

MARITAL/FAMILY INTERACTION PATTERNS

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"...in good times and in bad...to have and to hold." Promises of presence and support undergird most marriage vows, although their actual meaning is determined by each couple. Contemporary couples expect to create a companionate marriage, a union with emotional connectedness at its core. Spouses are expected to be best friends or emotional partners as well as to serve instrumental or pragmatic roles. Expectations for a companionate marriage place extensive focus on communication, particularly nurturing or interaction. This emphasis on emotional substance in marriage appears to be related to enhanced well-being for both women and men but is especially important for women (Williams, 1988). Yet this expectation can place high pressure on men because their friendship history may not include this dimension. Women are more likely to have a greater history of emotionally based same-sex friendships, and may have different definitions for "best friend." The communication and gender related assumptions underlying such first marriages are (1) the couple serves as the architect of the system, (2) marital communication, the core of the family system, incorporates gender-based interaction patterns.

It appears there is a gendered approach to maintenance communication behaviors in marriages. Women talk more about and focus on relationship issues more often than men (Acitelli, 1992) and they are more aware of such issues (Ragsdale, 1996). In their study of couples Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999:267) found "Wives appear to be more positive, to remain open, to reaffirm the importance of the relationship, to do things together and to perform agreed upon tasks when they and their husbands feel more positively about their marriages." In contrast husbands' use of maintenance behaviors do not appear to be influenced by these feelings or perceptions of marital quality.

Researchers have found the pattern of female demand/husband withdraw to happen more frequently than husband demand/wife withdraw. Some have attributed this difference to women desiring more change in their husbands than husbands desiring change in their wives. However, Caughlin and Vangelisti (1999) found that husbands and wives did not differ on their desire for change in the other, even though female demand/husband withdraw was more frequent.

Wives are more likely to use a range of affective responses than are husbands. Studies of marital interaction during the discussion of relationship problems tend to underscore sex differences, with wives being more likely to express their negative feelings directly and to be more emotional. In general, wives appear to show a great range of affection while males demonstrate a lack of behavioral responses and expressivity (Noller and Fitzpatrick, 1990). Women tend to express a broader range of emotion in marriage with more tenderness, fear, and sadness. Many men tend to limit themselves to control anger, a reflection of sociocultural and family-of-origin patterns that discourage softer emotions. Overall, women tend to be more expressive and affectionate than men in marriages (Thompson and Walker, 1989). Gender differences in conflict style may have roots in socialization patterns and physiological responses to stress (Gottman, 1994).

Males and females may differ in the ways they use or value relational currencies, in their ways of sharing affection. For example, although during courtship men are willing to spend intimate time with women, after marriage they tend to spend less and less time talking to their wives, often considering doing chores around the house to be an adequate demonstration of caring and intimacy. Husbands feel mystified about what women want when they seek more contact in the marital relationship (McGoldrick, 1989b).

Many modern couples engage in debriefing conversations defined by Vangelisti and Banski as “the conversations that couples engage in to inform one another about the events, thoughts, and emotions they experienced during the day when they were separated” (1993: 149). These researchers found women felt their husbands spent significantly more time talking about their day than men thought women did. Women reported they talk more than men did, but each thought the other talked for longer periods of time.

Self-disclosure is a primary communication relational currency used to deepen and strengthen interpersonal relationships. Historically, spouses disclose more to each other than to anyone else, yet wives tend to disclose more than husbands. Earlier studies suggested younger, more educated couples may be moving toward a pattern of more equal and intimate disclosure by both sexes as disclosure is higher among men and women with egalitarian sex role attitudes (Peplau and Gordon, 1985).

The nature of the message affects marital self-disclosure. For example, face honoring, face compensating, and face neutral emotions are disclosed more frequently and preferred more than face threatening disclosure. In other words, messages that are positive, supportive, or neutral are seen as more desirable than messages that threaten the other’s identity. Overall, husbands and wives do not differ in their actual disclosure of emotions, but wives reported that they disclosed more emotions and that they value the disclosure of emotions more than husbands (Shimanoff, 1985). Recent reviews of the self-disclosure literature suggest that verbal emotional disclosure is a more feminine style of relating, whereas a more masculine style may value joint activities (Wood and Inman, 1993), and there is an inherent bias that self-disclosure is good (Dindia, 2000).

