In A.L. Vangelisti (Ed.), (2004).
Handbook of family communication **(pp. 83-104).**
Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum

Communication in Marriage

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The most common reason for which people seek professional help is relationship problems (Veroff, Kulka & Douvan, 1981) and poor communication is the relationship problem most frequently identified by couples (Broderick, 1981). Marital therapists also rate dysfunctional communication as the most frequent and damaging problem they confront in their work with couples (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Not surprisingly, a great deal of research has been conducted on communication in marriage. For example, a PsychINFO (1967-2002) search using the keywords *marital* and *communication* yields 2,062 entries while the same search of Sociofile (1974-2002) turns up 416 entries. Similar searches using the keywords *love* and *marital* yield 501 and 213 references, respectively. Although we cannot read too much into these figures without a more detailed analysis of the content of the papers, it is probably safe to infer that the study of communication is a dominant theme in the marital literature.

The volume of work on communication in marriage presents a challenge to any writer attempting to provide an overview of the field, especially when it is noted that the work derives from several disciplines each with its own traditions and sub-disciplinary boundaries in the study of marital communication. This chapter does not therefore purport to provide a comprehensive review. Rather, it highlights some major findings and identifies new avenues for research. It is divided into three sections. The first provides a brief overview of the historical context in which marital communication research evolved, paying particular attention to the disciplines of communication and psychology. This serves as a springboard in identifying themes for the second section in which major findings are highlighted. The third section identifies research directions that need to be pursued to provide a more complete understanding of marital communication.

The Evolution of Research on Communication in Marriage

Although the study of marriage is an interdisciplinary endeavor, two disciplines have been at the forefront of research on marital communication. However, both of these disciplines, communication and psychology, are relative newcomers to the study of marital communication

with systematic work on marital communication in these disciplines emerging only later in the 1900s. Social reform efforts to combat the deleterious effects of adverse economic and social conditions on families at the end of the nineteenth century had ushered in a period of "emerging" science in family studies in the early 1900s (Jacob, 1987). An important element of this emerging science was the attention devoted to relationships between spouses and family members. Indeed, Burgess (1926) defined the family in terms of its interaction, namely, as "a unity of interacting personalities" (p. 5). However, it was not until 1959 that this definition gave rise to an empirical publication, Hess and Handel's (1959) qualitative analysis of internal family dynamics. Preceding this publication, research relating to marital communication emerged from large-scale surveys conducted primarily by sociologists to identify correlates of marital satisfaction, including communication. In reviewing 50 years of this research genre, Nye (1988, p. 315) concluded "early on [1939]…Burgess and Cottrell…took every individual characteristic they could think of and correlated it with marital success, producing an R of about .50 …Not a bad start, but we have not progressed much beyond that point in 50 years."

Communication

Research on family communication as a specialty area in the communication discipline was inaugurated by two dissertations (Fitzpatrick, 1976; Rogers, 1972) completed in the 1970s (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). By 1989 it had built sufficient momentum to be established as an interest group in the National Communication Association and shortly thereafter, in 1995, became a division of the Association. Although the specialty area of interpersonal communication predated these developments, research informed by it tended to use the marital dyad as one of several contexts in which to study constructs of interest (e.g., compliance–gaining, self-disclosure). In contrast, for family communication researchers family interaction is the central organizing construct of study and families (and constituent dyads) are not compared to other social units. Moreover, family communication tends to be viewed in terms of systems theory, an approach that has not been dominant in the area of interpersonal communication. This general

theoretical approach tends to be informed by two ways of understanding communication, the aforementioned interactionist perspective (in which relationships and meaning are constituted though interaction, Berger & Kelner, 1964) and the pragmatic perspective outlined in *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967).

These differences between interpersonal and family communication specialties have resulted in some fragmentation in the marital literature generated by communication scholars. This work, in turn is distinct from the literature generated by psychologists which reflects a rather different theoretical perspective and starting point.

Psychology

Systematic research on marriage in psychology emerged largely among clinical psychologists in response to the desire to better assist couples experiencing marital distress. The investigation of conflictual interaction assumed center stage as it was widely accepted that "distress results from couples' aversive and ineffectual response to conflict" (Koerner & Jacobson 1994, p. 208). In reaction to the prior reliance on self-report, heavy emphasis was placed on the observation of couple interaction with much of the research, that first began to emerge in the 1970s, focusing almost exclusively on describing the behavior that distinguished distressed from nondistressed couples. To the extent that attention was given to theory, social exchange theories and social learning theory dominated research generated in psychology.

