Dysfunctional Marital Conflict: Women Are Being Unfairly Blamed

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ABSTRACT. Previous investigations have noted that: (1) women have been noted to typically start most of the marital conflict discussions in laboratories that use observational methods, (2) the way conflict discussions start is also critical in predicting both their outcome and the longitudinal course of marriages, and (3) in distressed marriages there is a wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern. Coupled with the fact that women begin most marital conflict discussions, this gender pattern could be taken as blaming women for marital distress, unless it itself has an etiology. The present investigation was designed so that a non-conflict interaction, an events of the day reunion discussion after the partners had been apart for at least 8 hours, preceded the conflict discussion. The data of this investigation showed that the dysfunctional patterns of conflict interaction were predicted by husband as well as wife interaction variables during the preceding non-conflict interaction. These results qualify the interpretation of well-established gender differences during conflict discussions, so that these dysfunctional patterns must be seen as being systemic. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: http://www.haworthpressinc.com>]*

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Women typically start most of the marital conflict discussions in laboratories that use observational methods (Ball, Cowan, & Cowan, 1995; Oggons, Veroff, & Leber, 1993). The way a conflict discussion starts is also critical in determining its outcome. In one study, in 96% of these conflict marital interactions the way the conflict began determined its subsequent course (Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998, p. 7).

The way conflict is conducted predicts the longitudinal fate of the marriage. In two separate longitudinal studies and in a recent longitudinal study of newlyweds in our own laboratory (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998) it has been possible to identify specific dysfunctional patterns of conflict resolution that predicted a couple's cascade toward divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Gottman, 1994). This work has now been replicated in another laboratory (Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996). In the studies in our laboratory the consistent observed interaction predictors of divorce during the resolution of conflict were: (1) a lower ratio of positive to negative behaviors: Gottman (1993) reported that among three types of stable marriages he identified, the ratio of positive to negative interaction during conflict resolution was 5 to 1, whereas the ratio was .8 to 1 among unstable marriages; (2) greater criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling, a pattern Gottman (1994) called the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Criticism is defined as complaining with added blaming, or a more global complaint, for example, including the use of "You never" or " You always" preceding a complaint. Defensiveness is any form of self-defense that includes denying responsibility for a problem, cross-complaining, and whining. Contempt is any insult or demeaning of one's partner, or taking the high moral ground, including the cross-culturally universal Facial Action Coding System (FACS, Ekman & Friesen, 1978) code called the unilateral dimpler muscle (risorius), denoted as the unilateral AU14 (in marital interaction it is often accompanied by an eye roll).

It is also well known that in distressed marriages there is a wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern (see Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Christopher, & Christensen, 1993; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995).

Coupled with the fact that women begin most marital conflict discussions, this gender pattern could be taken as blaming women for marital distress, unless it itself has an etiology. We propose to investi-

gate whether this wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern during conflict is endogenous or whether it can be considered to have an etiology; specifically whether it might be predicted by the husband's or wife's affect during preceding non-conflict interactions. If this were indeed the case it would change our interpretation of this well-established gender difference during conflict discussions. Given that women start most conflict discussions, and the way these conflict discussions start is so powerful in determining the remainder of the discussion and the possible future of the marriage, it becomes important to ask the question, "What is the etiology of the dysfunctional marital conflict discussions?" and "Are women to blame for the dissolution of marriages?"

We explore what could be called the potential "etiology" of these dysfunctional patterns of conflict resolution in this paper. We do so by examining the nature of the couple's affective interaction in an immediately prior, relatively neutral or even positive *non-conflict resolution* reunion discussion of the events of the day after the couple have been separated for at least eight hours. The hypothesis we suggest is that high levels of negativity and lower levels of positivity in everyday non-conflict-resolving marital interaction may be lead indicators, setting conditions, or perhaps even causes of the dysfunctional conflict resolution patterns.

