Communication:
Couple Relationships, Family Relationships

Gender Differences and Similarities in Couple Communication

Much of the literature in popular culture leads one to believe that men and women are truly quite different in terms of their emotional experiences and their communication of those experiences. According to John Gray (1992), author of *Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus,* men and women differ in their experience of emotions and their communication of them. Gray, however, is not an academic, and his work is not based on empirical research.

Indeed, much of the empirical scholarship on sex and gender differences indicates quite the opposite. Specifically, it shows that men and women are more similar than they are different in terms of communicating in their close, personal relationships (Canary and Emmers-Sommer 1997). Although some differences do exist, they are not substantial enough to declare that the sexes or genders are significantly different. Many of the socalled differences in the sex and gender literature are related more to flaws in the studies themselves, such as errors in recollection in self-report studies, or individuals' reports that are affected by *social desirability.* Specifically, social desirability refers to an individual reporting what he or she thinks others would find acceptable, rather than what actually may be the truth. Within the context of gender differences, this would account for men and women reporting what they stereotypically believe men and women *should* do from a social expectation standpoint versus what they actually do.

Research on communication in close, personal relationships suggests that men and women are more similar than they are different. Nevertheless, some differences do exist between men and women. Many of the differences surface within the contexts of conflict or household chores. For example, in their extensive examination of the sex and gender literature, Dan Canary and Tara Emmers-Sommer (1997) offered the following conclusions regarding sex and gender differences. First, women, compared to men, express a greater range of emotions, such as sadness, fear, love, happiness, and anger. Women are also more inclined than men to disclose personal information, such as their personal opinion or details of their personal history. Compared to men, women are more likely to use touch to convey feelings of closeness; these feelings could be sexual in nature, but not necessarily. Interestingly, women are more likely to exercise power strategies than men. Compared to men, women are more likely to engage in manipulative behaviors and to exercise negative and confrontational conflict behaviors. Finally, women are more likely than men to enact self-disclosure behaviors, engage in loyalty toward their partner and relationship, and enact task-sharing in an effort to maintain their relationship. The authors also found that women, even in dual-career couples, tend to do the lion's share of the household chores and childrearing duties. Thus, some differences do exist between men and women; however, the extensive literature on sex and gender differences indicates that the differences are far outweighed by the similarities.

Interestingly, however, some of the subtle differences that do exist contribute in a noteworthy fashion to how men and women manage their relationships, particularly issues of contention and conflict. According to John Gottman (1994), both sex (physiological) and gender (sociological) differences are exhibited in couple conflict. Similarly, men's and women's adherence to particular gender role and relational ideologies relates to their responses during conflict.

Couple-Types

The distinction between sex and gender differences is important in communication research. For example, gender differences, rather than sex differences, play an important role in defining couple-types. Mary Anne Fitzpatrick (1988) argued that a variety of couple-types exist and that each couple-type's attitudes and beliefs toward their partner and relationship hold particular implications for their responses to conflict. It is important to consider the variety of couple-types that exist for several reasons. First, embedded within the couple-types are demonstrations of adherence to gender roles. Second, couple-type relates to how spouses respond in conflict situations, which, third, holds implications for couple communication patterns and for the satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the relationship.

Traditional couple-types. Men and women who are *traditionals* are highly interdependent and emphasize doing things together versus autonomously. Traditionals hold traditional gender role beliefs (e.g., the woman takes the husband's last name when married) and hold the stability of the relationship in high esteem. Traditionals use positive communication behaviors during conflict (e.g., discuss issues keeping the relationship in mind, not using threats), tend not to argue over petty issues, but do openly engage about salient issues (Fitzpatrick 1988).

Independent couple-types. Independents value both connection and personal autonomy. They actively discuss many aspects of their relationship and hold nontraditional beliefs about relationships (i.e., do not espouse the belief that the "man is in charge") (Fitzpatrick 1988). Independents actively engage in conflict over minor and major issues, argue for personal positions, and offer reasons for accepting their positions rather than rely on a oneup/one-down solution by virtue of gender (Witteman and Fitzpatrick 1986).

Separate couple-types. Separates, unlike independents or traditionals, are not interdependent and avoid interaction, particularly conflict. Separates are likely to withdraw or give in during early stages of conflict because active engagement in conflict involves interaction and a degree of interdependence. However, when separates do engage in conflict, the interaction can be quite hostile (Fitzpatrick 1988).

