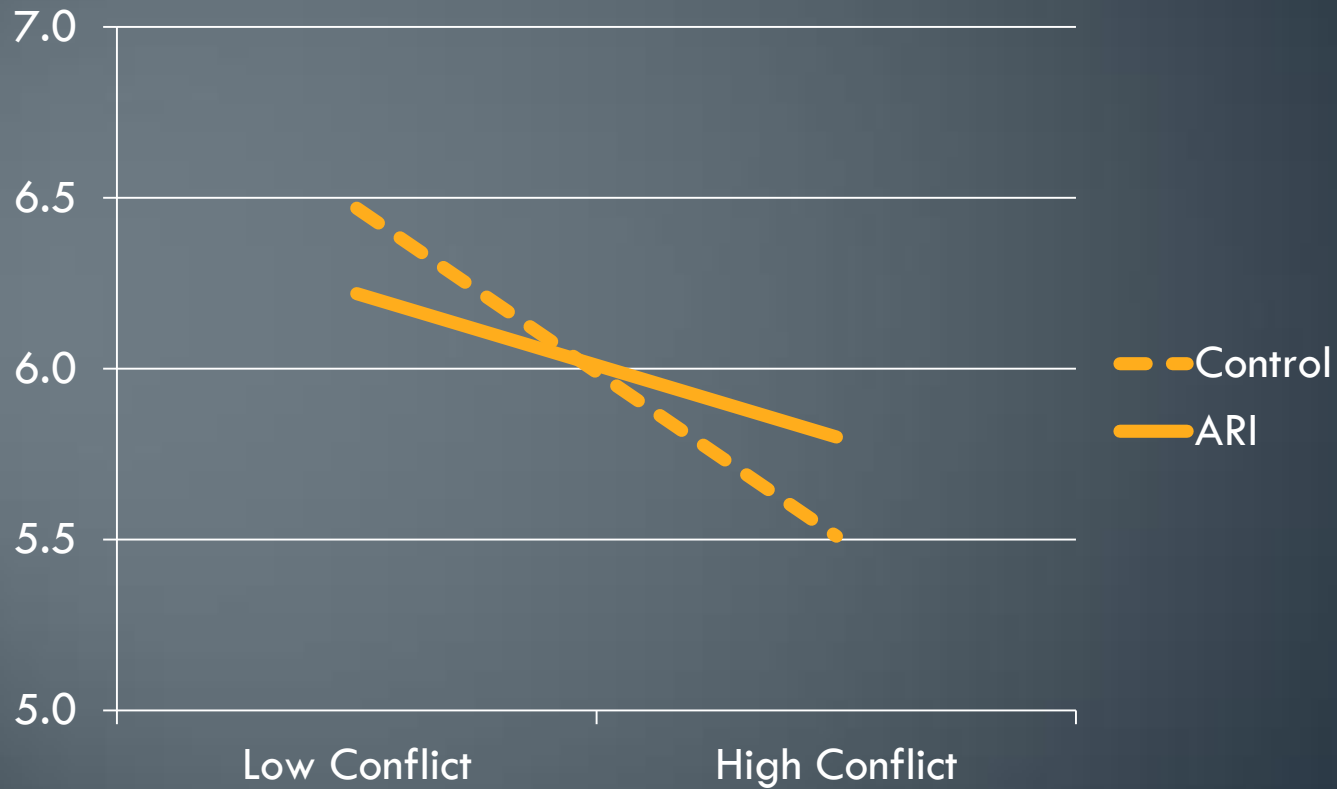
Expectations of Partner's Responsiveness