There is bound to be a great deal of stability in marital interaction across the two conversations. Hence a partial correlation is the appropriate and the most stringent analysis to employ in testing this hypothesis. To evaluate the husband's role in predicting the wife's negative affect during conflict, the partial correlation of the husband's negative affect during the immediately prior events of the day conversation, and the wife's negative affect during the conflict conversation, controlling the wife's negative affect during the events of the day conversation will be computed. This analysis controls for the potential predictability or stability in the wife's behavior across the two interactional contexts; that is, it is a cross-correlational test that controls for auto-correlation.

This non-conflict aspect of marital interaction has received scant attention. Two exceptions are Gottman (1979; 1980) and Birchler, Weiss, and Vincent (1975). Gottman (1979; 1980) reported that it was possible to discriminate distressed from non-distressed couples by whether they talked about a conflict issue in their marriage or worked

on a "fun deck" task in which the admonition to the couples was to look over the deck of items, plan, reminisce, and have a good time. Birchler, Weiss, and Vincent (1975) used a self-report diary measure of "pleases" and "displeases," a precursor of the Spouse Observation Checklist. In the home environment, distressed partners recorded significantly fewer pleasing and significantly greater displeasing events than was the case for nondistressed partners. The ratio of pleases to displeases at home discriminated the groups quite dramatically: the ratio was 29.66 for nondistressed and 4.30 for distressed couples. Also, during the conflict resolution interaction, these authors computed a similar ratio using the Marital Interaction Coding System (MICS), an observational coding system: distressed couples produced an average of 1.49 positives per minute, while nondistressed couples produced an average of 1.93 positives per minute, a significant difference. Birchler, Weiss, and Vincent (1975) also had a period of 4 minutes of "free interaction" in which couples were instructed to "talk abut anything while we are setting up the equipment." There were significant differences in these conversations between distressed and non-distressed couples only on negative, but not positive, interaction (distressed negative rate 1.07 "negatives" per minute, non-distressed negative rate .73 "negatives" per minute). The MICS, specifically designed for problem solving interaction, may not have been appropriate for coding the non-conflict interaction. In this paper we employed an observational system, the specific affect coding system (SPAFF) that obtained considerably more detail and specificity in coding affect than the MICS, for both positive and negative affect (Gottman, 1996), one which also had the advantage that, unlike the MICS, it could be used to code both conflict and non-conflict interaction.

METHODS

Participants

Couples were originally recruited in 1983 in Bloomington, Indiana using newspaper advertisements. Approximately 200 couples who responded to these advertisements took a demographic questionnaire and two measures of marital satisfaction, for which they were paid $5.00. From this sample, a smaller group of 85 couples was invited to participate in the laboratory assessments and to complete a number of

additional questionnaires. The goal of this two-stage sampling was to ensure that we came close to obtaining a distribution of marital satisfaction in which all parts of the distribution would be equally represented. Complete sets of usable physiological data were obtained from 79 of these 85 couples. These 79 couples could be described as follows: Husbands were about 32 years old (standard deviation = 9.5 years); wives were about 29 years old (standard deviation = 6.8 years). They were married an average of 5 years (standard deviation = 6.3 years). The average marital satisfaction for husbands was (average of Locke-Wallace and Locke-Williamson scales) 96.80 (standard deviation = 22.16); and for wives the average marital satisfaction was 98.56 (standard deviation = 20.70).

Procedures

Interaction session. Couples arrived in the laboratory after having been apart for at least eight hours. They had two 15-minute conversations: (1) events of the day and (2) conflict resolution (discussion of a problem area of continuing disagreement).[1] The conversations were always in the order shown above because we wanted couples to have the events of the day conversation first because we wanted to sample this kind of everyday non-conflict interaction, have it be uncontaminated by spill-over from conflict interaction, and we wanted to begin our laboratory session with a reunion conversation that would seem natural and help make subjects comfortable with the laboratory situation. We hoped that the events of the day would be far more affectively neutral than the conflict conversation, which tends to be quite affectively negative for some couples. After the events of the day conversation, the couples filled out a problem inventory, and then the spouses were interviewed about an area of continuing disagreement in their marriage and asked to discuss this area and try their best to resolve the issue in the next 15 minutes. Each conversation was preceded by a five minute pre-conversation period in which couples were asked to be silent and not interact. This period was designed for obtaining baseline physiological measures (not discussed in this report). Details of the procedures for setting up these conversations are available upon request.

