

Depression, Marital Satisfaction and Communication in Couples: Investigating Gender Differences

Barbara Gabriel
Steven R.H. Beach
University of Georgia

Guy Bodenmann
University of Zuerich

The correlation between depression and dysfunctional marital interaction is well documented, but only a few studies have examined gender-related differences in marital interaction patterns of couples with a depressed partner. In this paper we examined differences in observed marital communication in a sample of 62 Swiss couples presenting for treatment of depression. There were 16 maritally distressed couples with a depressed wife, 21 maritally nondistressed couples with a depressed wife, 18 maritally distressed couples with a depressed husband, and 7 maritally nondistressed couples with a depressed husband. Marital interaction behavior was found to depend on gender, depression, marital distress, as well as gender of the depressed partner. Our results suggest the need for a gender-sensitive model of the link between marital interaction and depression.

INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS AND SOCIAL deficits, especially in the marital context, are strongly associated with the development, intensity, and course of depression (Backenstrass, 1998; Beach, Jones, & Franklin, 2008; Bodenmann, 2006; Joiner, Coyne,

& Blalock, 1999). Several studies have identified lack of verbal and nonverbal positivity, asymmetry in interaction patterns, a higher level of passivity/withdraw, negative statements (e.g., complaints, negative self-statements) as well as negative reciprocity in couples with a depressed partner (e.g., Backenstrass, 1998; Biglan et al., 1985; Gotlib & Whiffen, 1989; Hautzinger, Linden, & Hoffman, 1982; Jacob & Leonard, 1992; Johnson & Jacob, 1997; Sher, Baucom, & Larus, 1990). Couples with a depressed member are, on average, more negative, less positive and less congenial in their marital interactions compared to couples without a depressed partner (e.g., Johnson & Jacob, 1997; McCabe & Gotlib, 1993). In keeping with this pattern, depressed persons display in their marital communication a higher frequency of interruption, expression of negative feelings, criticism and defensiveness, as well as a lower level of nonverbal positivity. The partners of the depressed persons, on the other hand, show enhanced criticism and negativity directed toward the depressed partner and the marital relationship (e.g., Benazon & Coyne, 2000; Hautzinger et al., 1982).

One might wonder, however, whether gender of the depressed partner is associated with differences in the patterns of interaction observed among couples with a depressed partner. Relatively few studies have compared couples with depressed wives to couples with depressed husbands (see Johnson & Jacob, 1997, 2000, for an exception). As a consequence, gender-linked patterns in this context are not currently well-understood. There

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Address correspondence to Barbara Gabriel, Institute for Behavioral Research, 514 Boyd, GSRC, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602; e-mail: bar.gabriel@yahoo.com.

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are several reasons to expect that gender-linked patterns may be important in depression. Some studies have found a different time course in the connection between marital satisfaction and depression as a function of gender, with evidence of an effect of history of marital distress on future depression for wives and evidence of an effect of history of depression on future marital distress for husbands (e.g., Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997; but see Kurdek, 1998, and Davila, Karney, Hall, & Bradbury, 2003, for evidence of gender similarity in time course). There is also evidence of a gender difference in response to negative feelings (see also Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990), and this gender difference may be intensified by depression (Wilhelm, Roy, Mitchell, Brownhill, & Parker, 2002). In particular, men may be more likely to engage in behaviors that minimize, distract from, or avoid interactions that potentially produce negative emotions, whereas women may be more likely to confront, ruminate, and engage such interactions, resulting in greater arousal and greater display of negative emotion for depressed women during interaction tasks than for depressed men.

In addition, there is a broader literature on gender-linked differences in marital interaction that suggest the importance of attending to gender-linked patterns. To the extent that women are more relationship-oriented than men, for example, they may feel more responsible for the resolution of relationship difficulties (Baucom, Notarius, Burnett, & Haefner, 1990; Culp & Beach, 1998), whereas men may focus more on independence (Culp & Beach, 1998; Gottman, 1994; Klinetob & Smith, 1996). Additionally, wives exhibit higher frequencies of both positively and negatively valenced behavior in marital interactions than husbands, including greater nonverbal positivity and increased levels of affect expression like self-disclosure, criticism, and complaints. Husbands, on the other hand, display higher levels of nonaffective, task-oriented behavior and instrumental advice, but also display anger and blame avoidance at higher rates and may be more conflict averse on average (Baucom et al., 1990; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Dindia & Allen, 1992; Gottman, 1994; Klinetob & Smith, 1996).

Gender-linked patterns have also been captured in research on demand/withdraw patterns and are particularly salient when couples are allowed to select their own discussion topic. In these situations, wives tend to display higher levels of demand and criticizing behavior, and husbands are more likely to display defensive, withdrawal, and stonewalling behaviors (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Gottman, 1994;

Rehmann & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2006). Because a part of the gender difference in demand-withdraw patterns observed in previous research is due to wives more commonly selecting the topic for couple discussion when the source of the topic is not specified by the therapist or researcher (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Klinetob & Smith, 1996), it is important to assess who selects the topic of discussion in each interaction. This demand-withdraw pattern is strongly related to other escalating coercive negative behaviors (e.g., contempt, belligerence, domineering) as well as marital and psychological distress (e.g., Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Notarius, 2000).

Another line of research suggesting the importance of examining gender in combination with depression and marital interaction was provided by Marchand and Hock (2000). In their investigation of correlates of self-reported attacking and avoidance behavior in a community sample, husbands' lower self-reported marital satisfaction was the only predictor of attacking and the strongest predictor of avoidance behavior, explaining between 15 and 20 percent of the variance. For wives, on the other hand, higher self-reported depression was the only predictor of avoidance and the best predictor of attacking behavior, explaining 26 to 57 percent of the variance in self-reported behavior in these domains. Conversely, recent work including behavioral observation did not support a consistent pattern of results linking gender, depression, marital satisfaction, and wife demand/husband withdraw behavior (e.g., Baucom et al., 2007). Accordingly, this is an area in need of further investigation.

Despite much interest in the topic of gender roles and depression and compelling reasons to examine the impact of gender on depression-linked interaction behavior, little is currently known about gender differences in marital interaction in the context of depression. The few available studies suggest that couples with depressed wives show less positivity and a trend to a higher negativity than couples with a depressed husband (Jacob & Leonard, 1992; Johnson & Jacob, 1997, 2000). Depressed husbands, compared to control husbands, tend to display less problem solving, lower negative reciprocity, more positive reactions, and have less impact on their wives' subsequent behavior. Wives of depressed husbands, on the other hand, are less likely to engage in positive reciprocity and display increased negativity (e.g., Jacob & Leonard, 1992; Johnson & Jacob, 2000). Consistent with the broader literature on gender differences, affect-relevant communication in

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