Despite repeated acknowledgement of the value of a systems perspective (e.g., Emery, 1992) this framework has had a minimal impact on marital communication research in psychology. With the emergence of the field of "personal," "intimate" or "close" relationships (see Fincham, 1995; for overviews of the field see Hinde, 1997; Brehm, Miller, Perlman & Miller, 2002) social psychologists have also become more noticeable contributors to marital research. The dominant theoretical perspectives informing this research are social exchange theories and the interdependence framework (Kelly et al., 1983). As in communication, the contributions from psychology's sub-disciplines lack integration.

One can see that the study of communication in marriage has evolved from very diverse origins both within and across disciplines. The resulting literatures therefore represent a loosely sewn together patchwork quilt rather than an evenly spun blanket. This will become more apparent as we turn to highlight some of the major findings on marital communication.

Overview of Findings on Communication in Marriage

The presumed role of communication skill deficits in generating marital distress has led to a substantial research literature on the topography of communication behavior during marital conflict.

Communication Behaviors

Compared to nondistressed couples, distressed couples' problem-solving communications show more interruptions (Schaap, 1984), criticisms and complaining (Fichten & Wright, 1983; Revensdorf, Hahlweg, Schindler, & Vogel, 1984), negative solutions (e.g., "Let's just forget the whole thing"; Weiss & Tolman, 1990), and fewer self-disclosures and positive suggestions (Birchler et al., 1984; Margolin, Burman, & John, 1989). In addition, distressed couples show less pinpointing and verbalize problems in a critical way (Birchler et al., 1984; Margolin & Wampold, 1981) suggesting that they have poor message production skills.

Nonverbal communication is more strongly related to relationship satisfaction than verbal communication (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977; Krokoff, 1987; Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1987) and when couples are instructed to act as if they are happy, independent observers can still reliably distinguish happy from unhappy couples on the basis of nonverbal communication (Vincent, Friedman, Nugent, & Messerly, 1979). Indeed, when one studies the interactions of happy couples, what stands out are the pleasurable emotions, the smiles, laughs, affection, and warmth. Similarly, it is the agitation, tears, distress, anger, and coldness in distressed couples that are often immediately evident. For example, Birchler, Weiss, and Vincent (1975) found that distressed couples behaved with less humor, assent, smiling, and laughter than happy couples (see also Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Also characteristic of distressed couples is

high levels of fear, anger, disgust, and sadness as well as withdrawal (e.g., maintaining silence, looking away, leaving the room), and body postures that are stiff, closed, and turned away from the partner (Weiss & Heyman 1997).

Communication Patterns

With regard to sequences of communication behavior, the "signature" of distressed couple communication is the existence of reciprocated negative behavior. Indeed, escalating, negative sequences during conflict are associated with marital distress and both frequency and sequences of negative behavior are more pronounced in couples where physical aggression is found (e.g., Burman et al. 1992; Gottman, 1994). In fact, one of the greatest challenges for couples locked into negative exchanges is to find an adaptive way of exiting from such cycles (Gottman, 1998). This is usually attempted through responses designed to repair the interaction (e.g., metacommunication, "You're not listening to me") that are typically delivered with negative affect (e.g., irritation, sadness). Distressed couples tend to respond to the negative affect thereby continuing the cycle. This makes their interactions more structured and predictable. In contrast, nondistressed couples appear to be more responsive to the repair attempt and are thereby able to exit from negative exchanges early on. For example, a spouse may respond to "Please, you're not letting me finish" with "Sorry… please finish what you were saying." Their interaction therefore appears more random and less predicable (Gottman, 1979).

Rogers and her colleagues have used a relational control model, based on a pragmatic theoretical perspective, to study dyadic communication (e.g., Millar, Rogers & Courtright, 1979, Millar & Rogers, 1988). The focus of their work has been on contiguous pairs of control moves (transacts). Dominance scores (number of one-up moves responded to with one-down moves by spouse) were used to compute dominance ratios (one spouse's score divided by the other's score) that were shown to predict level of understanding. That is, the clearer the dominance hierarchy, the less likely that each spouse was to know the behaviors expected of him or her by the other. The dominance ratio was also related to husbands' frequency of feeling understood by the wife

and his satisfaction with several communication behaviors (e.g., the couple's ability to talk things out, the ease with which complaints and problems are discussed). Couples in relationships characterized by complementary transacts (one spouse's message asserts control and other spouse's message accepts assertion or vice versa) are more satisfied than those in relationships where symmetrical transacts (both spouses make the same control moves) dominate (Rogers-Millar & Millar, 1979).