Mixed couple-types. Approximately half of couple-types do not neatly fall into a specific category such that both husband and wife are traditionals, independents, or separates. Rather, many couples represent a meshing of two different types. The most common mixed couple-type is the separate husband and the traditional wife (Fitzpatrick 1988). Several implications for this couple-type exist in terms of gender role adherence, engagement in conflict, and effects on the satisfaction of the relationship.

The research suggests that certain communication patterns can be constructive to a relationship's preservation, whereas other communication patterns can be destructive to a relationship's maintenance.

Communication Patterns and Couple (Dis)satisfaction

Gottman and colleagues (Gottman 1994; Gottman and Levenson 1988) have offered specific couple communication patterns that contribute to both satisfactory and dissatisfactory couple relationships, with a specific focus on the close, personal relationship of marriage. (It is important to note that most or all of this research has been conducted in the United States.) In fact, Gottman is able to predict divorce accurately 94 percent of the time. Gottman has found that the behaviors of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and withdrawal hold the most impact in influencing a close relationship negatively. Although men and women can exercise all of these behaviors, it is of particular harm when the man in the relationship withdraws from conversation about important issues of contention. This particular

behavioral pattern is indicative, for example, of a mixed couple-type in which the husband is a separate and the wife is a traditional.

Overall, Gottman (1994) offered several observations regarding what delineated a satisfied relationship from a dissatisfied one. First, dissatisfied couples more often engage in destructive communication patterns than satisfied couples. Specifically, dissatisfied couples are more likely to engage in criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and withdrawal. Many of these behaviors can also be conveyed nonverbally. For example, a partner stiffening up to convey defensiveness, rolling his or her eyes to convey contempt, or withdrawing and staring off into space to convey withdrawal. Of the four behaviors, Gottman (1994) argued that the behaviors of contempt and defensiveness are the most corrosive and that the man's withdrawal from conflict is the strongest predictor of divorce. In addition to emotional harm, these behaviors can also contribute to physiological distress. Second, husbands are more likely to withdraw from conflict in dissatisfied marriages and less likely to do so in satisfied marriages. That is, husbands are more likely to self-disclose their feelings to their wives in happy marriages. This suggests that one cannot assume that men are emotionally distant from everyone, as the common stereotype would indicate, and nondisclosive. Indeed, the mediating factor might be the state of the relationship. Research also suggests that women have a greater repertoire of individuals to disclose to than men do and are more inclined to disclose regardless of marital satisfaction, whereas some men only disclose to their wife. For those men in unhappy marriages, their feelings are often revealed to no one. Overall, much of the research suggests these aforementioned patterns (Canary and Emmers-Sommer 1997; Gottman 1994; House 1981). Third, men and women function differently in the face of negative affect. Specifically, the research suggests that women function more aptly in high conflict situations than men. Within the context of satisfied marriages, both husbands and wives engage in deescalation behaviors (i.e., reducing the conflict) during low-level conflict. Women engage in deescalation behaviors during high conflict as well, whereas men find it difficult regardless of their marital satisfaction. Within dissatisfied marriages, neither the husband nor wife engages in conflict de-escalation behaviors (Gottman 1979, 1994). Fourth, research suggests that destructive communication during conflict affects men more adversely from a physiological standpoint than women. Gottman (1994) concluded that men and women may differ in their responses to negative communication such that men react more quickly to negative affect and that their recovery from the episode is slower than that of women. These reactions to negative communication are evidenced through means such as elevated adrenal excretions and blood pressure. Interestingly, Gottman (1994) noted that while women's health appears to be superior to men's within these contexts, men seem to benefit from marriage more than women do. Fifth, Gottman (1994) argued that a five-to-one ratio is necessary for a stable relationship; specifically, that five positive communications are necessary to balance one negative communication. Further, negative communications that involve the four destructive behaviors mentioned earlier (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and withdrawal) are particularly harmful to the relationship. In response to these destructive behaviors, Gottman (1994) suggests that partners engage in the behaviors of soothing, nondefensive listening, and validating.

