

Couple Relationship Distress and Observed Expression of Intimacy During Reminiscence About Positive Relationship Events

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Satisfied couples report that positive, intimate communication is central to their relationship. We developed the positive reminiscence task, in which couples discuss positive relationship moments to assess communication of positive intimacy. The behavior and heart rate of 28 satisfied and 25 distressed couples were assessed during positive reminiscence and problem solving. As predicted, satisfied couples demonstrated higher rates of positive affect and dyadic intimacy than distressed couples during positive reminiscence, and these positive behaviors occurred at much lower rates during problem solving than positive reminiscence. However, the differences between distressed and satisfied couples were more marked on most assessed behaviors during problem solving rather than positive reminiscence. Two notable exceptions were that dyadic intimacy and sadness differed more between distressed and satisfied couples during positive reminiscence than problem solving. The positive reminiscence task assesses intimate behaviors in a manner likely to be useful in research and practice.

Keywords: couple satisfaction; communication; intimacy; problem solving; positive reminiscence

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THERE IS AN INTERESTING DISJUNCTION between what couples believe is important in relationships and what most couple relationship researchers have investigated. In Western cultures most people in couple relationships believe that psychological intimacy is central to a good relationship (Hiew, Halford, & Liu, *in press*; Kline, Horton, & Zhang, 2008). However, research on couple communication predominantly has focused on conflict management, and there have been repeated calls to focus more on communication in positive contexts (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2010). This paper tests the proposition that observable expressions of intimacy are associated with relationship satisfaction, and that positive intimate communication is best assessed by watching couples in the appropriate context.

COUPLE COMMUNICATION DURING PROBLEM SOLVING AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

Social learning models of couple relationships include a long-standing hypothesis that the behavioral exchange between spouses is a crucial influence on relationship satisfaction (e.g., Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). For more than three decades researchers have assessed observed communication to test how couple exchanges are associated with relationship satisfaction (e.g., Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974). The vast majority of that research has focused on how couples discuss topics that are a source of relationship conflict.

In a recent meta-analysis of problem-solving communication studies, low relationship satisfaction showed a moderate effect size and concurrent association with high rates of hostility (e.g., anger, contempt, dominating or demanding) and low rates

of problem solving (problem description, suggesting constructive solutions, requesting clarification) and positivity (e.g., humor, validation, positive affect) (Woodin, 2011). There also were small, but reliable, associations of low satisfaction with distress (anxiety, fear, sadness) and withdrawal (e.g., avoid, no eye contact, stonewall) (Woodin). Moreover, it is well established that negative problem-solving communication longitudinally predicts deteriorating relationship satisfaction, although the specific behaviors that predict satisfaction are somewhat inconsistent between studies (Heyman, 2001; Kim, Capaldi, & Crosby, 2007).

In addition to observable communication, high physiological arousal during problem solving (heart rate, blood pressure, skin conductance, pulse transmission time, serum cortisol and vasopressin levels) is associated with the behavioral negativity that characterizes distressed couples (Gouin et al., 2010; Heffner, Kiecolt-Glaser, Loving, Glaser, & Malaraky, 2004; Levenson & Gottman, 1983). Moreover, this high physiological arousal predicts deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Kiecolt-Glaser, Bane, Glaser & Malarkey, 2003), and has been implicated in negative effects on the spouses' physical health (Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003).

The research on problem solving has affirmed the assertion of social learning theorists that coercive and unproductive conflict is central to relationship distress and suggests that such negativity is associated with physiological arousal that might undermine physical health. However, observational coding of problem solving has not been particularly effective at identifying positive, intimate exchanges associated with relationship satisfaction. Woodin's (2011) meta-analysis did show that positivity during problem solving was associated with relationship satisfaction. However, the positivity usually observed in problem solving typically is not the expression of intimacy that couples and psychological theorists (e.g., Noller, 1996) posit are important to sustaining relationship satisfaction. Rather, positive behaviors in problem solving are those that serve to defuse tension (e.g., humor), validate the spouse as having a legitimate point of view (e.g., attending, asking open questions), or suggest problem solutions. It seems likely that, to assess intimate positive communication, researchers need to observe couples in a situation other than problem solving.

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

A number of researchers have developed tasks that attempt to assess positive couple communication that might contribute to couple relationship satisfaction,

but not be evident in problem-solving interactions. For example, Bradbury and colleagues developed the social support task in which each spouse discusses a personal concern that is not a source of conflict in the couple's relationship (e.g., stress management, wanting to get fit) in order to assess each partner's social support of the other (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). As a second example, Graber, Laurenceau, Miga, Chango, and Coan (2011) had newlywed spouses reflect on positive feelings they had toward their partner, and discuss those positive feelings for one another, in order to assess expressed positive affection. Both the social support (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010) and positive feelings discussions (Graber et al., 2011) elicit positive communication behaviors that correlate with relationship satisfaction.

There are significant limitations to the existing attempts to assess how positive communication relates to relationship satisfaction. First, some of the communication tasks used seem unlikely to elicit the communication of emotional intimacy often posited to be important in relationship satisfaction. Specifically, the social support task is focused, like the problem-solving task, on discussing issues spouses are concerned about. Contexts that prompt attention to positive events or feelings, rather than discussion of problems, might yield additional useful information on couples' positive communication. Gable, Gonzaga, and Strachman (2006) had individuals describe to their dating partner a positive and negative event that they had recently experienced. The constructiveness of the partner's response to the positive event disclosures predicted future relationship satisfaction. However, as Graber et al. (2011) note, this task is individually focused rather than couple focused, and couple-focused interactions might be more likely to elicit intimate communication.

A second limitation of some of the existing research is that the coding systems used did not specifically test whether the positive communication tasks were eliciting different behaviors from problem solving. For example, Sullivan et al. (2010) found social support communication predicted relationship satisfaction trajectory even after controlling for problem-solving communication. However, as different coding systems were used for the social support and problem-solving discussions, it is unclear if the different task or the different coding system were identifying behaviors during social support discussions that were not evident during problem solving. One exception is that Sevier, Eldridge, Jones, Doss, and Christensen (2008) compared severely and moderately distressed couples presenting for couple therapy on problem solving and social support communication. They

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