A third key communication pattern commonly observed in distressed couples is that one spouse pressures the other with demands, complaints, and criticisms, while the partner withdraws with defensiveness and passive inaction. This interaction pattern is commonly referred to as the demand/withdraw pattern (Christensen, 1987, 1988). Building on a series of early studies on self-reported demand/withdraw patterns (Christensen, 1987, 1988; Christensen & Shenk, 1991), Christensen and Heavey (1990) videotaped interactions of families discussing a topic chosen by each spouse. Topics were related to parenting behavior in each spouse. It was found that frequency of demands by the female partner and withdrawal by the male partner were negatively related to marital satisfaction. That female-demand and male-withdrawal behaviors are associated with low marital satisfaction is consistent with several other studies of gender differences in communication. In particular, women display more negative affect and behavior than do men (Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Notarius & Johnson, 1982; Schaap, 1982), and male partners make more statements suggestive of withdrawal, such as not responding and making irrelevant comments (Schaap, 1982; Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988).

However, inferring reliable gender differences in demand-withdraw patterns would be premature as who withdraws may vary according to which partner desires change (Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). To clarify this issue, Heavey, Christensen, and Malamuth (1995) explored how demand/withdraw patterns vary according to which partner's problem issue was discussed. When discussing the husband's issue, there were no systematic differences in the roles taken by each spouse. However when discussing the wife's issue, women were much more likely

to be demanding and men more likely to be withdrawing than the reverse. Similarly, Klinetob and Smith (1996) found that demand-withdraw patterns switch polarity when the topics chosen for discussion clearly focus on an issue of change for each partner. These results provide good evidence that although men and women tend to play different roles in typical dysfunctional communications, these roles are sensitive to context and are particularly sensitive to whose issue is under discussion.

Finally, conflict communication patterns seem to be relatively stable over time (e.g., Noller et al., 1994) and to predict changes in marital satisfaction and marital stability (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For example, Gottman et al. (1998) found that active listening, anger, and negative affect reciprocity among newlyweds predicted marital satisfaction and stability six years later.

In summary, there is greater net negativity, reciprocity of negative behavior, more sustained negative interaction, and escalation of negative interactions among distressed couples than among non-distressed couples. Moreover, communication behavior seems to be relatively stable over time (for reviews see Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Kelly, Fincham & Beach, 2002; Weiss & Heyman, 1990, 1997).

Variation by Couple Type

Reflecting scholars belief that categorization of marriages into different types will lead to better understanding of marital communication, numerous typologies of marriage have been proposed (e.g., Cuber & Haroff, 1965; Olson, 1981). Although intuitive, logical and empirical approaches have been used to derive typologies, it is the last mentioned that have shown the most promise. Among empirically derived typologies (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Johnson, Gaines & Levinger, 1992) Fitzpatrick's (1988) classification stands out as both the most thoroughly investigated and most promising.

Based on a content analysis of extant studies, Fitzpatrick set out to assess the essential dimensions of married life. The resulting Relational Dimensions Instrument (RDI) yielded 8

dimensions (*sharing, traditionalism*, *uncertainty*, assertiveness, temporal regulation, *conflict avoidance*, undifferentiated space and autonomy), four of which proved important in classifying couples (those in italics) into three types. Couples that are classified as traditionals hold conventional values, value stability over spontaneity, are highly interdependent showing a high degree of sharing and companionship in marriage and do not avoid conflict. Independents differ from traditionals by holding unconventional values believing that marriage should not constrain their individual freedoms. Separates appear to hold opposing ideological views simultaneously supporting the values of traditionals and independents but keep a psychological distance from the spouse and avoid conflict. About 60% of couples agree as to their marital type with the remainder falling into six possible mixed-type categories.

