Communication, Dyadic/Marital

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Even in the early twenty-first century, when the common belief is that the marriage institution is in an ongoing constant decline, the amount of research conducted on marriage has never been greater. Scholars are still interested in understanding marital relationships for two main reasons. First, marriage continues to constitute a strong societal expectation, with studies and surveys in the United States and Europe consistently showing that most young people believe they will get married, a finding reinforced by statistics that indicate that most, indeed, do. Second, the nature of the marital relationship is said to have a variety of significant influences on the entire family structure and its members’ well-being, especially for the partners themselves and for children in the family. Because marriage is still a normative social institution, and because it has an important impact on individual family members, exploring what makes some marital relationships satisfying and stable, whereas others are dissatisfaction and turbulent, has been an important inquiry undertaken by scholars, especially in light of the increasing numbers of divorce cases around the world.

Since the 1970s, researchers have studied communication between spouses to explore its role in shaping and predicting marital quality and functioning. Parting from an individual-oriented perspective, where individual characteristics were considered central in understanding marital relationships, researchers have examined communication dynamics in marriage, believing that spouses’ daily interactions constitute and reflect the gist of the marital relationship. Thus, instead of exploring personality traits, demographic factors, and individual psychological processes as predictors of marital success, research on marital relationships has increasingly focused on the role communication plays in reflecting and shaping the nature of the dynamics between spouses and the outcomes they predict for marriage and for each partner. That research points to certain communication behaviors as being associated with marital success, and to other marital interaction patterns that are associated with decreased marital relationship quality and spouses’ negative evaluation of their relationship.

Communication, which in the context of marriage the mechanisms through which married partners relate to each other, can reflect, as well as dynamically shape, the relationship between spouses. Two communicative dimensions can be identified as the principles for organizing and understanding marital interaction – namely, communication of responsiveness and communication of control. Simply put, it can be said that communication of responsiveness is delivered with and reflects positive affect in marital interaction, and communication of control is conducted with and demonstrates negative affect. When partners employ responsive communication with their spouse, they demonstrate that they feel close and intimate toward their partner and, at the same time, actively promote supportive and affective relationship dynamics. When, on the other hand, partners use controlling communication, they shape the interaction climate around power struggles and demandingness.
and construct relational distance and distress. Married couples that rely cumulatively and mostly on positive, responsive communication report high levels of relationship satisfaction and marital commitment, whereas couples that employ mainly negative, controlling communication in their interaction tend to experience frequent marital discord and distress. Thus, a substantial literature on marital communication generally shows that “happily” married couples communicate in significantly different ways from “unhappily” married couples. Specifically, communication behaviors that express responsiveness and closeness are generally linked to increased marital success. On the other hand, communication behaviors that demonstrate and reflect control and power in conflict interactions characterize distressed couples.

In terms of the various communication behaviors that express responsiveness and advance intimacy and affection among spouses, research highlights the so-called small, routine behaviors that are employed by married partners. In a decade review of marital research in the 1990s, Gottman and Notarius (2002) indicated that most of the literature on marital dynamics had explored spousal conflict processes. They then called for more scholarly work that would focus on positive affect in marital communication dynamics due to the important contribution such affectional processes make to marital relationships. Indeed, in a review of marital research in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Fincham and Beach (2010) indicated that, during these years, scholars have considered the role of positive affect in marriage more than at any other time before. The increased interest in the study of responsive communication has stemmed from the scholarly recognition of this process as a core mechanism that promotes a positive climate in marriage. Thus, scholars have investigated ways in which partners show positive affect of closeness, love, and care for each other. These include such communication behaviors as verbal expressions of closeness and support, nonverbal and physical expressions of intimacy and affection, self-disclosure, and, as described by Noller and Fitzpatrick (1993), material evidence for love (e.g., giving gifts) as well as nonmaterial evidence for love (e.g., spending time together in joint activities).