Positive Feelings at End of Discussion

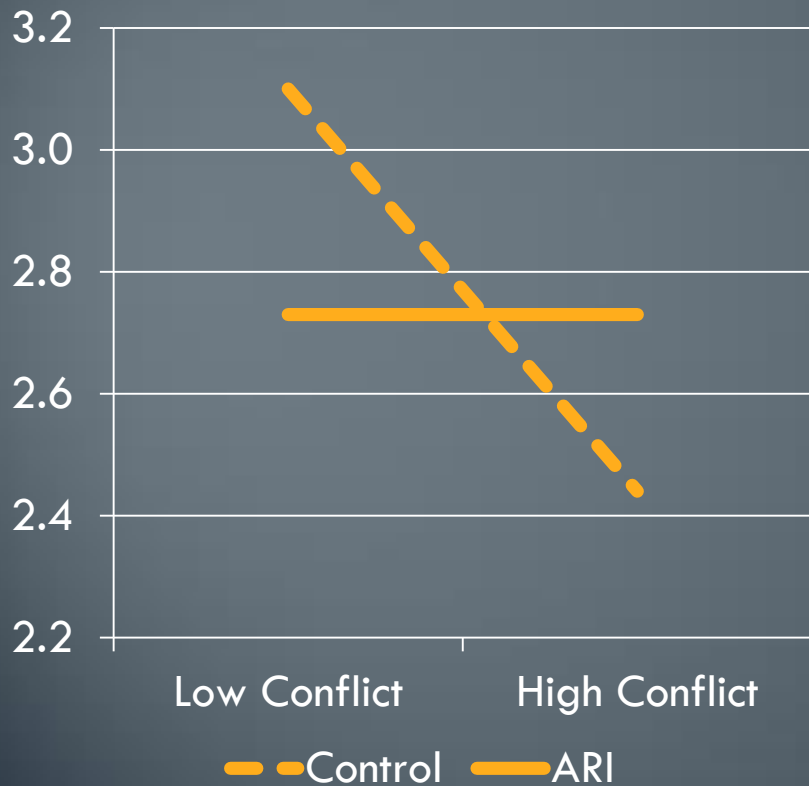


Overall Relationship Quality

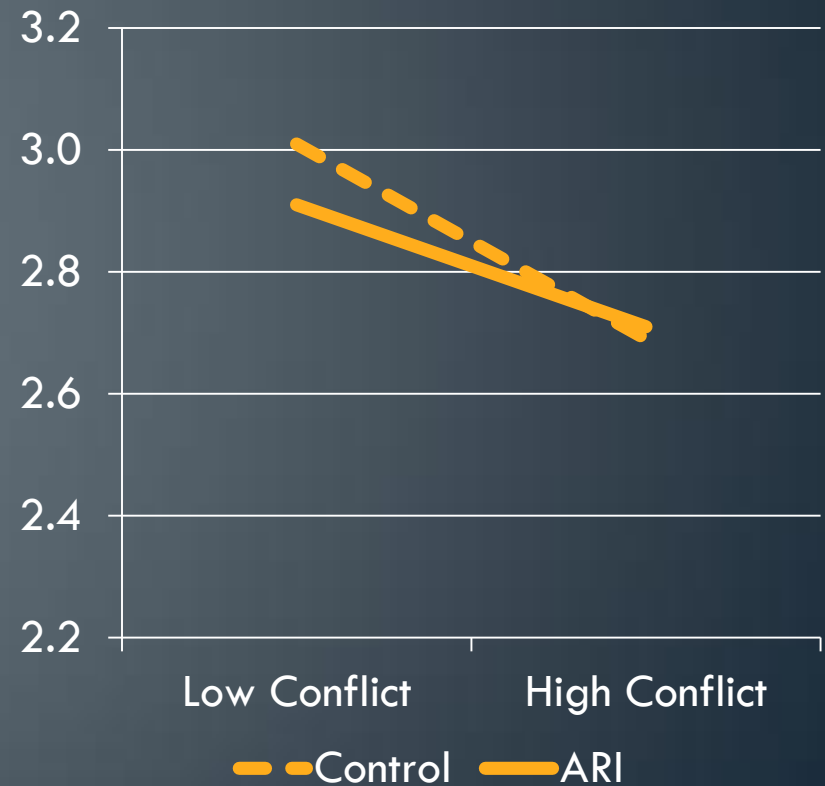


Constructive Behaviour (Coded)