The couple types predict a number of communication outcomes that cannot be predicted from either spouse's type alone. Specifically, independent couples self disclose to their spouses more than traditionals who, in turn, self-disclose more than separates. Power moves during conflict discussions also differ across couple types; in contrast to other types, separates do not engage in competitive, symmetrical transacts. In addition, traditionals display more conciliatory messages and less confrontation than expected by chance (possibly reflecting their 'sweeping problems under the rug') while separates are more confrontational than expected by chance. As regards affect, the types do not differ in the positive affect they communicate but do differ in neutral and negative affect; independents show significantly less neutral nonverbal behavior and significantly more negative affect during conflict. Finally, separates exhibit the most compliance communications (see Fitzpatrick 1988).

The Role of Social Perception

Both communication scholars (see Burleson, 1992) and psychologists (see Fincham & Beach, 2000) have emphasized the importance of social perception in understanding marital communication. A growing body of research supports this view. For example, there is increasing evidence that explanations or attributions for partner behavior are related to less effective

problem-solving communication (Bradbury & Fincham 1992), more negative communication during problem solving and support giving tasks (Bradbury et al., 1996, Miller & Bradbury 1995), and to specific affects (whining and anger) displayed during problem solving (Fincham & Bradbury 1992). As regards communication patterns, wives' attributions are related to the tendency to reciprocate negative partner behavior (e.g. Bradbury & Fincham 1992, Miller & Bradbury 1995). The partialling out of marital satisfaction from these relations shows that they do not simply reflect the spouse's sentiment towards the marriage (Bradbury et al., 1996). Finally, manipulating attributions for a negative partner behavior influenced distressed spouses' subsequent communication towards the partner (Fincham & Bradbury 1988).

Building on an important theoretical statement by Doherty (1981a,b) there is also evidence that efficacy expectations or the spouse's belief that she or he can execute the behaviors needed to negotiate a resolution of couple conflicts may determine a couple's persistence in conflict resolution discussions, the styles employed in conflict resolution, and their willingness to engage in discussion of marital problems (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Fincham, Bradbury, & Grych, 1990; Notarius & Vanzetti, 1983). There is also some evidence that efficacy beliefs may mediate the relation between attributions and marital outcomes (Fincham et al., 2000).

Finally, a provocative set of findings has emerged for a nonconscious process, the accessibility of partner evaluations typically assessed as the speed (in milliseconds) with which a spouse makes an evaluative judgment of the partner. Specifically, the cognitive accessibility of evaluative judgments of the spouse moderates the relation between marital satisfaction and communication behavior such that stronger associations are found for spouses with more accessible judgments (Fincham & Beach, 1999a). Such findings suggest that high accessibility should lead to more stable satisfaction over time (top-down processing occurs) relative to low accessibility (bottom-up processing occurs), an implication that is consistent with data collected over 18 months of marriage (Fincham et al., 1997). Thus, it may be necessary to revisit many of

the communication behaviors correlated with marital satisfaction to determine whether there is a differential association for spouses characterized by high and low accessibility.

Critique

What we know about marital communication is necessarily a function of how we have studied the phenomenon. This points to several factors that limit what we know about marital communication. First, and perhaps most obviously, most of our findings about marital communication are based on laboratory interactions. Do observations of communication in the artificial setting of the laboratory yield samples of typical communication behavior? This is a particularly important question in view of findings showing that couple communication varies according to contextual factors. For example, diary studies illustrate that stressful marital interactions occur more frequently in couples' homes on days of high general life stress, and at times and places associated with multiple competing demands (e.g., Halford, Gravestock, Lowe, & Scheldt, 1992). Similarly, Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler and Wethington (1989) found that arguments at work were related to marital arguments, a finding consistent with the association observed between problem-solving communication and the occurrence of stressful life events (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997). Although couples undoubtedly bring some life stressors into the laboratory, we may be losing important information by studying communication skills outside the natural ecology of couple interaction. It is therefore noteworthy that couples themselves report that laboratory interactions are reminiscent of their typical interactions (Margolin, John, & Gleberman, 1989) and that there is some evidence to show an association between communication in the laboratory and in the home (Kelly & Halford, 1995; Krokoff, Gottman, & Hass, 1989).

Second, in the absence of attempts to study goals in the marital literature (see Fincham & Beach, 1999b), it is difficult to distinguish communication behavior from communication skills. Communication skills refer to the ability to realize communicative goals during the course of interaction whereas communication behavior may be thought of as verbal and nonverbal behavior

occurring when a couple is interacting (Burleson & Denton, 1997). Although the problem-solving/conflict discussions that dominate research on marital communication may be a good operationalization of communicative behavior, they may not be a good measure of communication skills. Burleson and Denton persuasively argue that communicative behavior may say as much about the intent or motivation of participants as about communication skills. Hence a failed communication may reflect an unclear communication goal just as easily as it may reflect a lack of communication skills. Moreover, Jacobson and Christensen (1996) argue that observation codes are too often based on a value judgment of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' communication.