**Verbal expressions of closeness and support** include verbal demonstrations of affection and assurances. Empirical findings point to the importance of verbal expressions that are perceived by partners as genuine, such as “I love you,” “I am here for you,” and “we are in this together,” in enhancing marital satisfaction. Moreover, studies show that, during potentially conflictual spousal discussions, verbal expressions are particularly predictive of positive marital outcomes, such as perceptions of intimate safety in the relationship and marital stability. **Nonverbal and physical expressions of intimacy and affection** are strongly linked to marital satisfaction, probably due to their ability to demonstrate relational involvement and to create a sense of care during marital interactions, which, in turn, promote a sense of togetherness. Indeed, satisfied couples tend to incorporate such nonverbal behaviors as long eye contact, genuine smiles and laughs, and a relatively close interpersonal distance with their partner during interaction. Such couples also report increased physical intimacy, such as holding hands, kissing, and routine sexual intercourse. On the other hand, distressed couples frequently employ facial expressions of fear, anger, contempt, and disgust during marital interactions, which, in turn, are associated both with spouses’ perceptions of their marital relationship as poor and with dissolution of the marriage. **Self-disclosure** refers to the intentional sharing of personal and intimate information with another person.
In romantic relationships, self-disclosure has been described as a reciprocating mechanism where both partners are expected to mutually share such information with each other. Such a two-way process is said to increase understanding and emotional intimacy. Indeed, studies have found that nondistressed, satisfied married couples show more self-disclosures in their communication during discussions related to relational issues. Moreover, happily married couples spend more time “debriefing” each other about the events of the day than distressed couples. Material and nonmaterial evidence of love refer primarily to couples’ ways of maintaining their intimate partnership through romantic gestures, spousal rituals, and joint activities (Noller and Fitzpatrick 1993). Both material evidence (e.g., exchanging gifts) and nonmaterial evidence (e.g., celebrating the couple’s anniversary) of love promote a sense of closeness and togetherness in that they actively bond spouses and create a sense of a partnership that relies on and is characterized by support, involvement, and an effort to do things for one another. In this context, couples who spend time together in joint activities and spousal rituals enhance the number of opportunities they have for meaningful, enjoyable experiences together and the quality of such experiences. The power of communication that constitutes evidence of love stems from its ability to demonstrate how important these acts are and the symbolic significance these acts hold for couples.

Unlike responsive communication, communication behaviors of control are often employed when spouses need to manage a disagreement. Specifically, communication of control reflects attempts by spouses to change each other’s perspectives, feelings, or behavior. As such, communication behaviors of control are most salient within the context of marital conflict. Marital conflict and marital control have been the most studied communication processes in the marital literature; evidence has indicated that specific aspects of couples’ communication around conflict-laden topics are associated with, and predictive of, many marital outcomes. Here, again, research points to a difference between distressed and nondistressed couples in terms of the communication practices they employ in managing their disagreement. Generally, that research has shown that, whereas satisfied couples rely more on constructive communication when managing disagreements, dissatisfied couples employ destructive communication that is characterized by negative affect to conduct conflict. Whereas, naturally, all couples may experience disagreement where each individual has his/her own view on a variety of subjects and topics, such as finance, household chores, or childrearing issues, the literature on marital conflict and marital control highlights patterns of communication behavior that characterize distressed couples and explains the dynamics in dissatisfying marital relationships. In this sense, research shows that it is how spouses negotiate conflict rather than what they disagree about that predicts marital relationship dynamics and outcomes.