Coding and Analysis of the Data

The videotapes of both interactions were coded using the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF), which focused on specific emotions. Because the SPAFF describes emotionality and specific emotions and emotional patterns, it could be used across both conversations. Coders were first trained using the Ekman and Friesen (1978) Facial Action Scoring System, with a set of our own audio tapes for recognizing affect in the voice, and a set of video tapes for detecting specific features in affect using paralinguistic, contextual, linguistic, and kinesic channels. However, the training went beyond specific features and trained observers to use a Gestalt approach to recognizing specific emotions in all channels combined. The initial training of coders took over 200 hours. Coders classified each speech act (usually a phrase) within turn at speech as affectively neutral, as one of five negative affects (anger, contempt/disgust, sadness, fear, whining), or as one of four positive affects (affection/caring, humor, interest/curiosity, and joy/enthusiasm). The number of onsets of each code (i.e., the number of episodes) for each code, collapsing across speech acts within a turn at speech, for example, two consecutive speech acts by a husband that received the same code, would be collapsed into one. The Kappa coefficient of reliability, controlling for chance agreements, was equal to 0.75 for the entire SPAFF coding.

The divorce prediction data presented in Gottman and Levenson (1992) and in Gottman (1993; 1994) also involved coding only the conflict discussion video tapes with the Rapid Couples Interaction Coding System (RCISS; Gottman, 1996). The RCISS employs a checklist of 13 behaviors that are scored for the speaker and nine behaviors that are scored for the listener on each turn at speech. A turn at speech is defined as all utterances by one speaker until that speaker yields the floor to vocalizations by the other spouse (vocalizations that are merely back-channels such as "mm-hmm" are not considered as demarcating a turn). In the present study, only codes assigned to speakers were used. These codes consisted of five positive codes (neutral or positive problem description, task-oriented relationship information, assent, humor-laugh, other positive) and eight negative codes (complain, criticize, negative relationship issue problem talk, yes-but, defensive, put down, escalate negative affect, other negative). We computed the average number of positive and negative speaker

codes per turn of speech, and the average of positive minus negative speaker codes per turn. Tapes were coded by a team of coders, using verbatim transcripts. Using Cohen's kappa, reliability for all RCISS subcodes taken together was .72. For the individual speaker codes kappas ranged from .70 to .81. The four major codes that emerge from the RCISS are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.

Coding manuals, training and test video and audio tapes for both the SPAFF and the RCISS coding systems are available in Gottman (1996).

RESULTS

Validity of the Experimental Manipulation– Comparisons of the Two Conversations: Events of the Day and Conflict Resolution

To compare whether the two conversations were successful in inducing different amounts of positive and negative emotions, we used the SPAFF codes. For husband and wife separately the total amounts of negative and positive affect were computed. Positive affect was defined as the sum of humor, affection, interest, and joy. Negative affect was defined as the sum of anger, contempt/disgust, whining, sadness, and fear. Neutral affect was excluded from these computations. A series of paired t-tests were conducted. In comparing the conflict conversation with the events of the day conversation, for the conflict conversation: there was less husband positive affect, $t(71) = 8.03$, $p < .001$, with means of 41.76 seconds for the events conversation and 21.15 seconds for the conflict conversation, and there was less wife positive affect, $t(71) = 8.97$, $p < .001$, with means of 46.89 seconds for the events conversation and 20.99 seconds for the conflict conversation. In the conflict discussion compared to the events of the day discussion there was more husband negative affect, $t(71) = 7.67$, $p < .001$, with means of 13.43 seconds for the events conversation and 42.11 seconds for the conflict conversation, and there was more wife negative affect, $t(71) = 10.04$, $p < .001$, with means of 14.56 seconds for the events conversation and 49.42 seconds for the conflict conversation. Thus, the two conversations did have the experimentally desired effect.

