

Couples' Communication Behaviors as Predictors of Dropout and Treatment Response in Wife Abuse Treatment Programs

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Sixty couples entering a treatment program for husband-to-wife physical aggression were videotaped during a marital conflict task. Positive treatment response was significantly predicted by low levels of husbands' reciprocity of wives' hostility, accounting for approximately one-quarter of the variance. Poor treatment response, but increased treatment completion, was significantly predicted by (a) high frequency of husbands' distress-maintaining attributions and (b) low likelihood of husbands' hostility following wives' self-disclosures. Husbands' communication variables correctly predicted completion in about three-fourths of cases. Communication variables predicted dropout and treatment response over and above the effects of marital adjustment and husbands' psychological abuse. Wives' communication behaviors predicted dropout but not husbands' continued aggression. These results imply that preexisting marital processes may give important clues as to who will be responsive to treatment for partner abuse.

Treatment outcome research in the spouse abuse area has recently (e.g., Saunders, 1996) begun to mature from evaluating efficacy to examining vari-

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ables related to treatment completion or success. Among the predictors that have been found to be associated with treatment completion and/or success in court-mandated samples are education, personality disorders (e.g., antisocial, narcissistic, and dependant), and substance abuse (e.g., Edleson & Syers, 1990, 1991; Hamberger & Hastings, 1989; Saunders, 1996).

Although most of the treatment and mediator research has been conducted with court-mandated men, aggressive men and their partners who present voluntarily for marital therapy constitute a much larger treatment subpopulation (e.g., O'Leary, Vivian, & Malone, 1992). For these couples, marital communication variables may play a large role in whether (a) they stay in treatment until completion and (b) husbands reduce or eliminate their use of physical aggression. Despite the growing number of published studies of aggressive couples' communication (e.g., Jacobson et al., 1994; Margolin, John, & Gleberman, 1988), no published study has yet examined the role of communication in predicting treatment response of physically aggressive men.

Intact couples report that nearly all marital violence occurs during angry arguments (Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). The role that couples' interaction plays in the escalation from verbal conflict to physical aggression is the subject of much theoretical dispute. Systemic therapists such as Neidig (e.g., Neidig & Friedman, 1984) believe that both partners play a role in conflict escalation and therefore either can take actions to reduce the likelihood of violence. Although each partner is held responsible for his or her violence, conflict escalation is seen as a mutual process of ineffective communication. Feminist scholars, however, emphasize that even if women are involved in interpersonal processes leading to couple violence, they (a) are more likely to be the predominant victims when considering injury and psychological impact (e.g., Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992); (b) have less power at all levels of society, including marriage (e.g., Yllö, 1993); and (c) have little influence over whether a verbal altercation will lead to men becoming physically violent (Jacobson et al., 1994).

Examining communication patterns need not imply that both partners are equally culpable, either for the escalation of hostility or for the violence itself. Observing marital communication can, however, foster a better understanding of the context in which violence sometimes erupts. Further, given the heterogeneity of aggressive couples volunteering for treatment (see Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994), communication samples may provide clues as to which couples may be appropriate to treat as an intact unit, which are more likely to remain in treatment, and which are likely to benefit from treatment.

Communication research has shown that hostile communication is endemic in aggressive couples and is significantly higher than that of nonaggressive couples. Overall, observational studies have found differences in base rates and sequential behavioral patterns between aggressive and nonaggressive couples. Margolin and colleagues (Margolin, Burman, & John, 1989; Margolin, John, et al., 1988; Margolin, John, & O'Brien, 1989) found

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