C H A P T E R 7

Communication, Power, and Conflict

Outline

What Do YOU Think?

Are the following statements **TRUE** or **FALSE**?
You may be surprised by the answers (see answer key on the bottom of this page).

T   F   **1** Conflict and intimacy go hand in hand in intimate relationships.

T   F   **2** Touching is one of the most significant means of communication.

T   F   **3** Always being pleasant and cheerful is the best way to avoid conflict and sustain intimacy.

T   F   **4** Studies suggest that those couples with the highest marital satisfaction tend to disclose more than those who are unsatisfied.

T   F   **5** Negative communication patterns before marriage are a poor predictor of marital communication because people change once they are married.

T   F   **6** Good communication is primarily the ability to offer excellent advice to your partner to help him or her change.

T   F   **7** Physical coercion is the method men use most often when disagreement arises between them and their partners.

T   F   **8** The party with the least interest in continuing a relationship generally has the power in it.

T   F   **9** Latinos and Asian Americans tend to rely on the nonverbal expression of intense feelings in contrast to direct verbal expressions.

T   F   **10** Wives tend to give more negative messages than husbands.

"Your mother called again."

What a simple, ordinary statement that sounds like. It hardly seems like the kind of comment that would provoke an argument, nor does it appear particularly revealing about the tone or quality of a marriage or relationship. It sounds so routine, so "matter-of-fact" that we might overlook its significance and potential effect on married or coupled life.

Of course, we only have the four words; we don't know *how* they were said. What was the tone of voice? The cadence or rhythm of speech—was it, "Your mother called again," or "Your mother called. Again." Or, combining tone and cadence, "Your mother called. Again!" We also have no information about the nonverbal signs. What was the expression on the face of the speaker—say a wife to a husband—when the statement was made? Did she smile? Roll her eyes? Frown? All of these aspects of nonverbal communication help reveal more of the meaning and significance of such a statement. Clearly, even such a simple comment as this may have greater importance than the four words otherwise convey.

Finally, of even greater significance is how the other person responds to a statement such as this one. Whether she or he responds with "an irritable groan," a laugh (as if to say "what, again!"), or with a positive discussion of his or her mother tells us a lot. A nonresponse may tell us yet more. It may suggest indifference and lack of interest in talking with the partner. Exchanges surrounding statements such as this one, "mundane and fleeting" as they may appear to be, can build and, in the process, greatly affect the quality of a relationship, the amount and nature of conflict, and the feeling of closeness and romance (Driver and Gottman 2004).

Thinking about the kinds of relationships that are the focus of this book, what is it you most want or expect from marriages, families, and other intimate

Answer Key for What Do You Think

1 True, see p. 259;   **2** True, see p. 240;   **3** False, see p. 238;   **4** True, see p. 251;   **5** False, see p. 244;   **6** False, see p. 254;   **7** False, see p. 256;   **8** True, see p. 257;   **9** True, see p. 241;   **10** True, see p. 246.

relationships? Chances are, if you list the many characteristics or qualities you desire in such relationships, somewhere on that list will be "communication." We want our loved ones to share their feelings and ideas with us and to understand the ideas or feelings that we voice to them. After all, as shown in the last chapter, that is how we expect to share intimacy. We want to be able to communicate effectively.

Chances are that "conflict" will not be included among desired relationship characteristics. After all, who wants to argue? We tend to see conflict as a negative to be avoided. Yet, conflict is as much a feature of intimate relationships as are love and affection. As long as we value, care about, and live with others, we will experience occasions when we disagree. An absence of conflict is not only unrealistic, it would be unhealthy. How we resolve our disagreements tells us much about the health of our relationships.

Both communication and conflict are inextricably connected to intimacy. When we speak of communication, we mean more than just the ability to relay information (for example, "Your mother called"), discuss problems, and resolve conflicts. We also mean communication for its own sake: the pleasure of being in each other's company, the excitement of conversation, the exchange of touches and smiles, the loving silences. Through communication we disclose who we are, and from this self-disclosure, intimacy grows.

One of the most common complaints of married partners, especially unhappy partners, is that they don't communicate. But it is impossible not to communicate—a cold look may communicate anger as effectively as a fierce outburst of words. What these unhappy partners mean by "not communicating" is that their communication is somehow driving them apart rather than bringing them together, feeding and creating conflict rather than resolving it. Communication patterns are strongly associated with marital satisfaction (Noller and Fitzpatrick 1991).

In this chapter, we explore patterns and problems in communication in marital and intimate relationships. We also examine the role of power in marital relationships, where it comes from, and how it is expressed. Finally, we look at the relationship between conflict and intimacy, exploring different types of conflict and approaches to conflict resolution. We look especially at three of the more common areas of relationship conflict: conflicts about sex, money, and housework.

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

When we communicate face to face, the messages we send and receive contain both a verbal and a nonverbal component. **Verbal communication** expresses the *basic content* of the message, whereas **nonverbal communication** reflects more of the *relationship* part of the message. The relationship part conveys the attitude of the speaker (friendly, neutral, or hostile) and indicates how the words are to be interpreted (as a joke, request, or command). To understand the full content of any message we need to understand both the verbal and nonverbal parts.

For a message to be most effective, both the verbal and the nonverbal components should be in agreement. If you are angry and say "I'm angry," and your facial expression and voice both show anger, the message is clear and convincing. But if you say "I'm angry" in a neutral tone of voice and a smile on your face, your message is ambiguous. More commonly, if you say "I'm not angry" but clench your teeth and use a controlled voice, your message is also unclear. Your tone and expression make your spoken message difficult to take at face value.

Nonverbal Communication

Whenever two or more people are together and aware of each other, it is impossible for them *not to communicate.* Even when you are not talking, you communicate by your silence (for example, an awkward silence, a hostile silence, or a tender silence). You communicate by the way you position your body and tilt your head, your facial expressions, your physical distance from the other person or people, and so on. Take a moment, right now, and look around you. If there are other people in your presence, how and what are they communicating nonverbally?

One of the problems with nonverbal communication, however, is the imprecision of its messages. Is a person frowning or squinting? Does the smile indicate friendliness or nervousness? A person may be in reflective silence, but we may interpret the silence as disapproval or distance. We may incorrectly infer meanings from expressions, eye contact, stance, and

proximity that are other than what is intended. However, by acting on the meaning we read into nonverbal behavior, we give it more weight and make it of greater consequence than it initially might have been.

Functions of Nonverbal Communication

More than 20 years ago, an important study of nonverbal communication and marital interaction found that nonverbal communication has the following three important functions in marriage (Noller 1984): (1) conveying interpersonal attitudes, (2) expressing emotions, and (3) handling the ongoing interaction.

Conveying Interpersonal Attitudes

Nonverbal messages are used to convey attitudes. Gregory Bateson describes nonverbal communication as revealing "the nuances and intricacies of how two people are getting along" (quoted in Noller 1984). Holding hands can suggest intimacy; sitting on opposite sides of the couch can suggest distance. Not looking at each other in conversation can suggest awkwardness or lack of intimacy. Rolling eyes at another's statement conveys a negative attitude or reaction to what's being said or the person saying it, even if the eye-rolling culprit claims, "What? I didn't say *anything.*"

Expressing Emotions

Our emotional states are expressed through our bodies. A depressed person walks slowly, head hanging; a happy person walks with a spring. Smiles, frowns, furrowed brows, tight jaws, tapping fingers—all express emotion. Expressing emotion is important because it lets our partner know how we are feeling so that he or she can respond appropriately. It also allows our partner to share our feelings, whether that means to laugh or weep with us. It is this feature of nonverbal communication that is most lacking from phone conversations and electronic communication. Without those emotional cues that we read and come to depend on, it is sometimes a challenge to know just what the person on the other end of the phone is "really saying."

Handling the Ongoing Interaction

Nonverbal communication helps us handle the ongoing interaction by indicating interest and attention. An intent look indicates our interest in the conversation; a yawn indicates boredom. Posture and eye contact are especially important. Are you leaning toward the person with interest or slumping back, thinking about something else? Do you look at the person who is talking, or are you distracted, glancing at other people as they walk by or watching the clock?

The Importance of Nonverbal Communication

According to psychologist John Gottman (1994), even seemingly simple acts, such as rolling one's eyes in response to a statement or complaint made by a spouse, can convey **contempt,** a feeling that the target of the expression is undesirable. Contempt can be displayed verbally as well through such things as insults, sarcasm, and mockery. Along with contempt, there are three other negative behaviors that indicate particularly troubled and vulnerable relationships. These others are criticism (especially when it is overly harsh), defensiveness, and stonewalling or avoiding. Together, these four behaviors made up Gottman's "four horsemen of the apocalypse," spelling potential for eventual divorce (Gottman 1994). Eventually, Gottman added a fifth—belligerence. Gottman suggested that these are all warning signs of serious risk of eventual divorce (Gottman 1994; Gottman et al. 1998). Conversely, couples who communicate with affection and interest and who maintain humor amid conflict can use such a *positive affect* to diffuse potentially threatening conflict (Gottman et al. 1998).

As you think about Gottman's danger signs, consider how easily they can be expressed and conveyed via nonverbal communication, as well as by things we say to each other. For example, failing to make eye contact is a way of avoiding or stonewalling. The common gesture of raising your hands in front of yourself and "pushing at the air" communicates defensiveness to those you are interacting with; it is as if you were saying "back off." In fact, nonverbally, you *are* saying just that.

Proximity, Eye Contact, and Touch

Three forms of nonverbal communication that have clear importance are proximity, eye contact, and touch.

Proximity

Nearness, in terms of physical space, time, and so on, is referred to as **proximity.** Where we sit or stand in relationship to another person can signify levels of

intimacy or the type of relationship. Many of our words conveying emotion relate to proximity, such as feeling "distant" or "close," or being "moved" by someone. We also "make the first move," "move in" on someone else's partner, or "move in together."

In a social situation, the face-to-face distances between people when starting a conversation are clues to how the individuals wish to define the relationship. All cultures have an intermediate distance in face-to-face interactions that are considered neutral. In most cultures, decreasing the distance signifies an invitation to greater intimacy or a threat. Moving away denotes the desire to terminate the interaction. When you stand at an intermediate distance from someone at a party, you send the message that intimacy is not encouraged. If you want to move closer, however, you risk the chance of rejection. Therefore, you must exchange cues, such as laughter or small talk, before moving closer to avoid facing direct rejection. If the person moves farther away during this exchange or, worse, leaves altogether ("Excuse me, I think I see a friend . . ."), he or she is signaling disinterest. But if the person moves closer, there is the "proposal" for greater intimacy. As relationships develop, couples also engage in close gazing into each other's eyes, holding hands, and walking with arms around each other—all of which require close proximity.