Consistency in Emotional Behavior in the Two Discussions

To address the question of consistency in emotional behavior during the two conversations, the SPAFF codes for the events of the day conversation were correlated with the same SPAFF codes in the conflict conversation. The total amount of husband and wife emotionality in both contexts were also correlated.

These correlations are presented in Table 1. The correlations demonstrate a high degree of predictability from the affective manner in which couples talked about how their day went and the way they subsequently discussed a topic of high conflict. Thus, it is possible that the prior relatively neutral events of the day conversation is a setting condition for the affects expressed during the conflict discussion. It is equally plausible that the events of the day conversation represents a

TABLE 1. Correlations of Specific Affective Behaviors Across Conversations

Variable	Events & Conflict	
Husband		
Total Emotionality	.76***	
Humor	.41***	
Affection	.36***	
Interest		.53***
Excitement/Joy	.23*	
Anger	.44***	
Contempt/Disgust	.45***	
Whining	.21*	
Sadness	.00	
Fear/Tension	.72***	
Wife		
Total Emotionality	.83***	
Humor	.48***	
Affection	.17[a]	
Interest		.43***
Excitement/Joy	.18[a]	
Anger	.44***	
Contempt/Disgust	.25*	
Whining	.48***	
Sadness	.11	
Fear/Tension	.34**	

[a]$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

reservoir of unresolved negative affect from previous conflict discussions. At a minimum we can conclude that conflict marital interaction is not independent of non-conflict marital interaction.

To address the questions of this paper we next correlated specific husband negative affects during the events of the day discussion with specific wife negative affects during the conflict discussion. The wife's anger during the conflict discussion was predicted by the husband's anger during the events of the day discussion, $r = .43$, $p < .001$; the wife's disgust/contempt during the conflict discussion was not significantly predicted by the husband's disgust/contempt during the events of the day discussion, $r = .17$, $p = .083$; the wife's whining during the conflict discussion conflict was not significantly predicted by the husband's whining during the events of the day discussion, $r = .16$, $p = .097$; the wife's sadness during the conflict discussion was not predicted by the husband's sadness during the events of the day discussion, $r = -.06$, ns; and, the wife's fear/tension during the conflict discussion was predicted by the husband's fear/tension during the events of the day discussion, $r = .64$, $p < .001$. Thus, there is evidence of predictability across contexts and across spouses in emotional behavior. The minimal conservative conclusion one must reach from these analyses is that the marriage is a system, with influence between spouses across conversational contexts.

Etiology of Wife Negative Affect During Conflict Interaction

Given the cross contextual consistency in affective behavior, as noted in the introduction, a partial correlation is the most appropriate and stringent test of the potential etiology of wife negative affect in the conflict conversation. Hence, the partial correlation of the husband's negative affect during the events of the day conversation and the wife's negative affect during the conflict conversation, controlling the wife's negative affect during the events of the day conversation was computed. This partial correlation was .33, with F-for-change at the second step (after stepping in the wife's negative affect during the events of the day conversation, thus controlling for auto-correlation), $F(2,69) = 8.27$, $p = .0053$. Hence, even controlling for the predictability between the wife's negative affect in the conflict conversation from her immediately prior negative affect in the events of the day conversation, the contribution of the husband's negative affect during the events of the day conversation was statistically significant.

The following correlations were obtained between husband's *specific negative affects* during the events of the day conversation and the wife's total negative affect in the subsequent conflict conversation: Husband anger .32, $p < .01$, husband disgust/contempt .20, $p < .05$, husband whining $-.15$, ns, husband sadness $-.02$, ns, husband fear/tension .53, $p < .001$.