Finally, what we know about marital communication is necessarily limited by the focus on communication in conflict and problem-solving situations. McGonagle et al. (1992) collected data about the frequency of overt disagreements from an equal probability sample of 778 couples and found a modal response of once or twice a month. A subsample that kept diaries reported similar rates, and when contacted three years later, reported the same rate of disagreement. However, about 80% of the sample reported disagreements once a month or less. Thus we appear to have built our knowledge of marital communication on a relatively infrequent event. Infrequent events may be consequential for relationships (e.g., a one night stand) but whether problem solving communications are consequential (rather than reflecting existing characteristics of the marriage) is open to question as Karney and Bradbury (1995), in a meta-analysis, found very small effect sizes (r = -.06 to -.25) when using communication behavior to predict later spousal satisfaction. Whether problem-solving communication behavior is representative of communication in general remains an unanswered empirical question.

Towards a More Complete Understanding of Marital Communication

In light of the observations made thus far, it is apparent that there is a need to investigate communication in contexts other than problem solving or conflict discussions. Accordingly the next two sections each identify potentially important contexts in which to do so. However, a more

complete understanding requires consideration of the broader communication context, including factors external to the marriage. The third section therefore considers such factors.

Communication in the Contexts of Support Giving and Affectional Expression

Although support processes in marriage have been of interest for some time (e.g., Barker & Lemle, 1984; Coyne & DeLongis, 1986) only recently have methods been used that allow detailed investigation of potentially supportive transactions. For example, daily diary methods have helped clarify the operation of support in marriage; in a study of couples in which one spouse was preparing to take the bar exam, Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler (1998) showed that the examinees' distress did not rise as the exam drew near to the extent that the partner communicated increasing levels of support.

Observational methods for assessing the provision and receipt of supportive behaviors have also been developed (e.g., Cutrona, 1996) to code interactions where one spouse talks about a personal issue he or she would like to change and the other is asked to respond as she or he normally would. It appears that supportive spouse behavior is related to marital satisfaction, is more important than negative behavior in determining the perceived supportiveness of an interaction. Moreover, wives' supportive behavior predicts marital stress 12 months later while controlling for initial marital stress and depression (Cutrona 1996; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992, 1994; Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997). Importantly, in their study of newlyweds Pasch and Bradbury (1998) showed that, while behavior exhibited during conflict and support tasks tended to covary, their shared variance was small (<20%). Wives' supportive behaviors also predicted marital deterioration 24 months later independently of either partners' conflict behaviors and supportive behaviors moderated the association between conflict behavior and later marital deterioration with compromised conflict skills leading to greater risk of marital deterioration in the context of poor support communication (see also Carels & Baucom, 1999; Saitzyk, Floyd, & Kroll, 1997).

Research on affectional expression is similarly informative. Specifically, in the context of high levels of affectional expression between spouses, the inverse correlation between negative spouse behavior and marital satisfaction decreases significantly (Huston & Chorost, 1994). High levels of positivity in problem solving discussions also moderate the negative effect of disengagement on marital satisfaction 30 months later (Smith, Vivian & O'Leary, 1990). As regards communication patterns, Caughlin and Huston (2002) found that the interaction between the demand-withdraw pattern and affectional expression was a significant predictor of marital satisfaction; the demand-withdraw pattern was unrelated to marital satisfaction in the context of high affectional expression but the two variables were inversely related in the context of average or low affectional expression. .

Interestingly, research on communication in the context of support alerts us to the importance of support obtained by spouses outside the marriage for interpersonal processes within a marriage (Bryant & Conger, in press). For example, Julien, Markman, Leveille, Chartrand & Begin (1994) found that when extra-marital confidants were more supportive, wives were less distressed and closer to their husbands after the confiding interaction. However, before turning to the broader environment in which marital communication occurs, a much needed line of research is considered, communication in the context of relationship repair following a spousal transgression.