Sixth, in addition to certain communication behaviors and patterns, dissatisfied or distressed couples are often distinguished from satisfied or nondistressed couples in terms of how their conflict behaviors collectively produce cycles. Specifically, dissatisfied couples often find themselves in what Gottman (1994) termed "negativity cycles." Such cycles involve one partner offering a complaint and that complaint is met with the partner's countercomplaint, which is met with another countercomplaint, and so forth. Gottman found that satisfied and dissatisfied couples were distinguished, in part, by the couples' ability to remove themselves from the complaint/countercomplaint pattern. Whereas a satisfied couple might take only a few passes at the destructive complaint/countercomplaint cycle, dissatisfied couples kept hashing out the complaints, forcing themselves into a deeper and deeper negativity spiral. Finally, distressed couples are more inclined to form negative attributions toward the partner during

conflict and attribute behavior to internal factors, whereas nondistressed couples were more likely to attribute behavior to external factors. For example, if John and Jane are a distressed couple, they are more likely to attribute blame to one another, whereas if they are a nondistressed couple, they are more likely to attribute behaviors to the situation at hand.

Conclusion

Numerous conclusions can be gleaned from the aforementioned findings. First, it is important to note that the findings reviewed here are not exhaustive. Second, it is important to emphasize that the majority of the research presented here focuses on marital couples. Third, and as noted earlier, it must be kept in mind that some of the past gender and sex research might be somewhat in error as reliability and validity issues exist. Fourth, it is necessary to note that the majority of the research presented here was conducted in the United States. Surely, some cultural differences exist in relational ideologies and communication patterns. Nevertheless, certain noteworthy patterns do exist in the research findings that speak to sex and gender differences and similarities as well as what couple communication patterns contribute to satisfied and dissatisfied relationships.

What is particularly salient about work done on couple communication patterns is that awareness is being increased about demonstrable patterns that work and do not work in close, personal relationships. Indeed, how individuals communicate in their close personal relationships holds direct implications for individuals' personal and relational well-being. Of value in the extant research on couple communication patterns and relational satisfaction is that noticeable learned patterns can be unlearned by partners in dissatisfied and distressed relationships if the desire exists to better the relationship.

Meaning-Making

A primary family task is *meaning-making*. Communication is the process by which family members create meanings, share them with the rest of the world, and eventually develop their own relational culture or shared reality. Indicators of family meaning include language patterns, stories, rituals, and rules.

Family meanings are developed as members interpret behaviors through communication. Comments such as "I was only kidding when I said that" or "Yelling is just a way of getting rid of stress" serve to create a shared reality. Nicknames, nonverbal codes, inside jokes, shared references, and unique terminology separate members from non-members.

Stories, common sources of family meanings, bring the past into the present, constructing a common history and convey messages to present generations about what is valued. Narratives distill unique family experiences while answering members' questions such as, how did this family come to be? Will the family stand behind its members? What does it mean to be a [family name]? In addition, the performance of family stories—who tells and who hears the story, and how stories are told— contributes to meanings. For example, storytelling research identifies three couple types through their performative style: *connected couples* tell stories that include dialogue overlaps and mutual confirmation; *functional separate couples* demonstrate respect, validation, and support while telling individual stories; *dysfunctional couples* exhibit contradictions and disagreement (Dickson l995).

Rituals serve to develop and reflect a family's sense of itself. A family ritual is "a symbolic form of communication that, owing to the satisfaction that family members experience through the repetition, is acted out in a systematic fashion over time" (Wolin and Bennett l984, p. 401). Marital rituals include time for togetherness, idiosyncratic actions, intimacy expressions, or daily routines which serve to

maintain the relationship and signal coupleness to the outside world (Bruess and Pearson l995). Family rituals develop around vacations, dinnertime, or bedtime, as well as celebrations of holidays, birthdays, or cultural events.

Certain patterns, based on "shoulds" and "oughts," evolve into family rules that serve to coordinate meanings among family members. Families develop communication rules: shared understandings of what communication means and what behaviors are appropriate in various situations (Wood l997). Rules may be explicitly stated ("Do not swear") or implicitly emerge through multiple interactions ("Don't tell Mom about anything Dad's new wife bought us"). Family communication rules tell members what can be talked about, in what ways, and who is allowed to hear the talk. Frequently rules serve to protect secrets and establish and maintain family boundaries; families with an alcoholic member typically adhere to the communication rule "Don't talk about Dad's drinking."