Hence, from these analyses the minimal conservative conclusion one must reach is that marriage is a system, with bidirectional influence between spouses across conversational contexts.

Etiology of the Demand/Withdraw Pattern During Conflict Interaction

Let us consider the issue we raised in the introduction of the etiology of the wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern during conflict resolution.

First, did we find evidence for this pattern in our data? We used the RCISS coding for these analyses in the conflict context. Using the RCISS codes, there was evidence that during the conflict discussion the wife used more criticism than the husband, $t(78) = -3.49$, $p < .001$, with the husband's mean = .19, and the wife's mean = .29. There was also evidence that the husband stonewalled more than the wife, $t(78) = 5.10$, $p < .001$, with the husband's mean = 1.07, and the wife's mean = .84. These findings thus provide independent validation and corroboration of the Christensen wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern.

A variable was then created called "demand-withdraw" during conflict to index this Christensen wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern. It was the sum of wife minus husband criticism, and husband minus wife stonewalling. This variable will increase as the wife criticizes more than her husband and also increase as the husband stonewalls more than his wife.

Second, we used the SPAFF coding during the events of the day discussion to see if it predicted this Christensen wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern. The Christensen wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern during conflict was predicted by both the total *husband's* positive affect during the events of the day conversation ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$), and by the total *wife's* positive affect during the events of the day conversation ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$). It was not related to negative affect during the events of the day conversation.

Thus, once again the minimal conservative conclusion one must reach from these analyses is that the marriage is a system, with bidirectional influence between spouses across conversational contexts.

Predictability of the Predictors of Divorce

Positive to Positive-Plus-Negative Ratio. The ratio of positive to the sum of positive and negative interaction across both conversations was computed. This ratio was used instead of the ratio of positive-to-negative to avoid dividing by zero. Except for the problem of dividing by zero, the two ratios are actually mathematically derivable from one another. The husband's ratio during the events of the day conversation correlated with his own ratio during conflict .44, $p < .001$, and with his wife's ratio during conflict .29, $p < .01$. The wife's ratio during the events of the day conversation correlated with her own ratio during conflict .45, $p < .001$, and with her husband's ratio during conflict .30, $p < .01$. Multiple regression predicting the husband's conflict ratio from both spouses' events of the day ratios yielded a multiple R = .47, $F(2, 69) = 9.65$, $p = .002$; predicting the wife's conflict ratio from both spouses' events of the day ratios yielded a multiple R = .47, $F(2, 69) = 9.71$, $p = .002$. These analyses again suggest that the marriage is a system, with bidirectional influence between spouses across conversational contexts.

The "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Correlations were computed between the SPAFF codes for the events of the day conversation and the four horsemen on the conflict conversation (assessed with the RCISS, as they had been in prior studies, see Gottman, 1994). For the wife's conflict discussion, the significant correlations were as follows. The initiator of the Four Horsemen cascade is wife criticism (Gottman, 1994). The wife's RCISS criticism during conflict was significantly predicted by less husband neutral affect ($-.24$, $p < .05$) and also by less wife neutral affect ($-.22$, $p < .05$) during the events of the day conversation. That is, more emotionality of either husband or wife during the events of the day conversation predicted wife criticism during the conflict discussion. The wife's RCISS defensiveness during conflict was predicted by more husband interest (.21, $p < .05$), less wife affection ($-.23$, $p < .05$), and more wife contempt (.37, $p < .001$) during the events of the day conversation. The wife's RCISS contempt during conflict was predicted by more wife contempt (.27, $p < .01$) and more wife whining (.28, $p < .01$) during the events of the day con-