But because of cultural differences, there can be misunderstandings. The neutral distance for Latinos, for example, is much closer than for Anglos, who may misinterpret the distance as close (too close for comfort). In social settings, this can lead to problems. As Carlos Sluzki (1982) points out, "A person raised in a non-Latino culture will define as seductive behavior the same behavior that a person raised in a Latin culture defines as socially neutral." Because of the miscue, the Anglo may withdraw or flirt, depending on his or her feelings. If the Anglo flirts, the Latino may respond to what he or she believes is the other's initiation. In addition, the neutral responses of people in cultures that have greater intermediate distances and less overt touching, such as Asian American culture, may be misinterpreted negatively by people with other cultural backgrounds.

Eye Contact

Much can be discovered about a relationship by watching whether, how, and how long people look at each other. Making eye contact with another person, if only for a split second longer than usual, is a signal of in-

terest. Brief and extended glances, in fact, play a significant role in women's expression of initial interest (Moore 1985). (The word *flirting* is derived from the Old English word *fliting,* which means "darting back and forth," as so often occurs when someone flirts with his or her eyes.) When you can't take your eyes off another person, you probably have a strong attraction to him or her. You can often distinguish people in love by their prolonged looking into each other's eyes. In addition to eye contact, dilated pupils may be an indication of sexual interest (or poor lighting).

Research suggests that the amount of eye contact between a couple having a conversation can distinguish between those who have high levels of conflict and those who don't. Those with the greatest degree of agreement have the greatest eye contact with each other (Beier and Sternberg 1977). Those in conflict tend to avoid eye contact (unless it is a daggerlike stare). As with proximity, however, the level of eye contact may differ by culture.

Reflections

Think about your nonverbal communication. In instances where you and another person had significant eye contact, what did the eye contact mean? As you think about touch, what are the different kinds of touch you do? What meanings do you ascribe to the touch you give and the touch you receive?

Touch

A review of the research on touch finds it to be extremely important in human development, health, and sexuality (Hatfield 1994). It is the most basic of all senses; it contains receptors for pleasure and pain, hot and cold, rough and smooth. "Skin is the 'mother sense' and out of it, all the other senses have been derived," writes anthropologist Ashley Montagu (1986). Touch is a life-giving force for infants. If babies are not touched, they may fail to thrive and may even die. We hold hands with small children and those we love. Many of our words for emotion are derived from words referring to physical contact: *attraction, attachment,* and *feeling.* When we are emotionally moved by someone or something, we speak of being "touched."

But touch can also be a violation. A stranger or acquaintance may touch you in a way that is too familiar. Your date or partner may touch you in a manner you don't like or want. Some sexual harassment consists of unwelcome touching.

Touching is a universal part of social interaction, but it varies in both frequency and meaning across cultures and between women and men (Dibiase and Gunnoe 2004). Often, touch has been taken to reflect social dominance. Based largely and initially on research by Nancy Henley in which men were found to touch women more than women touched men, the generalization was drawn that touch is a privilege that higher-status, more socially dominant individuals enjoy over lower-status, more subordinate others.

Extending the issue of touch beyond gender to incorporate social class, professional status, and cultural differences, Henley demonstrated that higher-status individuals were more likely to touch others than to be touched by lower-status individuals. This generalization was further modified some by research that revealed that when individuals were of close but different statuses, the lower-status person often strategically used touch as a means of "making a connection" with the higher-status person. Status differences also determined the *type of touch;* lower-status individuals were more likely to initiate handshakes, and higher-status individuals were more likely to initiate somewhat more intimate touch such as placing a hand on another's shoulder (Dibiase and Gunnoe 2004).

Others have refined the relationship between gender and touch further, showing that women and men use different types of touch (with men touching women more with their hands and women touching men more with other forms of touch) and that gender differences in touch varied by age: among people under 30 years of age, men touched women significantly more than women touched men. This pattern does not appear to hold among older people or among married couples (Dibiase and Gunnoe 2004).

What about culture? Differences surface in a number of interesting ways. For example, people in colder climates use relatively larger distance, and hence relatively less physical contact, when they communicate, whereas people in warmer climates prefer closer distances. Latin Americans are comfortable at a closer range (have smaller personal space zones) than Northern Americans. Middle Eastern, Latin American, and southern European cultures can be considered "high-contact cultures," where people interact at closer distances and touch each other more in social conversations than people from noncontact cultures, such as those of northern Europe, the United States, and Asia (Dibiase and Gunnoe 2004). In so-called high-contact cultures, the kind of touch used in greetings is more intimate, often consisting of hugging or kiss-

ing, whereas a firm but more distant handshake is an accepted greeting in noncontact cultures.

Comparing women and men in the United States, Italy, and the Czech Republic, Rosemarie Dibiase and Jaime Gunnoe found that gender differences in touch varied across the three cultures. Although men engaged in more "hand touch" than women and women engaged in more "nonhand touch" in all three cultures, the extent of gender difference was not the same in the three countries observed. Dibiase and Gunnoe report that "only in the Czech Republic did men touch women with their hands significantly more than women touched men with their hands . . . (and) . . . there was a tendency for women to do more nonhand touching than men did. However, there were not significant differences between men and women living in the United States, and there were only trends toward differences in Italy." Only in the Czech Republic were the gender differences in nonhand touching significant (Dibiase and Gunnoe 2004).

Touch can signify more than dominance; it often is a way to convey intimacy, immediacy, and emotional closeness. Touch may well be the most intimate form of nonverbal communication. One researcher (Thayer 1986) writes, "If intimacy is proximity, then nothing comes closer than touch, the most intimate knowledge of another." Touching seems to go "hand in hand" with self-disclosure. Those who touch seem to self-disclose more; touch seems to be an important factor in prompting others to talk more about themselves (Heslin and Alper 1983; Norton 1983).

The amount of contact, from almost imperceptible touches to "hanging all over" each other, helps differentiate lovers from strangers. How and where a person is touched can suggest friendship, intimacy, love, or sexual interest.

Sexual behavior relies above almost all else on touch: the touching of self and others and the touching of hands, faces, chests, arms, necks, legs, and genitals. Sexual behavior is skin contact. In sexual interactions, touch takes precedence over sight, as we close our eyes to caress, kiss, and make love. We shut our eyes to focus better on the sensations aroused by touch; we shut out visual distractions to intensify the tactile experience of sexuality.

The ability to interpret nonverbal communication correctly appears to be an important ingredient in successful relationships. The statement, "What's wrong? *I can tell something is bothering you,*" reveals the ability to read nonverbal clues, such as body language or facial expressions. This ability is especially important

■ *We convey feelings via a variety of nonverbal means—proximity, touch, and eye contact.*

in ethnic groups and cultures that rely heavily on nonverbal expression of feelings, such as Latino and Asian American cultures. Although the value placed on nonverbal expression may vary among groups and cultures, the ability to communicate and understand nonverbally remains important in all cultures. A comparative study of Chinese and American romantic relationships, for example, found that shared nonverbal meanings were important for the success of relationships in both cultures (Gao 1991).

Gender Differences in Communication

The idea that women and men communicate differently has been the subject of much research and writing (Rubin 1983; Tannen 1990; Gray 1993), including best sellers bemoaning our lack of understanding and

inabilities to communicate with each other. Gender differences surface whether we examine nonverbal or verbal communication, and they become especially pronounced in cross-sex interaction.

Compared with men's nonverbal communication patterns, women smile more; express a wider range of emotions through their facial expressions; occupy, claim, and control less space; and maintain more eye contact with others with whom they are interacting (Borisoff and Merrill 1985; Lindsey 1997). In their use of language and their styles of speaking, further differences emerge (Lakoff 1975; Tannen 1990; Lindsey 1997). Women use more qualifiers (for example, "It's *sort of* cold out"), use more tag questions ("It's sort of cold out, *don't you think?*"), use a wider variety of intensifiers ("It was *awfully* nice out yesterday; now it's sort of cold out, don't you think?"), and speak in more polite and less insistent tones. Male speech contains fewer words for such things as color, texture, food, relationships, and feelings, but men use more and harsher profanity (Lindsey 1997). In cross-sex interaction, men talk more and interrupt women more than women interrupt men. In same-gender conversation, men disclose less personal information and restrict themselves to safer topics, such as sports, politics, or work (Lindsey 1997).

The male styles of both verbal and nonverbal communication fit more with positions of dominance, women's with positions of subordination. At the same time, women's style is one of cooperation and consensus; thus, it is also situationally appropriate and advantageous to relationship building and maintenance (Tannen 1990; Lindsey 1997). In light of these facts, researchers differ in their interpretations of these gender patterns: those who see women's style as artifacts of subordination versus those who see gender patterns as reflecting difference.

Communication Patterns in Marriage

Communication occupies an important place in marriage. When couples have communication problems they often fear that their marriages are seriously flawed. As shown in a subsequent section, one of the most common complaints of couples seeking therapy is about their communication problems (Burleson and Denton 1997).

Popular Culture

Buying into Mars versus Venus: Popularizing Gender Differences in Intimate Communication

Linguist Deborah Tannen tells this story:

A married couple was in a car when the wife turned to her husband and asked, "Would you like to stop for a coffee?"

"No, thanks," he answered truthfully. So they didn't stop.

The result? The wife, who had indeed wanted to stop, became annoyed because she felt her preference had not been considered. The husband, seeing his wife was angry, became frustrated. Why didn't she just say what she wanted?

To some of you, that story may be familiar, perhaps like one you encountered or witnessed yourself. Furthermore, it reflects a basic reality of communication and, more generally, of gender differences. Remember the discussion in Chapter 4, about the *gender lenses* that fundamentally shape our thinking about gender. Chief among these is *gender polarization*, the idea that there are basic and unavoidable differences between the genders, an idea. If women are expressive, men must be stoic. If men are aggressive and competitive, women must be passive and cooperative. Although there are real gender differences, we exaggerate many of them and fabricate still others.

Communication, especially between spouses or heterosexual intimate partners, is one area in which the idea of the genders as opposites is deeply believed and widely accepted. As we shall see, there *are* gendered styles of both verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as differences in how women and men approach, handle, and attempt to resolve conflict. These differences are not inevitable, although some research indicates that biological differences may help account for certain aspects of communication differences (especially regarding conflict). Furthermore, these differences are categorical ones; there are people whose style of communicating or approach to resolving conflict is more like the "opposite sex." In addition, gender differences are affected by culture and by the specific circumstances in which couples find themselves. Our point for now, is not whether differences exist or how wide they are but how widely we have accepted, even embraced, the notion that women's and men's communication patterns are so different.