One influential study that strongly highlights the significant role of communication patterns in predicting marital dissolution is Gottman’s (1994; 1999) longitudinal study on divorce. In that research, Gottman showed that the best predictor of marriage dissolution is the presence of four communication patterns in marital conflict. Termed the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” these communication patterns are characterized by negative affect: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. These four interaction patterns are destructive to the relationship, and each reflects and advances marital discord and is characterized by verbal, as well as nonverbal, communication cues. First, complaint/criticism refers to a pattern where
spouses raise problems in a blaming tone, often including general terms such as "you always" or "you never." Second, **defensiveness** refers to a spouse denying any responsibility for improper behavior. Third, when spouses demonstrate **contempt** toward their partner, they send a message of hostility, mocking and insulting their spouse. Finally, a spouse who **stonewalls** withdraws from the marital interaction by actively not talking or responding, avoiding eye contact, and employing hollow facial expressions. By avoiding emotional involvement, that spouse creates a disturbing distance between him/herself and the partner. Studies consistently show that demonstrating these four interactional patterns indicates a couple is experiencing critical marriage distress that will most probably result in marital separation.

In addition to Gottman’s four horsemen of the apocalypse, three main patterns are discussed in the literature: the existence of reciprocated negative behavior, the demand–withdraw interaction pattern, and the chilling effect. One common pattern of communication in distressed couples’ marital conflict is **reciprocated negative behavior**, which refers to the observation that distressed couples rely on negative rather than positive communication practices when attempting to resolve disagreements. These cycles of negative exchange usually start with one partner raising an issue in a way that involves negative affect, such as blame or criticism, followed by a response from the other spouse that is also delivered with negative affect, such as defensiveness, insult, or irritation. That initial interaction sequence evokes more negative responses from both partners, creating power struggles over who controls the interaction. The attempt to gain control over one’s partner and over the interaction creates a situation where expressions of negative affect cause the partners to cease to believe a resolution is possible. Studies indicate that such negative sequences are associated with marital distress, marital dissatisfaction, and marital dissolution. In the **demand–withdraw interaction pattern** (Christensen 1987), one spouse presents a demand, complaint, or criticism while the partner responds with withdrawal, avoidance, or passive inaction. This pattern of conflict management is said to be especially destructive to the marital relationship because it reflects neither interest nor involvement in the interaction and, further, sends a message of relational detachment. Studies show that, regardless of who is in the demand role and who is in the withdrawal role, the demand–withdraw interaction pattern characterizes distressed couples and is negatively correlated to both husbands’ and wives’ satisfaction. The **chilling effect** (Roloff and Cloven 1990; Cloven and Roloff 1993) describes a pattern where one partner withholds criticism or complaints to avoid confrontation due to fear of a negative response from his/her spouse and destructive outcomes for the relationship. In such a pattern, one partner controls the interaction in that his/her potentially negative response to the spouse’s message shapes that partner’s decision to not reveal information that may promote confrontation. Research shows that couples who demonstrate this marital interaction pattern often report high levels of relational uncertainty and decreased marital quality.

In terms of **what** married couples disagree about – that is, the content level of the conflict rather than the way a couple manages the conflict – various topics have been studied. Most, if not all, of these themes have to do with spousal negotiation of roles in the relationship. Spousal differences in terms of their expectations about marital roles and behavioral manifestations of these expectations often spark conflicts between spouses. Marital roles refer to the perceptions of the spouses as to "who does what" (Cowan and Cowan 2000) in their shared lives.
Negotiation of roles often reflects spouses’ expectations about relational power and control in their marriage and can generate conflicts when these expectations, as well as actual behaviors based on these expectations (two aspects often intricately tied), are unmet or perceived as wrong. Scholars have been studying couples’ role arrangements for managing household tasks, financial management tasks, dual careers, and childrearing tasks. More specifically, division of household tasks is probably the most studied aspect of role negotiation in the marital dynamics literature. Research generally shows that, in most marriages, household tasks still tend to be treated as the wife’s responsibility. In marriages in which one of the spouses is more desiring of equality, unequal division of household labor may have negative consequences for spouses’ perceptions of their marital quality as the division of household work is ranked among the topics spouses report to most likely spark conflict in marital relationships. Indeed, studies show that inequity in household labor is strongly associated with both husbands’ and wives’ psychological distress, whereas couples who share tasks more equally report that they are more committed to and satisfied with their relationship. In terms of managing dual careers, the literature shows that the number of marriages in which both partners maintain careers has consistently increased since the 1990s in industrialized societies, forcing dual-career couples to face various challenges regarding their sometimes conflicting roles inside and outside the home. Such couples may demonstrate lower or higher levels of adjustment to balancing the demands at home and at their jobs, and their levels of adjustment are reflected in their marital interaction about this topic. In couples where both spouses show low levels of adjustment to their potentially conflicting demands inside and outside the home, marital conflicts regarding career are more frequent and tend to be characterized by negative communication. Finally, studies indicate that disagreements about childrearing and parenting practices are a common source of marital discord. Partners who have more disagreement about child-related issues experience more challenges in their co-parenting relationship, which is reflected in their marital interaction and, in turn, in decreased marital satisfaction. In sum, research on marital conflict and control suggests that it involves both behavioral aspects - namely, interaction sequences and communication patterns - and topical aspects - namely, perceptions on roles in the marriage. Studies have shown that satisfied married couples and dissatisfied married couples demonstrate different characteristics in both realms.

