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## **Marital Satisfaction and Communication Behaviors During Sexual and Nonsexual Conflict Discussions in Newlywed Couples: A Pilot Study**

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*The way couples communicate during conflict discussions has been found to be a reliable predictor of marital satisfaction. However, in previous research, there has been little experimental control over the selection of topics. The present study examined, in a sample of 15 newlywed couples, whether affective displays during the discussion of a sexual and a nonsexual conflict topic differentially predict current marital satisfaction. Communication behaviors were coded using an adaptation of the Specific Affect Coding System, resulting in composite “negative behavior” and “positive behavior” categories. Data were analyzed using multilevel modeling. Negative behaviors*

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*displayed during the nonsexual conflict discussions were not significantly related to concurrent self-reported relationship satisfaction. In contrast, for wives, negative behaviors displayed during the discussion of a sexual problem were significantly related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. For the sexual and nonsexual conflict discussions, positive behaviors were positively associated with relationship satisfaction, although this effect did not reach statistical significance. Overall, the authors' findings emphasize the importance of incorporating sexual variables in the study of marriage. Furthermore, their study represents an important step in recognizing that marital research benefits from an examination of specific topics of conflict as a factor to consider in studies of marital functioning.*

How couples discuss conflicts in their relationship has been found to be a reliable predictor of marital satisfaction (Cutrona, 1996; Gottman, 1994; Klinetob & Smith, 1996; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Numerous observational studies have found that distressed relationships are characterized by high levels of negative (e.g., contempt) and low levels of positive affective expressions (e.g., validation) during conflict discussions (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). However, a limitation of the paradigms typically used to observe couple communication is that there is little experimental control over the type of conflict that couples choose for their discussions (Heyman, 2001).

The purpose of the present study was to compare behaviors displayed during nonsexual (e.g., financial, parenting) conflict discussions with those displayed during sexual conflict discussions. Thus, this study represents an effort to bridge the fields of sex and marital research by examining whether couples' communication behaviors during a sexual conflict discussion are more diagnostic of relationship distress, as compared with their communication behaviors during nonsexual conflicts. This prediction was based, in part, on research demonstrating that sexual conflicts are rated by both couples and clinicians as "harder" to solve. For example, in a study by Sanford (2003), sexual conflict interactions were rated by participating couples and therapists to be in the top five most difficult discussion topics. Further, Sanford (2003) found that greater topic difficulty was associated with more negative forms of communication behavior, such as criticism and contempt. In a theoretical article, Metts and Cupach (1989) identified some possible reasons as to why couples find sexual discussions difficult to have, including the notion that such discussions make the partner feel vulnerable, expose private aspects of one's identity, and may cause embarrassment, shame, or fear of being ridiculed, teased, or hurt. Thus, sexual conflicts may be particularly emotionally sensitive and an unskilled, or inexperienced, navigation of such an intimate topic, as revealed through affective expressions and other

behaviors, may be a stronger predictor of relationship distress, as compared to expressions and behaviors displayed during discussions of nonsexual conflicts. Because no studies to date have directly examined this question, our hypotheses were exploratory and we tentatively predicted that (a) negative affective expressions when discussing a sexual problem in one's relationship would more strongly predict relationship distress than negative affective expressions during a nonsexual relationship problem discussion, and that (b) positive affective expressions when discussing a sexual problem in one's relationship would more strongly predict relationship satisfaction than positive affective expressions during a nonsexual relationship problem discussion.

## METHOD

### Participants

Fifteen newlywed couples participated in the current study. They were recruited from a larger study on daily mood and sexual and marital satisfaction, for which newlywed couples between 18 and 40 years of age (found using publically accessible marriage licenses) had been invited by letter to participate. Couples who expressed interest in participating were screened for eligibility during a telephone interview. Only couples who had been married for less than a year, who did not (yet) have children, and for whom this was their first marriage were eligible to participate. The average age of the sample was 26.6 years ( $SD = 3.0$ ), with no difference in age between spouses (husbands:  $M = 26.7$ ,  $SD = 3.2$ ; wives:  $M = 26.5$ ,  $SD = 2.9$ ;  $t[28] = .23$ ,  $ns$ ), and the couples had been married on average for 0.8 years ( $SD = 0.4$ ). The majority of participants (87% of husbands and 100% of wives) were Caucasian, all of the husbands and the majority of wives (87%) had attended college or technical school, and most participants were employed, full- or part-time (approximately 7% were unemployed). The couples reported, on average, relatively high levels of marital satisfaction, as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976; husbands,  $M = 118$ ,  $SD = 2.5$ ; wives,  $M = 115$ ,  $SD = 12.6$ ;  $t[28] = .74$ ,  $ns$ ).