One indicator of the extent of popular belief in gender-polarized communication can be found in the appeal of popular and "self-help" books that have addressed this divide. In 1990, Tannen published the hardcover edition of her book, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation.* The book struck a nerve with readers, spending 8 months as the No. 1 best-selling book on the *New York Times* best seller list and remaining on the list for almost 4 years. Tannen is an accomplished scholar; she has a doctorate degree in linguistics, has authored more than 100 articles and books, and is a faculty member at Georgetown University. *You Just Don't Understand* brought Tannen's scholarly expertise on gender differences in communication to a popular audience. Its appeal was broad and international, as it was a best seller in a number of other countries, including Canada, England, Germany, Brazil, and Holland.

Tannen's thesis was straightforward: because men and women have such different needs and styles of communication, it is almost as though they are from different cultures, struggling to communicate despite speaking different languages. Communication across such differences invites frustration, misunderstanding, and conflict. Tannen (1990) located these communication differences in early socialization:

Little girls create and maintain friendships by exchanging secrets. Women regard conversation as the cornerstone of friendship. A woman expects her husband to be a new and improved version of a best friend. What is important is not the individual subjects that are discussed but the sense of closeness, of a life shared, that emerges when people tell their thoughts, feelings, and impressions. But . . . men don't know what kind of talk women want, and they don't miss it when it isn't there.

Tannen (1990) also raised the possibility that when women feel as though men "aren't really listening to them," they are—they just happen to *listen differently:*

The impression of not listening results from misalignments in the mechanics of conversation . . . the tendency of men to face away can give women the impression they aren't listening even when they are.

Additionally, where females may talk at length about a single topic, males jump from topic to topic, ". . . (a) habit that gives women the impression men aren't listening, especially if they switch to a topic about themselves."

Tannen went on to suggest other reasons for communication-related misunderstandings.

- Men don't make as much "listener noise" as women ("uh-huh," "yeah," and so on), even when they are paying attention. Expecting such reassuring signs of attentiveness, women may misinterpret men's silent attention as
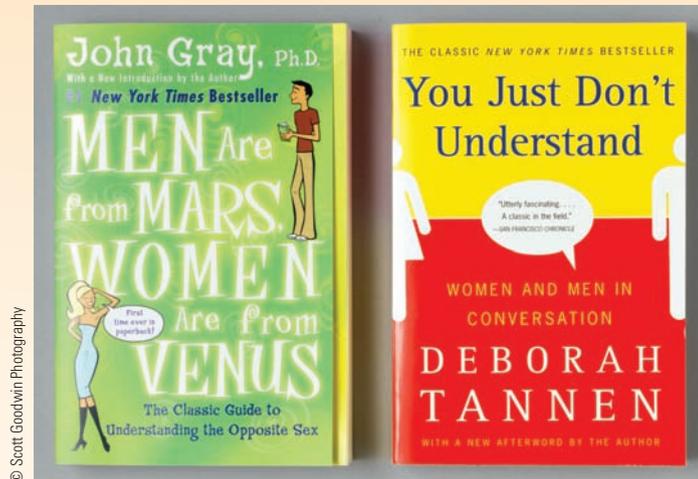
■ *Deborah Tannen's,* You Just Don't Understand..., *and John Gray's* Men Are from Marks, Women Are from Venus, *have sold millions of copies in the United States and worldwide. Each brings the issue of gender differences in communication to a popular audience.*

not paying attention. Meanwhile, men may interpret women's listener noise as overreaction or impatience and perceive women's tendencies to "overlap," (finish each other's sentences in anticipation of what the other is about to say) as intrusive interruption.

■ Women and men expect different things from conversation. When women talk to each other, they expect agreement and support. Many men perceive their "conversational duty" to be to represent the other side of an argument. To women, this is heard and, more importantly, felt as disloyalty. Women do want to see other points of view, but they don't want to feel directly challenged.

■ Women engage in what Tannen calls **rapport talk,** men in **report talk.** To men, language is a means to convey information. To women, talk is a way to build and sustain relationships, and conversations

are occasions to seek and give support and to reach consensus.

■ Women see conversation as a ritual means of establishing and sustaining intimacy. "If Jane tells a problem and June says she has a similar one, they walk away feeling closer to each other." In a relationship like marriage you can share your feelings and thoughts and still be loved. Women's greatest fear is being pushed away. Therefore, they may mistake men's ritual challenges for real attack. However, in men's experience talk maintains independence and status. They are on guard to protect themselves from being put down and pushed around.

Given these differences in how we communicate and what we expect from others, problems are nearly inevitable. But knowing the origin and understanding the motivations behind gender differences, we can come to an understanding of and

begin to try to fix communication problems in marriage. If we come to see communication differences as "cross-cultural" rather than as "right and wrong," or as difference rather than deficiency, it is easier to alter our behavior and our expectations of the other.

Tannen followed the success of *You Just Don't Understand* with books on gendered communication in the workplace, family communication between adults, and most recently communication between mothers and daughters. Her books have raised awareness and shaped the way we think about dynamics of family communication, especially across such divides as gender and generation.

Further evidence of how deeply accepted and widely embraced the idea of gender polarization is within the United States can be seen in the phenomenal success enjoyed by John Gray's *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus,* and its many follow-ups. Most of Gray's books build off of the same clever idea first introduced in the 1992 best seller *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus,* where Gray takes the issue of gender differences in a distinctive metaphorical direction. Instead of cross-cultural counterparts, women and men are portrayed as inhabitants of different planets, and—hence—as worlds apart.

As to Gray's Martian and Venutian ways of communicating, they clearly are meant to reflect observed patterns more typical of men and women. For example, when women/Venutians complain about something, they want to be heard and understood. When men/Martians voice feelings, they want action and solutions. Offering men "understanding" or women "solutions" will generate frustration and lead to problems.

Gray and Tannen have different approaches and backgrounds. Gray

Continues

http://www.cartoonstock.com

"I'm going to Venus. He's going to Mars."

CD-ROM, Mars and Venus vacations) (Gleick 1997).

Both Tannen and Gray have been the recipients of criticism, accused of overgeneralization (Shweder 1994); failure to look at larger social, cultural, or political contexts; or one-sidedness (Tannen accused by some of being "anti-male" and by others of being too soft on men; Gray labeled by some a misogynist with a sexist biases in his characterization of communication). In Gray's case, there have also been repeated questions to his claims about his academic credentials and training. He has also been accused of being, in his own words, a "watered-down version of Deborah Tannen" (Gleick 1997). But despite any criticism either may have received, they have been extremely influential in shaping how many people think about and act in relationships

lacks the academic background and scholarly approach that Tannen brought to *You Just Don't Understand.* As *Time* magazine reported in 1997, where Tannen's book has numerous footnotes to source material on gender and communication, Gray offers 1-800 numbers from which readers can order *Mars and Venus* products (including audio and videotapes, a

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There has been an explosion of research on premarital and marital communication in the last decade. Researchers are finding significant correlations between the nature of communication and satisfaction, as well as finding differences in male versus female communication patterns in marriage.

Premarital Communication Patterns and Marital Satisfaction

"Drop dead, you creep!" is hardly the thing someone would want to say when trying to resolve a disagreement in a dating relationship. But it may be an important clue as to whether such a couple should marry. Many couples who communicate poorly before marriage are likely to continue the same way after marriage, and the result can be disastrous for future marital happiness. Researchers have found that how well a couple communicates before marriage can be an important predictor of later marital satisfaction (Cate and Lloyd 1992). If communication is poor before marriage, it is not likely to significantly improve after marriage—at least not without a good deal of effort and help.

For example, *self-disclosure*—the revelation of our own deeply personal information—before or soon after marriage is related to relationship satisfaction later (see Chapter 5). In one study (Surra, Arizzi, and Asmussen 1988), men and women were interviewed shortly after marriage and 4 years later. The researchers found that self-disclosure was an important factor for increasing each other's commitment later. Talking about your deepest feelings and revealing yourself to your partner builds bonds of trust that help cement a marriage.

Whether a couple's interactions are basically negative or positive can also predict later marital satisfaction. In a notable experiment by John Markham (1979), 14 premarital couples were evaluated using "table talk," sitting around a table and simply engaging in conversation. Each couple talked about various topics. Using an electronic device, each partner electronically recorded whether the message was positive

or negative. Markham found that the negativity or positivity of the couple's communication pattern barely affected their marital satisfaction during their first year. This protective quality of the first year is known as the **honeymoon effect**—which means you can say almost anything during the first year and it will not seriously affect marriage (Huston, McHale, and Crouter 1986). But after the first year, couples with negative premarital communication patterns were less satisfied than those with positive communication patterns. A later study (Julien, Markman, and Lindahl 1989) found that those premarital couples who responded more to each other's positive communication than to each other's negative communication were more satisfied in marriage 4 years later.

Cohabitation and Later Marital Communication

As shown in the next chapter, researchers have revealed a cohabitation effect on marriage. Specifically, couples who live together before marrying are more likely to separate and divorce than couples who don't live together before marriage. That may seem counterintuitive. Wouldn't couples who live together first find it easier to adjust to marriage? Doesn't cohabitation weed out the unsuccessful matches before marriage? In Chapter 8, we consider the range of explanations for this cohabitation effect. Here, we simply look at how communication patterns might contribute to later marital failure.

Among the possible explanations for the cohabitation effect, Catherine Cohan and Stacey Kleinbaum (2002) hypothesized that spouses who live together before marrying display more negative problem solving and support behavior compared with their counterparts who marry without first living together. Why would cohabitation lead to poorer marital communication? Cohan and Kleinbaum suggest three possible reasons:

1. Couples who live together come from backgrounds that may predispose them to poorer communication abilities. Compared with couples who don't cohabit, cohabitants tend to be younger, less religious, and more likely to come from divorced homes. Cohan and Kleinbaum point out that this translates into them being less mature, less traditional, and less likely to have had good parental role models for effective communication.

2. People who cohabit may be more accepting of divorce and less committed to marriage. Thus, they may expend less effort or energy developing good marital communication skills because they are less sure they will stay married.

3. Cohabitation is associated with factors such as alcohol use, infidelity, and lower marital satisfaction, which in turn are correlated with less effective communication.

In studying 92 couples who were in their first 2 years of marriage, Cohan and Kleinbaum found that premarital cohabitation was associated with poorer marital communication. Couples with one or more cohabitation experiences displayed poorer, more divisive, and more destructive communication behaviors than did couples with no prior cohabitation experience (Cohan and Kleinbaum 2002).