versation. The wife's RCISS stonewalling during conflict was predicted by less wife interest ($-.21$, $p < .05$) and more wife contempt (.23, $p < .05$) during the events of the day conversation. For the husband's conflict discussion, the significant correlations were as follows. The husband's RCISS defensiveness during conflict was significantly predicted by higher SPAFF levels of the wife's contempt (.35, $p < .001$) and whining (.30, $p < .01$) during the events of the day conversation; the husband's contempt during conflict was significantly predicted by lower SPAFF levels of the wife's interest ($-.21$, $p < .05$) and higher levels of wife anger (.20, $p < .05$), wife contempt (.22, $p < .05$), and wife whining (.21, $p < .05$) during the events of the day conversation; the husband's stonewalling during conflict was significantly predicted by higher SPAFF levels of the wife's contempt (.21, $p < .05$) during the events of the day conversation. These analyses create a more mixed picture, with wives' behavior during events having greater predictability than husbands' but the overall pattern still leads one to conclude that both husband and wife behavior during conflict is presaged by their partner's and their own behavior during the events of the day conversation.

DISCUSSION

Comparisons of positive and negative affect across the conversations show that, despite the conversations having occurred in a fixed order, the two conversations were significantly different in the manner expected by the experimental induction. The conflict conversation induced significantly more negative and less positive affect.

What is the ecological validity of these two conversations? Based on what we know anecdotally about couples, most marital interaction research involving couples probably occurs in the context of the couples having previously had some kind of non-conflict conversation, perhaps in the car on the way over to the laboratory. Due to practical considerations, usually these studies are done in the evening, after the couples have discussed their day on the way to the laboratory, so the results of the present study could have some ecological validity. Our interviews with hundreds of couples suggest that the events of the day conversation is something that most couples do upon reunion at the end of a day. On the other hand, the conflict resolving discussion is relatively infrequent in the everyday interactions of couples. Many

couples tell us that the 15-minute conversation in our laboratory on this major issue in their marriage is the longest they have had in a very long time to talk about this topic.

At first one would think that a limitation of the present investigation was that the order of conversations was not randomized or counterbalanced. One could argue that without counterbalancing order, we can not say with confidence whether the same results would be obtained for conflict without the events of the day conversation preceding it. However, based on our experience, the reverse order would introduce a further complication, because the amount of conflict in the conflict conversation would spill over into the subsequent events of the day conversation (probably making it unrepresentative of events of most relatively neutral events of the day discussions), and the second conversation would then probably become an assessment of the couple's ability to rebound and contain negative affect. We would then not be able to comment on whether non-conflict interaction is a predictor of the way a couple resolves conflict. Of course, just because the events of the day discussion preceded the conflict discussion does not mean that the direction of causation was from the events conversation to the conflict conversation. The way the couple has attempted to resolve problems in the past probably affects the way they discuss the events of their day.

We found that generally the more emotional and the more negative and the less positive the way the couple discussed the events of their day, the more dysfunctional was their conflict resolution discussion, and this was true for husbands as well as wives. The ratios of positivity to negativity were significantly correlated across the two conversations. Furthermore, positive affects were often as predictive as negative affects. We might take from these results an hypothesis that the affective nature of everyday, mundane interaction may be the setting condition of emotional connection that can act so as to *cause* either dysfunctional or functional interaction around a problem area. This last statement is highly speculative. More likely the relationships between affective behavior across conversations is bi-directional. It is of considerable interest that they are significantly related. What these results probably should tell us is that it is possible that normal, everyday, non-conflict interaction, which is usually considerably less emotional than the conflict discussions, and described by most of our coders as usually quite boring, may provide the setting conditions for

the dysfunctional conflict resolution patterns that are highly predictive of the longitudinal course of the marriage. Conversely, the events of the day discussion may represent a reservoir of unresolved negative affect from previous conflict discussions.

We found that there was enormous consistency of emotional interaction across two very different contexts of marital conversation. At a minimum this suggests that marital researchers should consider contexts other than conflict for studying marital interaction.