Communication in the Context of Relationship Repair Following a Spousal Transgression: Focus on Forgiveness

In marriage we voluntarily make ourselves most vulnerable to another human being by linking the realization of our needs, aspirations, and hopes to the goodwill of our spouse. Rendering ourselves vulnerable is a double-edged sword. It makes possible the profound sense of well-being that can be experienced in marriage. At the same time, the imperfection of any partner means that hurt or injury is inevitable, and when it occurs, the hurt is particularly poignant precisely because we have made ourselves vulnerable. How partners deal with this inevitable hurt

is critical to individual and relational well-being. One means of meeting this challenge is through forgiveness, a concept that has received remarkably little attention in science despite its pervasiveness across cultures and major religions (Worthington & Wade, 1999). In fact, spouses themselves acknowledge that the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and satisfaction (Fenell, 1993).

Although forgiveness is fast becoming a topic of inquiry in marital research (e.g., Coop-Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2000; Fincham, 2000; Fincham et al., 2001), understanding of its relation to communication is limited. There is evidence that for both hypothetical and actual partner transgressions a spouse's self-reported willingness to forgive is a significant predictor of the partner's psychological aggression (verbal aggression and nonverbal behaviors that are not directed at the partner's body) even after controlling for the satisfaction of both partners. In addition, there is evidence that forgiveness is multidimensional consisting of at least two dimensions, a negative dimension defined by retaliatory motivation and a positive dimension defined by benevolence motivation. Each of these to dimensions accounts for unique variance in partner reports of constructive communication independently of both spouses' marital satisfaction (Fincham & Beach, 2002, Study 2). Finally, among British couples in their third year of marriage, husbands' retaliatory motivation or unforgiveness was a significant predictor of wife reported ineffective arguing whereas wives' benevolence motivation or forgiveness predicted less husband reported ineffective arguing. In longer-term marriages in the USA, three forgiveness dimensions were identified: retaliation, avoidance and benevolence. Whereas wives' benevolence again predicted ineffective arguing, only husbands' avoidance predicted wives' reports of conflict. In each sample findings were independent of both spouses' marital satisfaction (Fincham, Beach & Davila, 2002).

A limitation of the above research is that it does not examine communication specifically in the context of forgiveness. However in a study of forgiveness narratives, many of which involved spouses, Kelly (1998) identified three forgiver strategies, direct, indirect and

conditional, by which forgiveness was mediated in a relationship. The majority were direct

strategies that involved the forgiver telling the transgressor that she or he understood or saying "I

forgive you." Indirect strategies, constituting 43% of responses, included use of humor,

diminishing the magnitude of the transgression (e.g., saying it was "no big deal"), nonverbal

displays of affection, returning to normal interaction patterns without explicit comment, and

implicit understanding.

  The importance of studying directly forgiveness transactions between spouses is matched

only by the challenge of doing so. The temptation to identify forgiveness with a specific

statement or an overt act (e.g. Hargave & Sells, 1997; Baumeister et al., 1998) is problematic.

Here is why. The verb "to forgive" is not performative. So, for example, to say "I promise" is to

make a promise even in the absence of any intention to do what is promised. But to say "I

forgive you" does not thereby constitute forgiveness even if one fully intends to forgive the

person addressed. As Horsburgh (1974) points out, the phrase "I'll try to forgive you" is

sufficient evidence to support this argument as "to try" cannot be used in conjunction with any

performative verb (e.g., "I'll try to promise"). By extension, a specific act does not constitute

forgiveness, though it might well be the first sign that a decision to forgive has been made.

This analysis uncovers something important about forgiveness – forgiveness is not achieved

immediately. Rather, the decision to forgive starts a difficult process that involves conquering

negative feelings and acting with good-will towards someone who has done us harm. It is this

process, set in motion by a decision to forgive, that makes statements like "I'm trying to forgive

you" meaningful.

  This creates particular challenges when a spouse offers a verbal statement of forgiveness.

The transgressing spouse is likely to experience the statement as performative and be puzzled,

annoyed, or angry when incompletely resolved feelings of resentment about the harm-doing

intrude upon subsequent discourse or behavior in the marriage. Statements of forgiveness are also

important for another reason: they can be bungled. Setting aside the strategic use of such

statements, genuinely motivated attempts to tell the partner that she or he is forgiven can easily be seen as a put down, a form of retaliation, and so on if unskillfully executed. Thus, they can lead to conflict and might themselves end up being a source of hurt.