Marital Communication Patterns and Satisfaction

Researchers have found a number of patterns that distinguish the communication patterns in satisfied and dissatisfied marriages (Gottman 1995; Hendrick 1981; Noller and Fitzpatrick 1991; Schaap, Buunk, and Kerkstra 1988). Couples in satisfied marriages tend to have the following characteristics:

- Willingness to accept conflict but to engage in conflict in nondestructive ways.
- Less frequent conflict and less time spent in conflict. Both satisfied and unsatisfied couples, however, experience conflicts about the same topics, especially about communication, sex, and personality characteristics.
- The ability to disclose or reveal private thoughts and feelings, especially positive ones, to a partner. Dissatisfied spouses tend to disclose mostly negative thoughts to their partners.
- Expression by both partners of equal levels of affection, such as tenderness, words of love, and touch.
- More time spent talking, discussing personal topics, and expressing feelings in positive ways.
- The ability to encode (send) verbal and nonverbal messages accurately and to decode (understand) such messages accurately. This is especially important for husbands. Unhappy partners may actually decode the messages of strangers more accurately than those from their partners.

■ *Touch is one of our primary means of communication. It conveys intimacy, immediacy, and emotional closeness.*

Gender Differences in Partner Communication

In addition to overall gender differences in communication noted earlier, researchers have identified several gender differences in how spouses communicate (Klinetob and Smith 1996; Noller and Fitzpatrick 1991; Thompson and Walker 1989).

First, wives tend to *send clearer messages* to their husbands than their husbands send to them. Wives are often more sensitive and responsive to their husbands' messages, both during conversation and during conflict. They are more likely to reply to either positive messages ("You look great") or negative messages ("You look awful") than are their husbands, who may not reply.

Second, wives tend to *give more positive or negative messages;* they tend to smile or laugh when they send messages, and they send fewer clearly neutral messages. Husbands' neutral responses make it more difficult for wives to decode what their partners are trying to say. If a wife asks her husband if they should go to dinner or see a movie and he gives a neutral response, such as, "Whatever," does he really not care, or is he pretending he doesn't care to avoid possible conflict?

Third, although communication differences in arguments between husbands and wives are usually small, they nevertheless follow a typical pattern. Wives tend to *set the emotional tone* of an argument. They escalate conflict with negative verbal and nonverbal messages ("Don't give me that!") or deescalate arguments by setting an atmosphere of agreement ("I understand your feelings"). Husbands' inputs are less important in setting the climate for resolving or escalating conflicts. Wives tend to *use emotional appeals and threats more than husbands,* who tend to reason, seek conciliation, and find ways to postpone or end an argument. A wife is more likely to ask, "Don't you love me?" whereas a husband is more likely to say, "Be reasonable."

A prominent type of marital communication is referred to as **demand–withdraw communication**—a pattern in which one spouse makes an effort to engage the other spouse in a discussion of some issue of importance. The spouse raising the issue may criticize, complain, or suggest a need for change in his or her spouse's behavior. The other spouse, in response to such overtures, withdraws by either leaving the discussion, failing to reply, or changing the subject (Klinetob and Smith 1996).

In seeking change, the person making the demand is in a potentially vulnerable position and has less power than the person withdrawing from the interaction. The latter can choose to change or not. By withdrawing, she or he maintains the status quo. Withdrawal has other consequences. It keeps the conflict from escalating but may curtail needed communication and prevent necessary relationship adjustment (Sagrestano, Heavey, and Christensen 1999).

The demand–withdraw pattern has been found by researchers to be associated with gender. In 60% of couples, wives "demand" and husbands "withdraw." In 30% of couples, these roles are reversed. In the remaining 10%, spouses demand and withdraw about equally (Klinetob and Smith 1996). Researchers have considered a variety of explanations for the more common gender differences in demanding and withdrawing, including psychological, biological, and structural factors (Christensen and Heavey 1990). Research conducted by Nadya Klinetob and David Smith suggests that the demand and withdraw roles vary according to whose issue is being discussed: "During discussions of a wife-generated topic, she was the demander and her husband withdrew. During discussions of a husband-generated topic, he demanded and she withdrew" (1996, 954). They further suggest that

because marriage relationships often favor husbands, husbands will be less likely to bring up issues for discussion, because the relationship *as is* is more acceptable to them. On the other hand, because wives may be more discontented with aspects of the relationship and bring them up for discussion, they more often occupy the "demand" position (Klinetob and Smith 1996).

Although there are certainly socialization influences behind these gender differences, biologically based gender differences may also come into play. Men and women may have different physiological responses to conflict, and these may help produce the familiar male withdrawal that is part of the female demand–male withdraw pattern of communication. With greater tolerance for physiological arousal, women can maintain the kinds of high levels of engagement that conflict contains. John Gottman and Robert Levenson (1992) reported that compared to women, men show different physiological reactions—more rapid heart beat, quickened respiration, release of higher level of epinephrine in their endocrine systems—to disagreements. To men, this arousal is highly unpleasant; thus, they act to avoid it by withdrawing from the conflict. Withdrawal may be a means of avoiding these reactions (Gottman and Levenson 1992; Levenson Carstensen, and Gottman 1994).

Although the demand–withdraw pattern is fairly common, it is not a particularly healthy style of communication and conflict resolution. It is associated with less marital satisfaction and higher likelihood of relationship failure (Regan 2003). It also may be a predictor of violence within the couple relationship, especially among couples with high levels of husband demand–wife withdraw. Such couples are more likely to experience violence than are couples who have low levels of this pattern. Conversely, the more common wife demand–husband withdraw pattern may have the consequence of preventing conflict from escalating into violence (Sagrestano, Heavey, and Christensen 1999). Although both patterns were associated with wives' verbal aggression, and with husbands' verbal aggression and violence, only husband demand–wife withdraw interaction was significantly related to women's use of violence (Sagrestano, Heavey, and Christensen 1999).

Sexual Communication

To have a satisfying sexual relationship, a couple must be able to communicate effectively with each other about expectations, needs, attitudes, and preferences (Regan 2003). Both the frequency with which couples engage in sexual relations and the quality of their involvement depend on such communication.

Among heterosexuals, in both married and cohabiting relationships, women and men often follow sexual scripts that leave the initiation of sex (that is, the communication of desire and interest) to men, with women then in a position of accepting or refusing men's overtures. Reviewing the literature on sexual communication, Pamela Regan observes that regardless of who takes the role of initiating, the efforts are usually met with positive responses. Both attempts to initiate and positive responses are rarely communicated explicitly and verbally (Regan 2003, 84):

> A person who desires sexual activity might turn on the radio to a romantic soft rock station, pour his or her partner a glass of wine, and glance suggestively in the direction of the bedroom. The partner . . . might smile, put down his or her book, and engage in other nonverbal behaviors that continue the sexual interaction without explicitly acknowledging acceptance.

Interestingly, lack of interest or refusal of sexual initiations is communicated directly and verbally (for example, "Not tonight, I have a lot of work to do"). By framing refusal in terms of some kind of account, the refusing partner allows the rejected partner to save face (Regan 2003).

Effective sexual communication may be difficult, but it is important if couples hope to construct and keep mutually satisfying sexual relationships. We must trust our partner enough to express our feelings about sexual needs, desires, and dislikes, and we must be able to hear the same from our partner without feeling judgmental or defensive (Regan 2003).

Problems in Communication

Studies suggest that poor communication skills precede the onset of marital problems (Gottman 1994; Markman 1981; Markman et al. 1987). Even family violence has been seen by some as the consequence of deficiencies in the ability to communicate (Burleson and Denton 1997).

Although we cannot *not* communicate, we can enhance the quality of our communication so that we can understand each other and enhance our relationships. We can learn to communicate constructively rather than destructively. What follows, we hope, will

help you develop good communication skills so that your relationships are mutually rewarding.

Topic-Related Difficulty

Some communication problems are topic dependent more than individual or relationship based. By that we mean that some topics are more difficult for couples to talk about. As Keith Sanford (2003, 98) states, "it would seem easier to resolve a disagreement about what to do on a Friday night than a disagreement about whether one spouse is having an affair." If some topics are more difficult to discuss than others, couples are likely to display poorer communication when discussing those topics (98):

> If a couple is coping with a highly difficult, unresolved topic (for example, insults) . . . they might be likely to use poor communication in all their conflicts, whether the specific topic being discussed is easy or difficult for most couples.

In an attempt to determine the difficulty of different topics, Sanford gave a sample of 12 licensed Ph.D. psychologists a list of topics and asked them to provide their best guess as to how difficult each topic is for couples to discuss and resolve (from 1 = Extremely easy to 5 = Extremely difficult). The list consisted of 24 topics, generated from a sample of 37 couples who were asked to identify two unresolved issues in their relationships. The 10 topics to which the psychologists assigned the highest "difficulty scores" are listed in Table 7.1.

Other familiar relationship trouble spots and their assigned ratings include childrearing issues (3.42), finances (3.42), lack of listening (3.08), household tasks (2.33), and not showing sufficient appreciation (2.25). Interestingly, as determinants of communication behavior during attempts at problem solving, the difficulty of a topic showed only a small to negligible effect. Thus, although the scores demonstrate differences in the sensitivity contained in different marital issues, these differences do not, themselves, appear to determine how couples communicate about them (Sanford 2003).

Communication Styles in Miscommunication

Virginia Satir noted in *Peoplemaking* (1972), her classic work on family communication, that people can be classified according to four styles of *miscommunication:*

Table 7.1 ■ Ten Topics That Are Most Difficult for Couples to Discuss

Topic	Difficulty Score*
Relationship doubts (possibility of divorce)	4.58
Disrespectful behavior (lying, rudeness)	4.50
Extramarital intimacy boundary issues (use of pornography, jealousy)	4.42
Excessive or inappropriate display of anger (yelling, attacking)	4.25
Sexual interaction	4.17
Lack of communication (refusal to talk)	4.00
In-laws and extended family	3.83
Confusing, erratic, emotional behavior	3.75
Criticism	3.58
Poor communication skills (being unclear or hard to understand)	3.46

*1 = Extremely easy; 5 = Extremely difficult.

- *Placaters.* Always agreeable, placaters are passive, speak in an ingratiating manner, and act helpless. If a partner wants to make love when a placater does not, the placater will not refuse because that might cause a scene. No one knows what placaters really want or feel—and they themselves often do not know.

- *Blamers.* Acting superior, blamers are tense, often angry, and gesture by pointing. Inside, they feel weak and want to hide this from everyone (including themselves). If a blamer runs short of money, the partner is the one who spent it; if a child is conceived by accident, the partner should have used contraception. The blamer does not listen and always tries to escape responsibility.