In terms of the wife's startup of conflict, the Christensen wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern during conflict interactions was predicted by less positive affect (interest, validation, humor, and affection) of both husband and wife during the couple's discussion of the events of the day. The stringent partial correlation analyses suggest in fact that even controlling for the predictability between the wife's negative affect in the conflict conversation from her immediately prior negative affect in the events of the day conversation, the contribution of the husband's negative affect during the events of the day conversation was statistically significant.

Almost all of the analyses in the present report point to the conclusion that wives can not be considered the culprits of dysfunctional marital interaction, but that a marriage is clearly a system in which there is mutual influence across contexts of interaction. This conclusion may have been "obvious" from a feminist perspective, but our view is that the contention was worth demonstrating empirically. In fact, it may turn out to be clinically useful. Much marital research and marital therapy has focused heavily on the conflict resolution context.

Upon careful clinical qualitative reviewing of the video tapes we noticed that there appeared to be critical moments during the events of the day conversation that could be called either "requited or unrequited interest, excitement, humor, and affection." What we mean by "requited" in this context is a dimension of appropriate responsiveness to either positive or negative affect and "unrequited" refers to an inappropriate response or no response at all. In the events of the day discussion people made what we call "bids" for their spouse's interest, humor, affection, or excitement. The way the partner responded or failed to respond seemed critical to us. For example, in one couple in our study the wife excitedly reported about their young son having spent 30 minutes of rapt attention examining a flower in the garden that day, and she said "I thought they're supposed to have a very short

attention span at this age," but she was met with her husband's obvious disinterest. After a time of talking about errands that needed doing, he then talked excitedly about a new pump having arrived today so that he could repair their truck that weekend. His irritated wife then grilled him on how he had paid for the pump, and this opened up one of their major problem areas, his not balancing the checkbook before he writes a check. They later went on to discuss this issue, with a great deal of negative affect.

We suggest that the events of the day discussion can be a setting condition for how the couple discussed conflict and it may also tap a pervasive pattern of either positive (reciprocated interest, excitement, humor, or affection), or a kind of negative interaction pattern, which indexes the rest of the couple's non-conflict interaction, forming a pattern for either "turning toward" one another, or "turning away" from one another. Turning toward implies a pattern of requited positive or negative affect, turning away from a bid for interest, humor, affection, or excitement, whereas turning away implies a pattern of unrequited positive affect in which the bid for positive affect is either ignored or met with negative affect. We propose that the balance of positive affect and low negative affect, and this dimension of emotional responsiveness, then determine how the couple will enter the conflict discussion.

Gottman (1994) discussed the importance of "startup" and suggested that the very beginning of the conflict conversation determines the balance of positivity and negativity for the remaining 15 minutes for 96% of the cases: in plotting the cumulative sum of positive-minus-negative interactions over conversational turns, in only 4% of the cases was there any evidence of a check-mark pattern in which a couple reversed an initially negative start. Hence, despite the potential bi-directional nature of effects, on the basis of this study we wish to propose the hypothesis that changing the affective nature of the way couples discuss such mundane topics as the events of their day could affect the way they resolve conflict, and, therefore, possibly the future course of the marriage.

We are currently testing these ideas in an apartment laboratory in which couples spend 24 hours with only the admonition to act as much as possible as they normally would at home. This hypothesis suggests a new component of marital therapy that is worth testing, one that is designed to alter the way couples interact in everyday non-conflict

contexts. It is only by experiment that these notions of causal connection can adequately begin to be tested. This work is currently underway and in the pilot stage in our laboratory. We are conducting communication workshops for couples based on the idea that everyday interaction forms the setting conditions for the way the couple resolves conflict.

NOTE

1. The conflict discussion was followed by the couple filling out an inventory of positive topics and an interview in which they were asked to identify a topic that they would both enjoy discussing. The plan in following the conflict conversation was twofold: to debrief subjects so they could recover from the conflict conversation, and to assess the amount of recovery.

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