Partnerships and family dyads are maintained as members manage competing needs and obligations, coordinate their activities, introduce pleasure into their relationship, and build a place in which to nurture the relationships. Dialectical theory, which addresses contradictions and oppositions, is useful in examining these predictable relational tensions. Communication scholars identify a range of possible dialectical tensions including (l) autonomy-connection, or the desire to be independent while wishing to integrate with another person; (2) openness-closeness, or the desire to be expressive and disclosive and to be closed and private; and (3) predictability-novelty or the desire for sameness and constancy while also desiring stimulation and change. (Baxter 1990; Baxter and Montgomery l996). Partners may each feel similar pressure to be independent and connected; a parent and teenager may wish to be close and have an open relationship, but also to protect areas of privacy. One stepfamily dialectical dilemma involves managing the voluntary marital relationship and the involuntary stepparent-stepchild relationship (Cissna, Cox, and Bochner 1990). The tensions are ongoing, and partners and family members work to manage them strategically over the life of their relationship.

Intimacy

Couple and family intimacy reflects many similarities. Marital intimacy involves the following characteristics: (1) a close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship; (2) a detailed and deep knowledge and understanding from close personal connection or familiar experience; and (3) sexual relations (Feldman l979).

With the exception of sexual relations, these characteristics may be applied to all family relationships, understanding that intimacy is much different between partners than between children and parents or young siblings due to their developmental stages.

Talk, including confirmation and positivity, self-disclosure, and sexual communication, contributes to intimacy development. Its function varies with the unique multigenerational familial system, its ethnic heritage, and the maturity of its members.

Talk provides symbolic evidence of the connections among communicators while strengthening those connections. For example, time spent in debriefing conversations, when couples inform each other about events, thoughts, and emotions they experienced while apart, is positively associated with relational satisfaction (Vangelisti and Banski l993). Confirmation messages recognize another person's existence, respond relevantly to the other's communication, accept the other's way of experiencing life, and suggest a willingness to become involved with the other. Positivity includes displaying interest, affection, caring, acceptance, empathy, and joy. Based on a review of his research with hundreds of couples, John

Gottman (1994b) maintains that stable couples exhibit in a 5:1 positivity to negativity ratio. (Negativity consists of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, withdrawal, loneliness, and isolation.) These kinds of talk lay the connecting groundwork for long-term, intimate familial ties.

Self-disclosure, or voluntarily sharing personal and private information with another, serves to deepen relationships. Disclosure about self is complex and difficult, and involves risk on the part of the discloser and a willingness to accept such disclosure on the part of the other. High mutual self-disclosure is usually associated with voluntary adult relationships, such as couples or extended family, and is characterized by trust, confirmation, and affection, and is influenced by ethnic and family of origin patterns. Discussions between parents and younger children, given differences in developmental stages, seldom include mutual disclosure. High levels of self-disclosure of negative feelings about the other may occur at points in familial relationships resulting in conflict and anger. In most families, boundary management is an ongoing processes. Family members must continuously decide which feelings and thoughts they are willing to share: the cost is personal vulnerability. Relational boundary management is achieved by developing, using, and coordinating rules and managing relational turbulence when boundaries are invaded (Petronio 2000). Some cautions about unrestrained self-disclosure need to be considered, since it can be destructive or manipulative (Wilder and Collins 1994). Selective, rather than total, self-disclosure contributes to intimacy development in partner and parent-child relationships.

Sexuality is linked directly to communication at both the partner and family level. Sexual attitudes and behavior may be viewed as a topic of communication, a form of communication, and a contributing factor to relational intimacy and satisfaction. Family sex communication includes ". . . a composite of a few direct, sometimes forceful, verbal messages; a lot of indirect verbal messages; a background mosaic of innumerable nonverbal messages" (Warren 1992, p. 130). How a family encourages or discourages talk about issues such as pregnancy, birth control, masturbation, menstrual cycles, the initial sexual encounters of adolescents, and the sexual intimacy of the parents is related to communication and sexuality rules (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Bochner 1990).

Family approaches to sexuality range along a continuum from sexually neglectful to sexually healthy to sexually abusive (Maddock 1989). In some "sexually neglectful" families, sex is seldom mentioned or it is discussed so abstractly that a direct connection is not made between the topic and the personal experience of family members. Sexually abusive families are typically closed and emotionally inexpressive with boundary confusion between members and generations. Sexually healthy families are characterized by respect for both genders, developmentally appropriate boundaries, effective and flexible communication patterns that support intimacy, and a shared system of culturally relevant sexual values and meanings.