- *Computers.* Correct and reasonable, computers show only printouts, not feelings (which they consider dangerous). "If one takes careful note of my increasing heartbeat," a computer may tonelessly say, "one must be forced to come to the conclusion that I'm angry." The partner who is interfacing, also a computer, does not change expression and replies, "That's interesting."

- *Distractors.* Acting frenetic and seldom saying anything relevant, distractors flit about in word and deed. Inside, they feel lonely and out of place. In difficult situations, distractors light cigarettes and

■ *How partners express and handle conflict verbally, as well as nonverbally, says much about the direction in which the relationship is heading.*

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talk about school, politics, business—anything to avoid discussing relevant feelings. If a partner wants to discuss something serious, a distracter changes the subject.

Why People Might Communicate Ineffectively

We can learn to communicate, but it is not always easy. Traditional male gender roles, for example, work against the idea of expressing feelings. This role calls for men to be strong and silent, to ride off into the sunset alone. If men talk, they talk about things—cars, politics, sports, work, money—but not about feelings. Also, both men and women may have personal reasons for not expressing their feelings. They may have strong feelings of inadequacy: "If you really knew what I was like, you wouldn't like me." They may feel ashamed of, or guilty about, their feelings: "Sometimes I feel attracted to other people, and it makes me feel guilty because I should only be attracted to you." They may feel vulnerable: "If I told you my real feelings, you might hurt me." They may be frightened of their feelings: "If I expressed my anger, it would destroy you." Finally, people may not communicate because they are fearful that their feelings and desires will create conflict: "If I told you how I felt, you would get angry."

Obstacles to Self-Awareness

Before we can communicate with others, we must first know how we feel. Although feelings are valuable guides for actions, we often place obstacles in the way of expressing them. First, we suppress "unacceptable" feelings, especially feelings such as anger, hurt, and jealousy. After a while, we may not even consciously experience them. Second, we deny our feelings. If we are feeling hurt and our partner looks at our pained expression and asks us what we're feeling, we may reply, "Nothing." We may actually feel nothing because we have anesthetized our feelings. Third, we project our feelings. Instead of recognizing that we are jealous, we may accuse our partner of being jealous; instead of feeling hurt, we may say our partner is hurt.

Becoming aware of ourselves requires us to become aware of our feelings. Perhaps the first step toward this self-awareness is realizing that feelings are simply emotional states—they are neither good nor bad in themselves. As feelings, however, they need to be felt,

Reflections

Do you find that any of the stated styles of miscommunication characterize your own communication patterns? Your partner's style? What happens if you and your partner have similar styles? Different styles?

Exploring Diversity Ethnicity and Communication

Different ethnic groups within our culture have different language patterns that affect the way they communicate. African Americans, for instance, have distinct communication patterns (Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau 1993). Language and expressive patterns are characterized by emotional vitality, realness, and valuing direct experience, among other things (White and Parham 1990). Emotional vitality is expressed in the animated use of words. Realness refers to "telling it like it is" using concrete, nonabstract words. Direct experience is valued because "there is no substitute in the Black ethos for actual experience gained in the course of living" (White and Parham 1990). "Mother wit"—practical or experiential knowledge—may be valued over knowledge gained from books or lectures.

Latinos, especially traditional Latinos, assume that intimate feelings will not be discussed openly (Guerrero

Pavich 1986). One researcher (Falicov 1982) writes this about Mexican Americans: "Ideally, there should be a certain formality in the relationship between spouses. No deep intimacy or intense conflict is expected. Respect, consideration, and curtailment of anger or hostility are highly valued." Confrontations are to be avoided; negative feelings are not to be expressed. As a consequence, nonverbal communication is especially important. Women are expected to read men's behavior for clues to their feelings and for discovering what is acceptable. Because confrontations are unacceptable, secrets are important. Secrets are shared between friends but not between partners.

Asian American ethnic groups are less individualistic than the dominant American culture. Whereas the dominant culture views the ideal individual as self-reliant and self-sufficient, Asian American subcultures are more relationally oriented. Researchers Steve Shon and Davis Ja (1982) note the following about Asian Americans:

> They emphasize that individuals are the products of their relationship to nature and other people. Thus,

heavy emphasis is placed on their relationship with other people, generally with the aim of maintaining harmony through proper conduct and attitudes.

Asian Americans are less verbal and expressive in their interactions than are both African Americans and Caucasians; instead, they rely to a greater degree on indirect and nonverbal communication, such as silence and the avoidance of eye contact as signs of respect (Del Carmen 1990). Because harmonious relationships are highly valued, Asian Americans tend to avoid direct confrontation if possible. Japanese Americans, for example, "value implicit, nonverbal intuitive communication over explicit, verbal, and rational exchange of information" (Del Carmen 1990). To avoid conflict, verbal communication is often indirect or ambiguous; it skirts around issues instead of confronting them. As a consequence, in interactions Asian Americans rely on the other person to interpret the meaning of a conversation or nonverbal clues.

whether they are warm or cold, pleasurable or painful. They do not necessarily need to be acted on or expressed. It is the acting out that holds the potential for problems or hurt.

Problems in Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure creates the environment for mutual understanding (Derlega et al. 1993). We live much of our lives playing roles—as student and worker, husband or wife, son or daughter. We live and act these roles conventionally. They do not necessarily reflect our deepest selves. If we pretend that we are only these roles and ignore our deepest selves, we have taken the path toward loneliness and isolation. We may reach a point

at which we no longer know who we are. In the process of revealing ourselves to others, we discover who we are. In the process of our sharing, others share themselves with us. Self-disclosure is reciprocal.

Keeping Closed

Having been taught to be strong, men may be more reluctant to express feelings of weakness or tenderness than women. Many women find it easier to disclose their feelings, perhaps because from earliest childhood they are more often encouraged to express them (Notarius and Johnson 1982).

If distinct differences exist, they can drive wedges between men and women. One sex does not understand the other. The differences may plague a marriage

until neither partner knows what the other wants; sometimes partners don't even know what they want for themselves. Sometimes, what is missing is the intimacy that comes from self-disclosure. People live together, or are married, but they feel lonely. There is no contact, and the loneliest loneliness is to feel alone with someone with whom we want to feel close.

How Much Openness?

Can too much openness and honesty be harmful to a relationship? How much should intimates reveal to each other? Some studies suggest that less marital satisfaction results if partners have too little *or too much* disclosure; a happy medium offers security, stability, and safety. But a review of studies on the relationship between communication and marital satisfaction finds that a linear model of communication is more closely related to marital satisfaction than the too little–too much curvilinear model (Boland and Follingstad 1987). In the linear model of communication, the greater the self-disclosure, the greater the marital satisfaction, provided that the couple is highly committed to the relationship and willing to take the risks of high levels of intimacy. High self-disclosure can be a highly charged undertaking. Studies suggest that high levels of negativity are related to marital distress (Noller and Fitzpatrick 1991). It is not clear whether the negativity reflects the marital distress or causes it. Most

likely, the two interact and compound each other's effects.

Research by Brant Burleson and Wayne Denton suggests that the relationship between communication skill and marital success and satisfaction is "quite complex" (1997, 889). In a study of 60 couples, the researchers explored the importance of four communication skills in determining marital satisfaction:

- *Communication effectiveness:* producing messages that have their intended effect
- *Perceptual accuracy:* correctly understanding the intentions underlying a message
- *Predictive accuracy:* accurately anticipating the effect of the message on another
- *Interpersonal cognitive complexity:* the capacity to process social information

Prior research had indicated that each of the preceding skills were important in differentiating satisfied from dissatisfied couples or nondistressed from distressed couples. Based on their research, Burleson and Denton suggest that *communication skill* may not adequately explain levels of distress or dissatisfaction. The intentions and feelings being communicated were more important factors separating distressed from nondistressed couples. Spouses in distressed couples had "more negative intentions" toward each other. "The negative communication behaviors frequently

■ *A pivotal aspect of effective communication, self-disclosure is reciprocal.*

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observed in distressed spouses may result more from ill will than poor skill" (1997, 897). Burleson and Denton also observe that good communication skills can worsen marital relationships when spouses have "negative intentions toward one another" (1997, 900).

"Can I Trust You?"

When we talk about intimate relationships, among the words that most often pop up are *love* and *trust.* As shown in the discussion of love in Chapter 5, trust is an important part of love. But what is trust? **Trust** is the belief in the reliability and integrity of a person.

When a person says, "Trust me," he or she is asking for something that does not easily occur. For trust to develop, three conditions must exist (Book et al. 1980). First, a relationship has to exist and have the likelihood of continuing. We generally do not trust strangers or people we have just met, especially with information that makes us vulnerable, such as our sexual anxieties. We trust people with whom we have a significant relationship.

Second, we must believe we are able to predict how the person will behave. If we are married or in a committed relationship, we trust that our partner will not do something that will hurt us, such as having an affair. If we discover that our partner is involved in an affair, we often speak of our trust being violated or destroyed. If trust is destroyed in this case, it is because the *predictability* of sexual exclusiveness is no longer there.

Third, the person must have other acceptable options available to him or her. If we were marooned on a desert island alone with our partner, he or she would have no choice but to be sexually monogamous. But if a third person, who was sexually attractive to our partner, swam ashore a year later, then our partner would have an alternative. Our partner would then have a choice of being sexually exclusive or nonexclusive; his or her behavior would then be evidence of trustworthiness—or the lack of it.

Matter of Fact

The happiest couples are those who balance autonomy with intimacy and negotiate personal and couple boundaries through supportive communication (Scarf 1995).

Trust is critical to communication in close relationships for two reasons (Book et al. 1980). First, the degree to which you trust a person influences the way you are likely to interpret ambiguous or unexpected messages. If your partner says he or she wants to study alone tonight, you are likely to take the statement at face value if you have a high trust level. But if you have a low trust level, you may believe your partner is going to meet someone else while you are studying in the library. Second, the degree to which we trust someone influences the extent of our self-disclosure. Revealing our inner selves—which is vital to closeness—makes a person vulnerable and thus requires trust. A person will not self-disclose if he or she believes that the information may be misused—for example, by a partner who resorts to mocking behavior or revealing a secret.