### Procedure

All study measures and procedures were approved by the university's Human Subjects Committee (institutional review board) and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. All participants were asked to engage in both a sexual and a nonsexual conflict discussion.<sup>1</sup> The nonsexual conflict discussion always preceded the sexual conflict discussion. The specific instructions given to participants were to focus on "something that you both agree on as an area of conflict in your relationship (one sexual and one nonsexual topic)." To help select the specific topics, each spouse completed,

in separate rooms, the modified Areas of Change Questionnaire (described later). The experimenter compared the spouses' responses on the questionnaire, and, on the basis of these responses, selected the topics that were rated by the couple as most contentious (one sexual and one nonsexual).<sup>2</sup> The experimenter then checked with the two spouses, who were still separated at that time, regarding whether they were willing to discuss the selected topics. If they were not, the topic with the second highest rating, in terms of how problematic it was for the couple, was offered as an alternative. Following this, the couple was brought together into the same room where they engaged in the two videotaped discussions, each 7 min long.

## Measures

### DYADIC ADJUSTMENT SCALE (SPANIER, 1976)

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale is a widely used, 32-item measure of relationship satisfaction. The scale has been demonstrated to have strong psychometric properties. Across numerous studies it has been shown to have high levels of internal consistency, to correlate highly with other measures of relationship satisfaction, thus demonstrating concurrent validity, and to reliably discriminate between distressed and nondistressed couples (Spanier, 1976). It provides a global score and four subscale scores: agreement/consensus, affectional expression, dyadic cohesion, and relationship satisfaction. Because the total score is computed using items that also assess aspects of a couple's sexual relationship, we opted to use the satisfaction subscale (which is free of such items) as our measure of relationship satisfaction.

### AREAS OF CHANGE QUESTIONNAIRE (MARGOLIN, TALOVIC, & WEINSTEIN, 1983)

In the present study, we used the Areas of Change Questionnaire to determine topics for the two conflict discussions. On a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*much more*) to 7 (*much less*), with 4 representing *no change desired*, participants are asked to rate how much they would like their spouses to change in various areas (e.g., assuming financial responsibility, expressing emotions). For the present study, we modified the Areas of Change Questionnaire to include a total of 28 nonsexual and 9 sexual (e.g., pay more/less attention to one's sexual needs, show more/less interest in sex, be more/less experimental) topics.

### TOPIC DIFFICULTY AND IMPORTANCE

At the end of the session, all participants were asked to indicate (on a scale from 1 to 100) how difficult it was to discuss the sexual and nonsexual

topics with their spouse. In addition, a question was added to the modified Areas of Change Questionnaire to assess the importance of each topic to the participant (on a scale from 1 to 10).

## Coding and Data Analysis

### CODING

Coders used Noldus's The Observer 5.0 to code the marital interactions. Data were recorded using a timed-event approach (i.e., the presence of behaviors and onset and offset times were recorded). To capture both durations of, and minor variations in, exhibited behaviors, the data for each behavioral code were converted into a percentage score which represented the proportion of the duration of the marital discussion each participant exhibited a particular behavior.

For the present study, we modified and adapted the Specific Affect Coding System (Gottman, 1996) to meet our goals. Negative affective expressions were added together to create a composite "negative behavior" category. The codes that were included in this category included contemptuous, domineering, belligerent, defensive, and angry behaviors. The internal consistency of this category, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.88. Positive affective expressions were added together to create a composite "positive behavior" category. The codes in this category included statements of affection and validation. The internal consistency of this category, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.86. When a spouse was not displaying any of the target positive or negative behavior, he or she was coded as "neutral." When couples were inaudible or out of range of the camera, they were coded as uncodable.