The conflict styles men and women bring into marriage frequently differ. Gottman (1994) reports common patterns in how the sexes interact in marriage. He suggests women are generally more comfortable in intimate relationships and “in marital relationships, women tend to be the emotional managers” (138) whereas men are more reluctant to delve into emotional issues. He attributes this in part to socialization as well as to physiological differences in managing emotional conflict.

The quality of marital communication affects marital satisfaction. William (1988) suggests the beneficial effects of marriage are tied to the quality of dyadic communication between spouses: “It appears that it is the affective quality of the marital relationship rather than the marriage per se that is more important for the well-being of individuals” (465). More recent work reports that husbands’ tendency to disclose and express themselves affects both husbands and wives relational satisfactions more than wives’ ability to be open (Vangelisti and Banski, 1993). About one-third of wives find it easy to raise issues of change with their husbands. These wives and their husbands report higher levels of marital satisfaction (McQuillan and Ferree, 1998). In addition, there appears to be a relationship between marital satisfaction and the husband’s ability to read nonverbal messages. In a study of married couples reading nonverbal clues, results indicated a positive relationship between marital satisfaction and nonverbal competence but only for husbands reading their wives’ nonverbal cues. In comparison to male strangers, the husbands of satisfied wives were more able to read their wives’ nonverbal cues, while the husbands of dissatisfied wives were less able to read them (Gottman and Porterfield, 1981). Fitzpatrick and Badzinski (1985) suggest a strong correlation between marital satisfaction and self-reports of communication in marriage; that is, the happily married believe they have good communication with their spouses. Finally Vangelisti and Banski’s study of couples’ debriefing conversation led them to conclude: “the amount of time that individuals reported talking with their spouses about the events in their day was positively and significantly associated with relational satisfaction” (1993: 153).

Marital satisfaction is also related to the types of attributions husbands and wives make about each other’s behavior. When compared to couples with higher marital satisfaction,

couples who report lower marital satisfaction tend to make attributions about the other's behavior that decrease the impact of positive events (i.e., "He only brought me flowers because he feels guilty about something.") and increase the impact of negative events (i.e., "She was late getting home because she knows that makes me mad.") (Bradbury and Fincham, 1990). These authors also report that there is evidence to suggest that there is not only a correlation between types of attributions and marital satisfaction, but that types of attributions have a causal effect on judgments of marital satisfaction.

Yet generalizations can be misleading, because each marriage is different. Work on marital typologies reveals similarities among groups or types of marriages and families. For example, Fitzpatrick's work (1988, 1997) on classifying couple types identifies three major types—independents, separates, and traditionals—plus mixed types. Independents accept uncertainty and change, do considerable sharing, and negotiate autonomy. They do not avoid conflict, they value independence, and they are more likely to support androgynous and flexible sex roles. Separates differ from independents in greater conflict avoidance, more differentiated space needs, fairly regular schedules, and less sharing. In relationships, they experience little sense of togetherness or autonomy. Separates usually oppose an androgynous sexual orientation. Traditionals uphold a fairly conventional belief system and resist change or uncertainty because it threatens their routines. Their high level of sharing leads to a high degree of interdependence and low autonomy. Traditionals will engage in conflict but would rather avoid it. Uncertainty and change in values upset them. Traditionals demonstrate strong sex-typed roles.

Though this chapter is primarily centered on functional marriages, it is important to recognize that there are highly dysfunctional marriages, some of which are violent in nature. Some research suggests that men and women participate equally in marital violence (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin, 1997). Difficulties in accurately measuring marital violence contribute to this confusion. Although causes for domestic violence are considered to be somewhat elusive, certain risk factors for domestic abuse have been established (Miller and Knudsen, 1999). An extensive study of aggression in early marriage suggests that for men, violence in the family-of-origin, and that for women, violent actions against others, serve as predictors of later marital aggression (O'Leary, Malone, and Tyree, 1994).

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