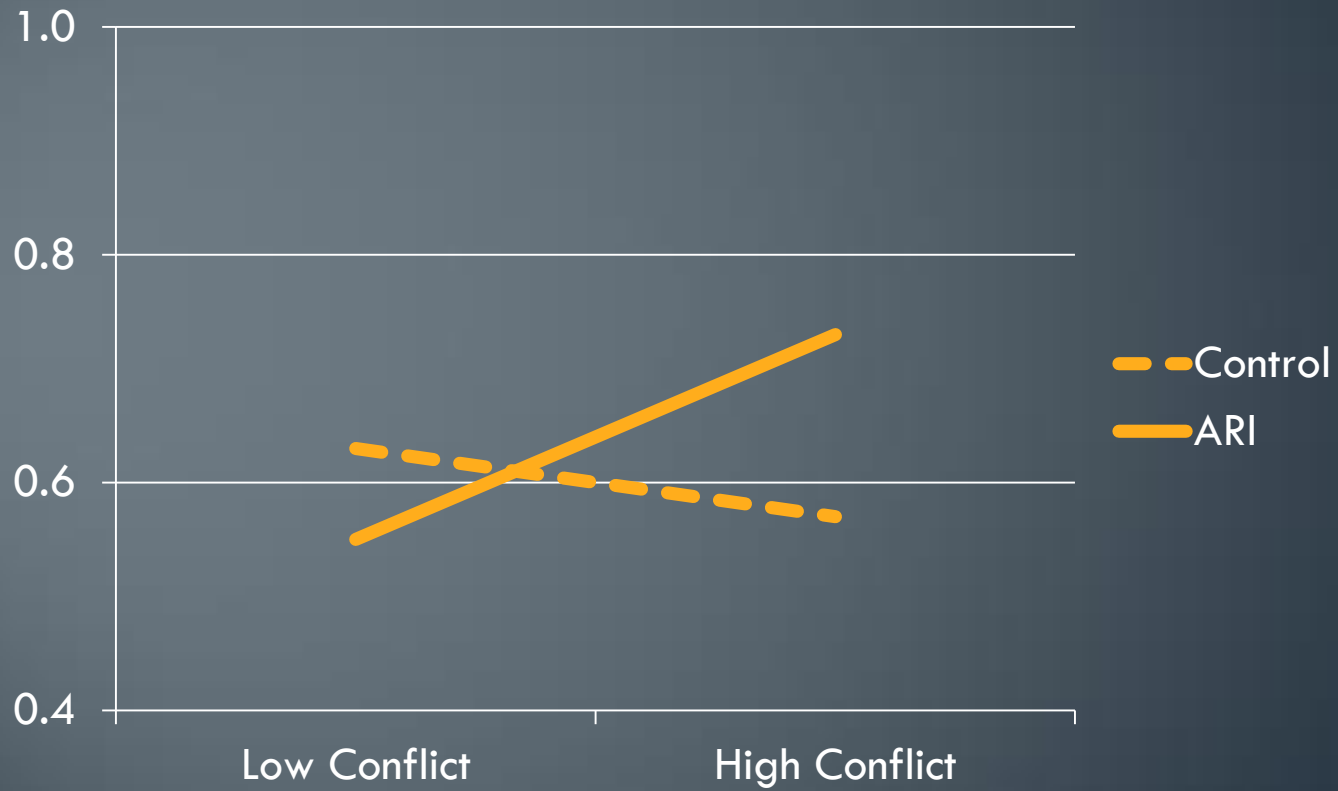
Women



Men



Prize Draw Entries



Summary

- High conflict couples who completed the ARI reported more positive expectations of their partner's responsiveness in an upcoming conflict discussion
- These more positive expectations mediated further effects on positive emotions experienced at end of discussion, and relationship quality reported after discussion
- The ARI also eliminated the effect of couple conflict on women's constructive behaviours (coded) during the discussion

Discussion

- Limitations
 - Primarily young, dating sample
 - Not clear whether behaviour is significantly changing, or just perceptions
- Future directions
 - Long-term follow-up (snowball effect?)
 - Can couples administer their own intervention during active conflict?
(cf. Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013)

Questions?