Trust in personal relationships has both a behavioral and a motivational component (Book et al. 1980). The behavioral component refers to the probability that a person will act in a trustworthy manner. The motivational component refers to the reasons a person engages in trustworthy actions. Whereas the behavioral element is important in all types of relationships, the motivational element is important in close relationships. One has to be trustworthy for the "right" reasons. As long as you trust your mechanic to charge you fairly for rebuilding your car's engine, you don't care why he or she is trustworthy. But you do care why your partner is trustworthy. For example, you want your partner to be sexually exclusive to you because he or she loves you or is attracted to you. Being faithful because of duty or because your partner can't find anyone better is the wrong motivation. Disagreements about the motivational bases for trust are often a source of conflict. "I want you because you love me, not because you need me" or "You don't really love me; you're just saying that because you want sex" are typical examples of conflict about motivation.

The Importance of Feedback

Self-disclosure is reciprocal. If we self-disclose, we expect our partner to self-disclose as well. As we self-disclose, we build trust; as we withhold self-disclosure, we erode trust. To withhold ourselves is to imply that we don't trust the other person, and if we don't, he or she will not trust us.

A critical element in communication is **feedback,** the ongoing process in which participants and their messages create a given result and are subsequently modified by the result (see Figure 7.1). If someone

Figure 7.1 ■ Communication Loop

In successful communication, feedback between the sender and the receiver ensures that both understand (or are trying to understand) what is being communicated. For communication to be clear, the message and the intent behind the message must be congruent. Nonverbal and verbal components must also support the intended message. Verbal aspects of communication include not only language and word choice but also characteristics such as tone, volume, pitch, rate, and periods of silence.
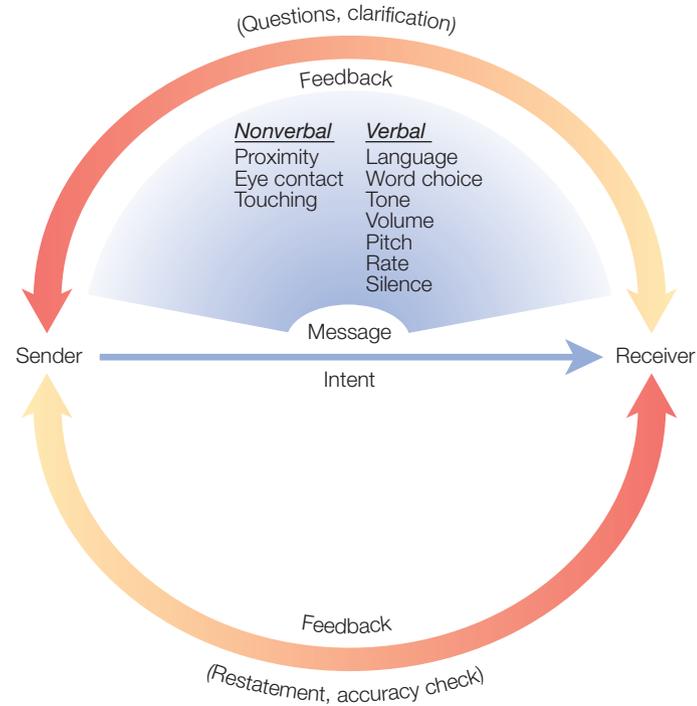
self-discloses to us, we need to respond to his or her self-disclosure. The purpose of feedback is to provide constructive information to increase self-awareness of the consequences of our behaviors toward each other.

If your partner discloses to you his or her doubts about your relationship, for example, you can respond in a number of ways:

- You can remain silent. Silence, however, is generally a negative response, perhaps as powerful as saying outright that you do not want your partner to self-disclose this type of information.

- You can respond angrily, which may convey the message to your partner that self-disclosing will lead to arguments rather than understanding and possible change.

- You can remain indifferent, responding neither negatively nor positively to your partner's self-disclosure.

- You can acknowledge your partner's feelings as being valid (rather than right or wrong) and dis-

close how you feel in response to his or her statement. This acknowledgment and response is constructive feedback. It may or may not remove your partner's doubts, but it is at least constructive in that it opens the possibility for change, whereas silence, anger, and indifference do not.

Some guidelines, developed by David Johnston for the Minnesota Peer Program, may help you engage in dialogue and feedback with your partner:

1. *Focus on "I" statements.* An "I" statement is a statement about your feelings: "I feel annoyed when you leave your dirty dishes on the living room floor." "You" statements tell another person how he or she is, feels, or thinks: "You are so irresponsible. You're always leaving your dirty dishes on the living room floor." "You" statements are often blaming or accusatory. Because "I" messages don't carry blame, the recipient is less likely to be defensive or resentful.

2. *Focus on behavior rather than the person.* If you focus on a person's behavior rather than on the person,

you are more likely to secure change. A person can change behaviors but not himself or herself. If you want your partner to wash his or her dirty dishes, say, "I would like you to wash your dirty dishes; it bothers me when I see them gathering mold on the living room floor." This statement focuses on behavior that can be changed. If you say, "You are such a slob; you never clean up after yourself," then you are attacking the person. He or she is likely to respond defensively: "I am not a slob. Talk about slobs, how about when you left your clothes lying in the bathroom for a week?"

3. *Focus on observations rather than inferences or judgments.* Focus your feedback on what you actually observe rather than on what you think the behavior means. "There is a towering pile of your dishes in the living room" is an observation. "You don't really care about how I feel because you are always leaving your dirty dishes around the house" is an inference that a partner's dirty dishes indicate a lack of regard. The inference moves the discussion from the dishes to the partner's caring. The question "What kind of person would leave dirty dishes for me to clean up?" implies a judgment: only a morally depraved person would leave dirty dishes around.

4. *Focus on observations based on a continuum.* Behaviors fall on a continuum. Your partner doesn't *always* do a particular thing. When you say that he or she does something sometimes or even most of the time, you are measuring behavior. If you say that your partner always does something, you are distorting reality. For example, there were probably times (however rare) when your partner picked up the dirty dishes. "Last week I picked up your dirty dishes three times" is a measured statement. "I always pick up your dirty dishes" is an exaggeration that will probably provoke a hostile response.

5. *Focus on sharing ideas or offering alternatives rather than giving advice.* No one likes being told what to do. Unsolicited advice often produces anger or resentment because advice implies that you know more about what a person needs to do than the other person does. Advice implies a lack of freedom or respect. By sharing ideas and offering alternatives, however, you give the other person the freedom to decide based on his or her own perceptions and goals. "You need to put away your dishes immediately after you are done with them" is advice. To offer alternatives, you might say, "Having to walk around your dirty dishes bothers me. What are the alternatives other than my watching my step? Maybe you could put them away after you finish eating, clean them up before I get home, or eat in the kitchen. What do you think?"

6. *Focus the value of a response to the recipient.* If your partner says something that upsets you, your initial response may be to lash back. A cathartic response may make you feel better for the time being, but it may not be useful for your partner. If, for example, your partner admits lying to you, you can respond with rage and accusations, or you can express hurt and try to find out why he or she didn't tell you the truth.

7. *Focus on the amount the recipient can process.* Don't overload your partner with your response. Your partner's disclosure may touch deep, pent-up feelings in you, but he or she may not be able to comprehend all that you say. If you respond to your partner's revelation of doubts by listing all doubts you have ever experienced about yourself, your relationship, and relationships in general, you may overwhelm your partner.

8. *Focus on responding at an appropriate time and place.* Choose a time when you are not likely to be interrupted. Turn the television off and the phone answering machine on. Also, choose a time that is relatively stress free. Talking about something of great importance just before an exam or a business meeting is likely to sabotage any attempt at communication. Finally, choose a place that will provide privacy; don't start an important conversation if you are worried about people overhearing or interrupting you. A dormitory lounge during the soaps, Grand Central Station, a kitchen teeming with kids, or a car full of friends is an inappropriate place.

Mutual Affirmation

Good communication in an intimate relationship involves **mutual affirmation,** which includes three elements: (1) mutual acceptance, (2) liking each other, and (3) expressing liking in both words and actions. Mutual acceptance consists of people accepting each other as they are, not as they would like each other to be. People are who they are, and they are not likely to change in fundamental ways without a tremendous amount of personal effort, as well as a considerable passage of time. The belief that an insensitive partner

will somehow magically become sensitive after marriage, for example, is an invitation to disappointment and divorce.

If you accept people as they are, you can like them for their unique qualities. Liking someone is somewhat different from being romantically involved. It is not rare for people to dislike those with whom they are romantically linked.

We also need to express our feelings of warmth, affection, and love. To a partner, unexpressed words, actions, thoughts, kindnesses, deeds, touches, caresses, and kisses can be the same as nonexistent or unfelt ones. "You know that I love you" without the expressions of love is a meaningless statement. A simple rule of thumb for communicating love is: If you love, show love.

Mutual affirmation entails our telling others that we like them for who they are, that we appreciate the little things, as well as the big things, that they do. Think about how often you say to your partner, your parents, or your children, "I like you," "I love you," "I appreciate your doing the dishes," or "I like your smile." Affirmations are often most common during dating or the early stages of marriage or living together. As you get to know a person better, you may begin noting things that annoy you or are different from you. Acceptance turns into negation and criticism: "You're selfish," "Stop bugging me," "You talk too much," or "Why don't you clean up after yourself?"

If you have a lot of negatives in your interactions, don't feel too bad. Many of our negations are habitual. When we were children, our parents may have been negating: "Don't leave the door open," "Why can't you get better grades?" "Stand straight and pull in your stomach." How often did they affirm? Once you become aware that negations are often automatic, you can change them. Because negative communication is a learned behavior, you can unlearn it. One way is to make the decision consciously to affirm what you like; too often we take the good for granted and feel compelled to point out only the bad.

Power, Conflict, and Intimacy

Although we may find it unusual to think about family life in these terms, day-to-day family life is highly politicized. By that we mean that the politics of family life—who has more power, who makes the decisions, who does what—can be every bit as complex and explosive as politics at the national level. Like other groups, families possess structures of power. As used here, **power** is the ability or potential ability to influence another person or group, to get people to do what you want them to do, whether they want to or not. Most of the time, we are not aware of the power aspects of our intimate relationships. We may even deny the existence of power differences because we want to believe that intimate relationships are based on love alone. Furthermore, the exercise of power is often subtle. When we think of power, we tend to think of coercion or force; as we show here, however, marital power takes many forms and is often experienced as neither coercion nor force. A final reason we are not always aware of power is that power is not constantly exercised. It comes into play only when an issue is important to both people and they have conflicting goals.

As a concept, power in marital and other couple relationships has been said to consist of power bases, processes, and outcomes. *Power bases* are the economic and personal assets (such as income, economic independence, commitment, and both physical and psychological aggression) that comprise the source of one partner's control over the other. *Power processes* are the "interactional techniques" or methods partners or spouses use to try to gain control over the relationship, the partner, or both, such as persuasion, problem solving, or demandingness. *Power outcomes* can be observed in such things as who has the final say and determines—or potentially could determine and control—the outcome of attempted decision making (Byrne, Carr, and Clark 2004; Sagrestano, Heavey, and Christensen 1999).