### DATA ANALYSIS

The present study used a hierarchically structured design, with individuals nested within couples. In addition, each participant engaged in two conflict discussions (one sexual and one nonsexual), resulting in repeated observations for the variables of interest. Thus, the data were organized according to two levels: the level of the couple or dyad, and the level of the individual. Multilevel structures imply interdependence of data, which violates the assumption of standard regression procedures that observations are completely independent of each other. Therefore, we used mixed-models analyses to examine the research questions. This enabled us to account for the interdependence of partner and repeated measures data, as well as to assess interactions between effects at different levels (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

We used four separate models to test our hypotheses regarding positive and negative behaviors in each of the two discussions. Although the

models differed in terms of the type of communication behavior that was used to predict relationship satisfaction, they shared a common structure. Specifically, each model included one continuous predictor variable (communication behavior), one categorical repeated measures variable (spouse: husband and wife), and the corresponding two-way interaction term. The categorical variable was effect-coded (spouse: wife = +1; husband = -1). Given that participants were distinguishable on the repeated measures variables, heterogeneous compound symmetry was specified as the covariance type (Kenny et al., 2006). Consistent with recommendations made by Aiken and West (1991), relationship satisfaction scores were centered to reduce multicollinearity and to enhance the interpretability of the regression coefficients. The findings for the sexual and nonsexual conflict discussions were examined in separate regression models. We then compared the regression coefficients of negative behaviors displayed during the sexual versus nonsexual discussion to examine whether they were significantly different from each other in the expected direction. The same comparison was conducted for positive behaviors.

The overall model can be represented by the following equation:

$$Y' = b_0 + b_1U + b_2V + b_3W + b_4U * W + b_5V * W$$

where  $Y'$  is the predicted value of the dependent variable (relationship satisfaction);  $b_0$  represents the intercept;  $b_1$  is the regression coefficient for actor communication behavior (U);  $b_2$  is the regression coefficient for partner behavior (V);  $b_3$  is the regression coefficient for spouse (W);  $b_4$  represents the interaction between an actor's communication behavior and gender (U \* W); and,  $b_5$  represents the interaction between a partner's communication behavior and gender (V \* W).

## RESULTS

### Difficulty and Importance of Sexual and Nonsexual Topics

Husbands and wives did not differ in how they rated the importance (independent-sample  $t$  test:  $t[28] = -.45$ ,  $ns$ ;  $t[27] = -.98$ ,  $ns$ ) and difficulty (independent-sample  $t$  test:  $t[28] = -.45$ ,  $ns$ ,  $t[27] = -.98$ ,  $ns$ ) of sexual and nonsexual conflict topics. However, wives gave higher ratings to both the difficulty ( $M = 40.3$ ,  $SD = 30.5$  vs.  $M = 19.7$ ,  $SD = 19.9$ ; paired-sample  $t$  test:  $t[14] = 3.1$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the importance ( $M = 6.6$ ,  $SD = 2.4$  vs.  $M = 5.7$ ,  $SD = 2.5$ ; paired-sample  $t$  test:  $t[14] = 2.6$ ,  $p < .05$ ) of sexual, as compared with the importance of nonsexual, topics. In contrast, for husbands no differences in difficulty and importance was found for the two topics (paired-sample  $t$  test:  $t[13] = 0.97$ ,  $ns$ ;  $t[13] = 0.46$ ,  $ns$ , respectively).

### Predicting Marital Satisfaction with Negative Communication Behaviors

Negative behaviors expressed during the nonsexual conflict discussions were not significantly related to self-reported relationship satisfaction,  $b = -.01$ ,  $t(19.55) = 0.26$ , *ns*. In contrast, negative behaviors displayed during the discussion of a sexual problem were significantly related to relationship satisfaction: Higher levels of negativity displayed during the sexual discussion predicted lower levels of relationship satisfaction,  $b = -.11$ ,  $t(19.05) = -3.42$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, the main effect for actor negative behavior was qualified by an interaction between actor negative behavior and gender,  $b = -.13$ ,  $t(21.50) = -4.49$ ,  $p < .01$ . Simple slopes analyses revealed that, for husbands, there was no association between their own overall level of negativity during the sexual discussion and their relationship satisfaction. In contrast, for wives, the more negative they were during the sexual discussion, the lower was their own relationship satisfaction.

To examine whether negative behavior was significantly more predictive of relationship satisfaction during the sexual versus the nonsexual discussion, we directly compared the two regression coefficients for negative behavior by conducting a *t* test. The obtained *t* value was  $-2.00$  ( $p < .05$ ), suggesting that the regression slopes were significantly different from each other and that negative behaviors during the sexual discussion were significantly more predictive of relationship distress than negative behaviors displayed during the nonsexual conflict discussion.