The challenge for researchers is magnified by the fact that forgiveness behavior has no specific topography as it is the respectful, interpersonal behavior expected in everyday life that, in the context of injury, assumes the mantle of forgiveness (Downie, 1971). Notwithstanding these difficulties there is a glaring need for research on forgiveness transactions in marriage as there is little doubt that forgiveness constitutes an important relationship repair mechanism that leads to reconciliation between hitherto estranged spouses. At a very minimum, it is possible to study interactions where forgiveness is an explicit part of the discourse and identify the factors associated with communicative success and failure in such contexts.

Because a more complete understanding communication in marriage requires consideration of the broader communication context, it is considered next

The Broader Communication Context

Two different classes of factors are examined each of which helps shape the broader communication context: spouse's backgrounds and characteristics and the environmental influence on the marriage.

Spouses' backgrounds and characteristics. Evidence on the importance of communication for marital well-being leads naturally to questions about what each spouse brings to the relationship that predicts communication in the marriage. Interest in individual differences that might predict marital functioning have been subject to study since research on marriage first began. Notwithstanding the conclusion of some (e.g., Gottman, 1979; see also 1994, p. 87), that study of individual difference variables is not particularly informative for understanding marriage and should be eschewed in favor of studying relationship variables, there is growing evidence for the importance of spouses' backgrounds and characteristics for understanding marital communication.

As regards spouse background, for example, continuing work on intergenerational processes shows that parental divorce is associated with poorer communication observed among their offspring around the time of marriage (Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999) and that the association between parental divorce and offspring divorce is mediated by problematic behaviors, such as hostile, domineering and critical behaviors, among the offspring (Amato, 1996). Along similar lines, Gotlib, Lewinsohn, and Seeley (1998) have shown that individuals with a history of depression during adolescence are more likely to marry earlier and to experience higher rates of marital problems than individuals with other diagnoses or no diagnosis. Data of this kind demonstrate that a history of psychopathology is an important antecedent of marital functioning and, together with concurrent symptomatology, cannot be overlooked in models of marital functioning (see Beach, 2001). Individual risk factors extend beyond parental divorce and psychopathology, and there is growing evidence that such personal risk factors, evident prior to marriage, increase the likelihood of conflict and communication problems in the marriage.

Particularly informative in the area of spousal characteristics and relationship functioning is research on attachment, which aims to address questions about how the experience of relationships early in life are manifest in individuals' working models of relationships and subsequent interpersonal functioning in adulthood (Bowlby, 1969; see Simpson & Rholes, 1998). Kobak and Hazan (1991), for example, have shown that securely attached husbands were less rejecting and more supportive than insecurely attached husbands during problem solving and wives displayed more rejection during a problem-solving discussion to the extent that they described themselves as less reliant on their husband and described their husband as less psychologically available to them (also see Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999). Secure and ambivalently attached individuals report more self disclosure than avoidant individuals (Keelan, Dion & Dion, 1998) with securely attached persons showing the greatest range of self discourse across social situations. Feeney, Noller and Callan (1994) found that the attachment dimension of anxiety over relationships was related to destructive patterns of communication. In a later study,

they showed that the dimension, anxiety over abandonment, was related to the demand-withdraw communication pattern which served as a mediator of the association between attachment and couple violence (Roberts & Noller, 1998). Although the richness of theorizing about the role of attachment in adult relationships can sometimes exceed the data used to test key hypotheses, this area of inquiry provides strong, conceptually-guided evidence for how an overarching framework can integrate individual-level variables to further understanding of marital communication.

Although study of communication across different contexts and consideration of the background and characteristics that spouses bring to the communicative context will enhance our understanding of marital communication, it is also important to consider the broader environment in which the marriage is situated.

Broader environment influences on the marriage. The environment in which marriages are situated and the intersection between interior processes and external factors that impinge upon marriage are important to consider in painting a more textured picture of marital communication. In this regard, investigation of the economic and work environment comprises the largest body of research on environmental influences on marriage. Numerous self-report studies that outline links between job characteristics and marital outcomes (e.g., Hughes, Galinsky, & Morris, 1992) have been supplemented by observational or diary methods to specify the interactional processes affected by financial and work stress (see Menaghan, 1991). Using observational methods, Krokoff, Gottman, and Roy (1988) demonstrated that displays of negative affect, but not reciprocation of negative affect, were linked to occupational status in a sample of white- and blue-collar workers. And in perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of economic stress and marital functioning to date, Conger, Rueter, and Elder (1999), found support for a model whereby economic pressure in a sample of predominantly rural families at Time 1 predicted individual distress and observed marital conflict at Time 2, which in turn predicted marital distress at Time 3. The effect of economic pressure on emotional distress was greater in marriages poor in observed social support.