Power and Intimacy

The problem with power imbalances and the blatant use of power is the negative effects they have on intimacy. If partners are not equal, self-disclosure may be inhibited, especially if the powerful person believes his or her power will be lessened by sharing feelings (Glazer-Malbin 1975). Genuine intimacy appears to require equality in power relationships. Decision making in the happiest marriages seems to be based not on coercion or tit for tat but on caring, mutuality, and respect for each other. Women or men who feel vulnerable to their mates may withhold feelings or pretend to feel what they do not. Unequal power in marriage may encourage power politics. Each partner may struggle with the other to keep or gain power.

It is not easy to change unequal power relationships after they become embedded in the overall structure of a relationship; yet they can be changed. Talking, understanding, and negotiating are the best approaches. Still, in attempting changes, a person may risk estrangement or the breakup of a relationship. He or she must weigh the possible gains against the possible losses in deciding whether change is worth the risk.

Sources of Marital Power

Traditionally, husbands have held authority over their wives. In Christianity, the subordination of wives to their husbands has its basis in the New Testament. Paul (Colossians 3:18–19) states: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord." Such teachings reflected the dominant themes of ancient Greece and Rome. Western society continued to support wifely subordination to husbands. English common law stated, "The husband and wife are as one and that one is the husband." A woman assumed her husband's identity, taking his last name on marriage and living in his house.

The U.S. courts formally institutionalized these power relationships. The law, for example, supports the traditional division of labor in many states, making the husband legally responsible for supporting the family and the wife legally responsible for maintaining the house and rearing the children. She is legally required to follow her husband if he moves; if she does not, she is considered to have deserted him. But if she moves and her husband refuses to move with her, she is also considered to have deserted him (Leonard and Elias 1990).

Legal and social support for the husband's control of the family has declined since the 1920s and especially since the 1960s. A more egalitarian standard for sharing power in families has taken much of its place. Especially through employment and wage earning, wives have gained more power in the family, increasing their influence in deciding such matters as family size and how money is spent.

The formal and legal structure of marriage may have made the male dominant, but the reality of marriage may be quite different. Sociologist Jessie Bernard (1982) makes an important distinction between authority and power in marriage. Authority is based in law, but power is based in personality. A strong, dominant woman is as likely to exercise power over a more passive man as vice versa, simply through the force of personality and temperament.

The relationship among gender, power, and violence is complex. Although some research suggests that men's violence is an expression of men's power over their wives (and of women's powerlessness), research also asserts that violence is more likely to be used by men with *less power*. Framed in this way, violence is a method through which men who lack power or have a need for power control their wives. Even the threat of violence can be an assertion of power, because it may intimidate women into complying with men's wishes even against their own (Sagrestano, Heavey, and Christensen 1999).

If we want to see how power works in marriage, we must look beneath gender stereotypes and avoid overgeneralizations. Women have considerable power in marriage, although they often feel that they have less than they actually do. They may fail to recognize the extent of their power; because cultural norms theoretically put power in the hands of their husbands, women may look at norms rather than at their own behavior. A woman may decide to work, even against her husband's wishes, and she may determine how to discipline the children. Yet she may feel that her husband holds the power in the relationship because he is supposed to be dominant. Similarly, husbands often believe that they have more power in a relationship than they actually do because they see only traditional norms and expectations.

Power is not a simple phenomenon. Researchers generally agree that family power is a dynamic, multidimensional process (Szinovacz 1987). Generally, no single individual is always the most powerful person in every aspect of the family. Nor is power always based on gender, age, or relationship. Power often shifts from person to person, depending on the issue.

According to J. P. French and Bertam Raven (1959), there are six types of marital power, each based on different beliefs or relationship dynamics:

1. *Coercive power* is based on the fear that one partner will punish the other. Coercion can be emotional or physical. A pattern of belittling, threatening, or being physical can intimidate and threaten another. This is the least common form of power, but it is used in partner rape or abuse.

2. *Reward power* is based on the belief that the other person will do something in return for agreement. If, for example, your partner attempts to understand your feelings about a specific issue, he or she may expect you to do the same.

3. *Expert power* is based on the belief that one partner has greater knowledge than the other. If you

believe that your partner has more wisdom about childrearing, for instance, you may defer the rewards, incentives, and discipline to him or her.

4. *Legitimate power* is based on acceptance of roles giving the other person the right to demand compliance. Gender roles are an important part of legitimacy because they give an aura to rights based on gender. Traditional gender roles legitimize male initiation in dating and female acceptance or refusal rights. Sociologists refer to legitimate power as *authority.*

5. *Referent power* is based on identifying with the partner and receiving satisfaction by acting similarly. If you have great respect for your partner's communication skills and his or her ability to actively listen, provide feedback, and disclose in an honest manner, you are more likely to model yourself after him or her.

6. *Informational power* is based on the partner's persuasive explanation. If, for example, your partner refuses to use a condom, you can provide information about the prevalence and danger of STDs and AIDS.

Explanations of Marital Power

Relative Love and Need Theory

Relative love and need theory explains power in terms of the individual's involvement and needs in the relationship. Each partner brings certain resources, feelings, and needs to a relationship. Each may be seen as exchanging love, companionship, money, help, and status with the other. What each gives and receives, however, may not be equal. One partner may be gaining more from the relationship than the other. The person gaining the most from the relationship is the most dependent. Constantina Safilios-Rothschild (1970) offers this observation:

> The relative degree to which the one spouse loves and needs the other may be the most crucial variable in explaining the total power structure. The spouse who has relatively less feeling for the other may be the one in the best position to control and manipulate all the "resources" that he has in his command to effectively influence the outcome of decisions.

Love itself is a major power resource in a relationship. Those who love equally are likely to share power

equally (Safilios-Rothschild 1976). Such couples are likely to make decisions according to referent, expert, and legitimate power.

Principle of Least Interest

Akin to relative love and need as a way of looking at power is the **principle of least interest.** Sociologist Willard Waller (Waller and Hill 1951) coined this term to describe the curious (and often unpleasant) situation in which the partner with the least interest in continuing a relationship enjoys the most power in it. At its most extreme form, it is the stuff of melodrama. "I will do anything you want, Charles," Laura says pleadingly, throwing herself at his feet. "Just don't leave me." "Anything, Laura?" he replies with a leer. "Then give me the deed to your mother's house." Quarreling couples may unconsciously use the principle of least interest to their advantage. The less involved partner may threaten to leave as leverage in an argument: "All right, if you don't do it my way, I'm going." The threat may be extremely powerful in coercing a dependent partner. It may have little effect, however, if it comes from the dependent partner because he or she has too much to lose to be persuasive. Knowing this, the less involved partner can easily call the other's bluff.

Resource Theory of Power

In 1960, sociologists Robert Blood and Donald Wolfe studied the marital decision-making patterns as revealed by their sample of 900 wives. Using "final say" in decision making as an indicator of relative power, Blood and Wolfe inquired about a variety of decisions (for example, whether the wife should be employed, what type of car to buy, and where to live) and who "ultimately" decided what couples should do. They noted that men tended to have more of such decision-making power and attributed this to their being the sole or larger source of the financial resources on which couples depended. They further observed that as wives' share of resources increased, so did their roles in decision making (Blood and Wolfe 1960).

This **resource theory of power** has been met with both criticism and some empirical support. By focusing so narrowly on resources, the theory overlooks other sources of gendered power. Specifically, it fails to explain the power men continue to enjoy when they

are outearned by their wives (Thompson and Walker 1989) or when they are househusbands and thus dependent on wives' incomes (Cohen and Durst 2000). The theory has also been criticized for equating power with decision making and for ignoring that power occasionally frees a spouse from having to make decisions. Although resources alone don't account for power, they may, with other factors, influence it, especially among heterosexual couples (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Schwartz 1994).

Rethinking Family Power: Feminist Contributions

Even though women have considerable power in marriages and families, it would be a serious mistake to overlook the inequalities between husbands and wives. As feminist scholars have pointed out, major aspects of contemporary marriage point to important areas in which women are clearly subordinate to men: the continued female responsibility for housework and childrearing, inequities in sexual gratification (sex is often over when the male has his orgasm), the extent of violence against women, and the sexual exploitation of children are examples.

Feminist scholars suggest several areas that require further consideration (Szinovacz 1987). First, they believe that too much emphasis has been placed on the marital relationship as the unit of analysis. Instead, they believe that researchers should explore the influence of society on power in marriage—specifically, the relationship between social structure and women's position in marriage. Researchers could examine, for example, the relationship of women's socioeconomic disadvantages, such as lower pay and fewer economic opportunities than men, to female power in marriage.

Second, these scholars argue that many of the decisions that researchers study are trivial or insignificant in measuring "real" family power. Researchers cannot conclude that marriages are becoming more egalitarian on the basis of joint decision making about such things as where a couple goes for vacation, whether to buy a new car or appliance, or which movie to see. The critical decisions that measure power are such issues as how housework is to be divided, who stays home with the children, and whose job or career takes precedence.

Some scholars suggest that we shift the focus from marital power to family power. Researcher Marion Kranichfeld (1987) calls for a rethinking of power in a family context. Even if women's marital power may not be equal to men's, a different picture of women in families may emerge if we examine power within the entire family structure, including power in relation to children. The family power literature has traditionally focused on marriage and marital decision making. Kranichfeld, however, feels that such a focus narrows our perception of women's power. Marriage is not family, she argues, and it is in the larger family matrix that women exert considerable power. Their power may not be the same as male power, which tends to be primarily economic, political, or religious. But if *power* is defined as the ability to change the behavior of others intentionally, "women in fact have a great deal of power, of a very fundamental and pervasive nature, so pervasive, in fact, that it is easily overlooked," according to Kranichfeld (1987). She further observes:

> Women's power is rooted in their role as nurturers and kinkeepers, and flows out of their capacity to support and direct the growth of others around them through their life course. Women's power may have low visibility from a nonfamily perspective, but women are the lynchpins of family cohesion and socialization.

Research on marital violence suggests that it is the level of absolute power that has consequence for couples. In relationships that are *either* male dominated *or* female dominated, we find the highest levels of violence. In relationships that are "power divided," there is less violence, and in egalitarian relationships we see the lowest levels of violence (Sagrestano, Heavey, and Christensen 1999).