### Predicting Marital Satisfaction with Positive Communication Behaviors

For the sexual and nonsexual conflict discussions, positive behavior marginally predicted relationship satisfaction, such that greater positive behavior was associated with a trend toward greater relationship satisfaction, irrespective of topic of conflict (sexual conflict discussion:  $b = 0.56$ ,  $t[18.30] = 1.99$ ,  $p = .06$ ; nonsexual conflict discussion:  $b = 0.61$ ,  $t[16.11] = 1.75$ ,  $p = .10$ ). To examine whether positive behavior was significantly more predictive of relationship satisfaction during the sexual versus the nonsexual discussion, we directly compared the two regression coefficients for positive behavior by conducting a *t* test. The obtained *t* value was  $0.11$  ( $p > .10$ ), suggesting that the regression slopes were not significantly different from each other. Thus, in our sample, the association between positive behavior and relationship satisfaction did not differ by topic of conflict discussion.

For both discussions, gender of spouse was not found to be a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction (sexual conflict discussion:  $b = -1.10$ ,  $t[10.24] = -0.42$ , *ns*; nonsexual conflict discussion:  $b = 1.04$ ,  $t[9.95] = 0.34$ , *ns*). Similarly, for both discussions, the two-way interaction between gender



and positive behavior was found to be a nonsignificant predictor of relationship satisfaction (sexual conflict discussion:  $b = -0.11$ ,  $t[15.76] = -0.32$ , *ns*; nonsexual conflict discussion:  $b = 0.03$ ,  $t[15.32] = 0.08$ , *ns*).

## DISCUSSION

The overall purpose of the current study was to examine the association between marital satisfaction and communication patterns involving different domains of conflict. Consistent with our predictions, the results showed that negative affect displayed during the sexual conflict was significantly more predictive of marital distress than negative affect displayed when discussing a nonsexual conflict. However, there was no difference in the predictive value of positive affective expressions across the two conflict domains. Thus, the predictive power of negative affective expressions differed across the two domains of conflict even in such a small sample size. These results contradict the perspective held by some marital researchers that what matters is not what people argue about but how they argue (Gottman, 1999). Rather, our results suggest that both the process and content of conflict may need to be considered and that the field may have been missing important information by not attending to sexuality more specifically.

We also found a significant interaction between gender and negativity displayed during the sexual conflict discussion, such that for husbands there was no association between their own negativity behavior during the sexual discussion and their own relationship satisfaction, but for wives their own negativity when discussing a sexual conflict predicted lower wife relationship satisfaction. Because of the small sample size of the present study, this interaction needs to be interpreted with caution. If replicated, it will be important to better understand the mechanisms that underlie this finding. One possible explanation is that in newlywed couples, wives are more sensitive to and more affected by sexual conflicts in the relationship, as compared to husbands.

The finding for positive behavior also needs to be interpreted with caution. Because of the small sample size and narrow range of relationship satisfaction scores in the present study, it would be premature to conclude that positive affective expressions have the same effect on marital satisfaction irrespective of whether the topic of conflict is sexual or nonsexual. However, it does appear that negativity expressed when discussing sexual topics may be a particularly potent predictor of marital satisfaction for newly married couples.

One of the advantages of using mixed-model analyses to test multilevel data is that such procedures permit researchers to examine both how one's own behavior affects one's own outcome (actor effects) and how one's behavior affects partner outcomes (partner effects). However, because of

sample size limitations, we were unable to test partner effects or to compare actor and partner effects; these effects will need to be investigated in future work. In addition, future research could include a more fine-grained analysis of behavior, rather than relying on only composite positive and negative categories.

The results of our study underscore the significance of sexuality in marriage and point to the value of marital researchers developing models that incorporate sexual functioning variables. In future studies, we need to examine in more depth why sexual discussions may be more diagnostic of relationship quality than nonsexual discussions, at least in the early marital years. A better understanding of the processes may prove to be clinically relevant by helping professionals better assist couples in safely and constructively entering discussions about the sexual dimensions of their relationship.

## NOTES

1. All couples also engaged in two nonsexual "support-provision" discussions (which always followed the general and sexual conflict discussions) but for the purpose of this article, only the conflict discussions were coded and analyzed.

2. The nonsexual topics of conflict selected by the couples included topics such as differences in desired levels of time together versus apart, disagreements over financial matters, and dissatisfaction with levels of emotional expression. The sexual conflicts selected by the couples included topics such as disagreements over desired frequency of sexual activity, dissatisfaction with types of sexual activities that the couple engaged in, and the desire for greater communication about the couple's sexual relationship.

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