There is also a substantial body of work that addresses the impact of discrete, often traumatic events on marriage. However, there is a dearth of work in this area that focuses on communication, a deficit that clearly needs to be addressed. This is because, in the absence of external stressors, communication skills may have little impact on the marriage (Bradbury et al., 1998; Karney & Bradbury 1995). External stressors also may influence marital processes directly. In particular, nonmarital stressors may lead to more negative patterns of communication (e.g., Repetti, 1989), and lower relationship satisfaction (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury 1997). In addition, moderate levels of negative life events provide a context in which positive and negative partner communications can have a greater impact on the marriage (Tesser & Beach 1998). Level of negative life events may therefore moderate the effect of communication behaviors on subsequent marital satisfaction (see Cohan & Bradbury 1997).

Incorporation of life events assessments into examinations of marital communication is likely to enhance understanding. For example, Cohan and Bradbury (1997) propose that communication may influence the relationship between stressful events and marital satisfaction in three ways. First, they propose that communication may buffer, or moderate, the effect of stressful events on marital satisfaction (e.g., good communication may decrease the impact of stressful events whereas poor communication may magnify their effects). Second, they propose that communication may lead to enhanced marital satisfaction when stressful events occur (termed the "personal growth model of stress"). Third, they propose that communication may mediate the association of stressful events and marital satisfaction. That is, stressful events predict communication, and communication, in turn, predicts marital satisfaction. Two studies inform us of how stressful events, communication, and marital satisfaction are related. In a longitudinal study, Cohan and Bradbury (1997) administered checklists of stressful events, behavioral measures of verbal and nonverbal behavior during problem solving, and measures of marital satisfaction at two time-points 18 months apart. They found evidence that problem solving moderates the effect of life events. They also found evidence of a personal growth effect:

when wives expressed higher proportions of anger, reports of stressful events predicted increased marital satisfaction, suggesting that wives' anger was beneficial for personal and marital adjustment in the context of stressful life events. Perhaps anger expression (without contempt or whining) by the female partner constitutes a functional communication skill that signals high distress and engages the male partner in support and/or problem solving behaviors.

Bradbury, Rogge and Lawrence (2001) in considering the ecological niche of the couple, - their life events, family constellation, socioeconomic standing, and stressful circumstances - argue that it may be "at least as important to examine the struggle that exists between the couple …and the environment they inhabit as it is to examine the interpersonal struggles that are the focus of our work" (p.76). From this perspective, couple communication processes may reflect the adequacy of couple resources - personal, interpersonal, material - to cope with the environment in which they are situated. We continue to ignore this at our own risk. There is a growing need to map out the life events that are and are not influential for different couples and for different stages of marriage, to investigate how these events influence marital communication, to clarify how individuals and marriages may inadvertently generate stressful events, and to examine how spouses take life events into account when making evaluations of their relationship (see Tesser & Beach, 1998).

Conclusion

The topic of marital communication has received a considerable amount of attention from researchers across different disciplines and sub-disciplines. As noted, the disciplines of communication and psychology have been at the forefront of this work and each has approached the topic from a different perspective. Diversity of perspective also occurs across sub-areas within each discipline resulting in several relevant literatures that are at best only loosely connected. The need for research that integrates existing lines of inquiry is clearly evident.

The material reviewed in the chapter also shows that the overwhelming majority of the studies on marital communication have focused on communication in conflict situations, a

circumstance that, it turns out, is relatively infrequent in community samples (McGonagle et al.,

1992). Notwithstanding the large volume of work on the topic, it is therefore perhaps not

surprising that a number of important gaps remain in the literatures relevant to understanding

marital communication. Some, such as communication in the context of support and affectional

expression, are now receiving attention while others, such as communication in the context of

relationship repair, have yet to receive focused attention. However the lacunae in the literature are

not limited to specific communication contexts. A more complete understanding of marital

communication also requires consideration of the broader communication context, including

environmental factors that might be influencing individual spouses and/or the couple. Thus,

attention to such factors is also needed if our knowledge of marital communication is to change

from that resembling an undersized patchwork quilt to that of a larger, evenly spun blanket.

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