Each partner's background influences sexual encounters, as does the partner's sexual identity. Couples establish their own patterns of sexual activity early in the relationship, and these patterns typically continue throughout the relationship (Specher and McKinney 1994). Open communication becomes critical, since a good sexual relationship depends on what is satisfying to each partner. A couple that cannot communicate effectively about many areas of their life will have difficulty developing effective communication about their sexual life because "Communication in the bedroom starts in other rooms" (Schwartz 1994, p. 74).

Conflict

Family conflict patterns become repetitive and predictable. A stage model for analyzing the frequently recurring family conflict patterns lists prior conditions, frustration awareness, active conflict, solution or non-solution, follow-up, and resolution stage (Galvin and Brommel 2000). Gottman (1994a) classifies

three couple types according to their styles of conflict interactions: validating, volatile, and conflict avoiders. Whereas validating partners respect one another's point of view on a variety of topics and strive toward compromise, volatile partners are emotionally expressive, comfortable with disagreement, and highly persuasive. Conflict avoiders abhor negative messages and strive to lessen potential conflicts by placating or deferring to one another. All three groups of stable couples exhibited a 5:1 positivity to negativity ratio.

Sometimes family conflict escalates to abuse. Abusive couples exhibit significantly more reciprocity in verbally aggressive exchanges than do distressed, non-abusive control groups (Sabourin, Infante, and Rudd 1990). For the majority of couples that use verbal aggression, conflict does not lead to physical aggression although some physically aggressive couples view verbal aggression as a catalyst for their physical acts (Roloff 1996).

Parent-parent and parent-child abuse become a part of role relationships; in physically combative families such behaviors occur frequently enough for children, husbands, wives, or lovers to become accustomed to it. Family aggression relates to gender and age: boys receive more verbal aggression than girls and both experience more of it after age six (Vissing and Baily 1996). Non-abusive mothers introduce more topics into discussions, give more verbal and nonverbal instructions, and use more signs of verbal and nonverbal affection. Non-abusive parents use more time-outs, privilege denials, and explanation of consequences to discipline their children (Wilson and Whipple 1995).

Technology and Families

Technological developments are impacting family communication patterns. Technology, particularly the Internet, is altering hierarchical communication structures in many families as youngsters gain information and skills which many parents do not possess. The Internet weakens parental supervision of media use; parents report concerns of child safety, such as Internet strangers, and concerns about content such as pornography, violence, and hate speech (Wartella and Jennings 2001). Working parents and working partners are increasingly technology-dependent as family members use e-mail, cell phones, and other new media to stay in touch. Non-custodial parents often maintain relationships with children via e-mail as do parents or partners who travel frequently.

More family members are creating family websites and family listservs, researching family history, sharing photos, and rekindling Internet relationships with long-lost relatives. Whereas e-mail has increased communication among some family members, it is used as a substitute for face-to-face conversation among others. Many siblings stay in touch more frequently with e-mail than with telephones. There appear to be some gender differences in the use of electronic messages to maintain family ties (PEW Internet and American Life Project 2000)—women are more likely to use the Internet to rekindle relationships with relatives who have been out of contact for a long time. Because teens frequently teach other family members how to use the Internet, it creates a generational reversal which may enhance parent-child relationships or exacerbate conflicts (PEW Internet and American Life Project 2001).

Enrichment

Communication strategies are valuable as family members aim for increased satisfaction, commitment, and stability. Many people enter marriage and parenthood naïvely assuming that this wonderful relationship will endure indefinitely without much effort. Yet significant amounts of thought, time, and energy need to be invested to sustain a well-functioning family.

Sometimes family members make relational changes on their own through discussing, listening, and trying new behaviors; frequently this is insufficient to effect desired changes (Galvin and Brommel 2000). Couples or family members may participate in enrichment programs designed to improve communication; others decide to enter marital or family therapy when family life is painful.

The study of family communication is developing rapidly. Recent research has focussed on race and ethnicity (Socha and Diggs 1999; Gudykunst and Lee 2001), gay and lesbian families (West and Turner 1995), and work/family interface issues (Golden 2000). Given the complexity and power of communication patterns, and their impact on current and future generations, the importance of this research cannot be underestimated.

REFERENCE

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