Although both responsive communication, delivered with positive affect and that reflects as well as promotes closeness and intimacy among couples, and controlling communication, which is characterized by destructive interactional behaviors that demonstrate marital discord and contribute to increased distance and dissatisfaction, each play an important role in marital dynamics, research suggests that it is the interaction between positive and negative affect that should be most prominently considered. In other words, all couples employ both aversive and supportive communication in their interaction, but marital satisfaction, adjustment, and stability are significantly higher in couples who demonstrate a high ratio of positive to negative communication. Looking at the findings and the empirical evidence that point to the importance of the delicate balance of responsive versus controlling marital communication, one important question arises: Are couples able to learn how to communicate in such a way that will enhance marital quality? According to an extensive body of research, marital education programs that focus on communication and
aim to improve interaction skills in couples to better balance positive and negative affect in their interaction are effective in improving marital relationships, although evidence points to at least two issues that need to be considered. First, albeit overall helpful for couples, such programs often produce only modest changes in the ways spouses communicate, and only for the short term. Because old habits die hard, it is very challenging for couples to sometimes dramatically reconstruct and reshape their communication dynamics, individually and together, and, thus, they often fall back to patterns of communication that, although destructive for their marriage, are familiar and thus employed by them. Second, education programs seem to work better for healthy, well-functioning married couples than for distressed couples. Studies show that, although marital communication skills training can help couples who experience ongoing marital problems in improving their relationship, nondistressed couples benefit more from such programs. Offering ways to maintain and improve communication skills that advance positive marital outcomes, such programs assist happily married couples to prevent a decline in marital satisfaction and quality. Nevertheless, in terms of the role played by communication in marital relationships, research does indicate that dynamically shaping and reshaping spousal interaction patterns can enhance positive outcomes for married couples, both distressed and nondistressed.

In sum, then, as a dynamic mechanism that both reflects and shapes marital relationship dynamics, communication has been at the core of research on marriage. Explaining marital outcomes, such as satisfaction, commitment, and stability, but also distress and divorce, interaction patterns in marriage have been explored to characterize communication of responsiveness and positive affect, which characterize happy couples, and communication of control and negative affect, which predict destructive marital outcomes. Looking at marital communication both in times of crises and in routine interaction advances the understanding of marital dynamics and has theoretical as well as practical implications for scholarly work and for therapists, counselors, and other professionals who work with couples.

SEE ALSO: Adjustment to Divorce (Spouses); Couples’ Counseling: Divorce Revolution; Marital Adjustment; Marital Conflict; Marital Power; Marital Quality; Marital Satisfaction; Marital Stability; Marital Success; Marriage and Relationship Education in the United States

REFERENCES


**FURTHER READING**