The topic of "egalitarian relationships" is somewhat complicated by the question of whether such relationships truly are equal. Feminist scholarship has revealed that even among self-professed equal couples, power processes seem to favor men. Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney's 1998 study of equal couples—in which each spouse perceives the relationship to be characterized by mutual accommodation and attention and each spouse has the same ability to receive cooperation from the other in meeting needs or wants—is a case in point. Although couples described their relationships as equal and their roles as "nongender specific," men wielded more power than women. Wives made more concessions to fit their daily lives around their husbands' schedules than husbands did to fit their lives around the schedules of their wives. Women were also more likely than their husbands to report worrying about upsetting or offending their

spouses, to do what their spouses wanted, and to attend to their spouses' needs (Fox and Murry 2000). It appears as if characterizing an unequal marriage as equal allows a couple to ignore real if covert power differences that might otherwise threaten their relationships (Fox and Murry 2000).

Intimacy and Conflict

Conflict between people who love each other seems to be a mystery. The coexistence of conflict and love has puzzled human beings for centuries. An ancient Sanskrit poem reflected this dichotomy:

> In the old days we both agreed
> That I was you and you were me.
> But now what has happened
> That makes you, you
> And me, me?

We expect love to unify us, but often times it doesn't. Two people don't really become one when they love each other, although at first they may have this feeling. It isn't that their love is an illusion, but their sense of ultimate oneness is. In reality, they retain their individual identities, needs, wants, and pasts while loving each other—and it is a paradox that the more intimate two people become, the more likely they may be to experience conflict. But it is not conflict itself that is dangerous to intimate relationships; it is the manner in which the conflict is handled. Conflict, itself is natural.

If this is understood, the meaning of conflict changes, and it will not necessarily represent a crisis in the relationship. David and Vera Mace (1979), prominent marriage counselors, observed that on the day of marriage, people have three kinds of raw material with which to work. First, there are things they have in common—the things they both like. Second, there are the ways in which they are different, but the differences are complementary. Third, unfortunately, there are the differences between them that are not complementary and that cause them to meet head on with a big bang. In every relationship between two people, there are a great many of those kinds of differences. So when they move closer to each other, those differences become disagreements.

The presence of conflict within a marriage or family doesn't automatically indicate that love is going or gone; it may mean quite the opposite. It is common

and normal for couples to have disagreements or conflicts. The important factor is not *that* they have differences but *how* constructively or harmfully they resolve their differences. By using occasions of conflict to implement mutually acceptable behavior changes or decide that the differences between them are acceptable, couple relationships may grow as a product of their differences. Couples who resolve conflict with mutual satisfaction and who find ways to adapt to areas of conflict tend to be more satisfied with their relationships overall and are less likely to divorce.

Matter of Fact

When the communication patterns of newly married African Americans and Caucasians were examined, couples who believed in avoiding marital conflict were less happy 2 years later than those who confronted their problems (Crohan 1996).

Basic versus Nonbasic Conflicts

Relationships experience two types of conflict—basic and nonbasic—that have different effects on relationship quality and stability. Basic conflicts challenge the fundamental assumptions or rules of a relationship, leading to the possible end of the relationship. Nonbasic conflicts are more common and less consequential; couples learn to live with them.

Basic Conflicts

Basic conflicts revolve around carrying out marital roles and the functions of marriage and the family, such as providing companionship, working, and rearing children. It is assumed, for example, that a husband and a wife will have sexual relations with each other. But if one partner converts to a religious sect that forbids sexual interaction, a basic conflict is likely to occur because the other spouse considers sexual interaction part of the marital premise. No room for compromise exists in such a matter. If one partner cannot convince the other to change his or her belief, the conflict is likely to destroy the relationship. Similarly, despite recent changes in family roles, it is still expected that the husband will work to provide for the family. If he decides to quit work and not function as a provider, he is challenging a basic assumption of marriage. His partner is likely to feel that his behavior is

unfair. Conflict ensues. If he does not return to work, his wife is likely to leave him.

Nonbasic Conflicts

Nonbasic conflicts do not strike at the heart of a relationship. The husband wants to change jobs and move to a different city, but the wife may not want to move. This may be a major conflict, but it is not a basic one. The husband is not unilaterally rejecting his role as a provider. If a couple disagrees about the frequency of sex, the conflict is serious but not basic because both agree on the desirability of sex in the relationship. In both cases, resolution is possible.

Experiencing and Managing Conflict

Differences and conflicts are part of any healthy relationship. If we handle conflicts in a healthy way, they can help solidify our relationships. But conflicts can go on and on, consuming the heart of a relationship, turning love and affection into bitterness and hatred. In the following section, we look at ways of resolving conflict in constructive rather than destructive ways. In this manner, we can use conflict as a way of building and deepening our relationships.

Dealing with Anger

Differences can lead to anger, and anger transforms differences into fights, creating tension, division, distrust, and fear. Most people have learned to handle anger by either venting or suppressing it. David and Vera Mace (1980) suggest that many couples go through a love–anger cycle. When a couple comes close to each other, they may experience conflict; then they recoil in horror, angry at each other because just at the moment they were feeling close their intimacy was destroyed. Each backs off; gradually they move closer again until another fight erupts, driving them apart. After a while, each learns to make a compromise between closeness and distance to avoid conflict. They learn what they can reveal about themselves and what they cannot.

Another way of dealing with anger is to suppress it. Suppressed anger is dangerous because it is always there, simmering beneath the surface. It leads to re-sentment, that brooding, low-level hostility that poisons both the individual and the relationship.

Anger can be dealt with in a third way; when conflict escalates into violence. Especially in a culture that cloaks families in privacy, surrounds people with beliefs that legitimize violence, and gives them the sense that they have a right to influence what their loved ones do, escalating anger can result in assault, injury, and even death. Given the relative power of men over women and adults over children, threats against one person's supposed advantage may provoke especially harsh reactions. We look closely at the causes, context, and consequences of family violence in Chapter 13.

Finally and most constructively, anger can be recognized as a symptom of something that needs to be changed. If we see anger as a symptom, we realize that what is important is not venting or suppressing the anger but finding its source and eliminating it. David and Vera Mace (1980) offer this suggestion:

> When your disagreements become overt conflict, the only thing to do is to take anger out of it, because when you are angry you cannot resolve a conflict. You cannot really hear the other person because you are just waiting to fire your shot. You cannot be understanding; you cannot be empathetic when you are angry. So you have to take the anger out, and then when you have taken the anger out, you are back again with a disagreement. The disagreement is still there, and it can cause another disagreement and more anger unless you clear it up. The way to take the anger out of disagreements is through negotiation.

Not all conflict is overt. Some conflict can go undetected by one of the partners. As such, it will have minimal effect on him or her and is not likely to lead to anger. In addition, not all "conflicts" (that is, of interest, goals, wishes, expectations, and so on) become *conflicts*. Spouses and partners can approach their differences in many ways short of overt conflict (Fincham and Beach 1999).

How Women and Men Handle Conflict

In keeping with observed gender differences in communication, research has identified differences in how men and women approach and manage conflict. As summarized by Rhonda Faulkner, Maureen Davey, and Adam Davey (2004), we can identify the following gender differences:

Real Families

Gender and Marital Conflict among Korean Immigrants

"Did you bring me to this country for exploitation?"

Such is the plaintive appeal of 41-year-old Yong Ja Kim, a Korean immigrant, to her husband, Chun Ho Kim. What is it she is objecting to? In what way does she feel exploited? Sociologist Pyong Gap Min researched the consequences of immigration for marital relations among Korean immigrant couples. Existing research indicated that marital conflicts had emerged among Korean immigrants to the United States because of women's increased role in the economic support of families without concurrent changes in their husbands' gender attitudes or marital behavior. Min sought to delve more deeply into such conflicts.

Among Min's interviewees were Yong Ja Kim and Chun Ho Kim, husband and wife, who work together at their retail store 6 days a week from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Upon returning home, he watches Korean television programs and reads a Korean daily newspaper while she prepares dinner. Defensively, he retorts:

It makes no sense for her to accuse me of not helping her at home at all. In addition to house maintenance, I took care of garbage disposal more often than she and helped her with grocery shopping very often. I did neither of the chores in Korea.

To his wife, however, the comparison is not between what he did in Korea and what he does in the United States but between what *he does* and what *she does:*

I work in the store as many hours as you do, and I play an even more important role in our business than you. But you don't help me at home. It's never fair. My friends in Korea work full-time at home, but don't have to work outside. Here, I work too much both inside and outside the home.

Although conflicts such as this, in which wives contest an unequal division of household responsibility, are far from unique to Koreans or to immigrants, more generally, they take particular meaning and shape from the clash between the patriarchal Korean culture and the more egalitarian ideas espoused in the United States and from the discrepancy between men's status in Korea and their socioeconomic positions in the United States.

Culturally, there are noteworthy differences between the traditional status of husbands in Korea and the situations of most immigrant Korean men in the United States. Traditionally, Korean husbands were breadwinners and patriarchal heads of their families. Wives and children were expected to obey their husbands and fathers. Women were further expected to bear children and cater to their husbands and in-laws. Although the traditional South Korean family system has been "modified," it remains a patriarchal system, justified by Confucian ideology. As they have immigrated to the United States, Korean women's in-

volvement in paid employment has increased "radically." In the process, traditional gender attitudes and male sense of self as patriarch and provider have been undermined.

Exacerbating the cultural transition are real economic adjustments. Min notes that with immigration to the United States, most Korean immigrant men encounter significant downward occupational mobility. This, in turn, results in further "status anxiety." They compensate by seeking ways to assert their authority in the household, only to find that their wives and children no longer grant them such status automatically. Min states that Mr. Kim "could not understand much and how fast his wife had changed her attitudes toward him since they had come to the United States. He did not remember her talking back to him in Korea."

She probably did not "talk back to him" in Korea. Min points out the marital conflicts and marital instability have increased alongside the increased economic role played by wives, the decreased economic status and power of their husbands, and women's pleas for greater male involvement in housework.

Min summarizes her research findings by noting that for Korean immigrant couples, the gulf between their gender-role behavior and their traditional gender attitudes may be greater than for many other ethnic groups. If so, and if such discrepancies are partly responsible for marital conflict, the situation for Korean immigrants may be harder than for other immigrant groups.

- Women are more likely than men are to initiate discussions of contested relationship issues.

- Where men have been found to be more likely to withdraw from negative marital interactions, women are more likely to pursue conversation or conflict.

- Typically, women are more aware of the emotional quality of and the events that occur in the relationship.

- In the course and processes of conflict management and resolution, men take on instrumental roles and

women take on expressive roles. Men approach conflict resolution from a task-oriented stance, as in "problem solving"; women are more emotionally expressive as they pursue intimacy.

We need to bear in mind that the research designs used to study patterns of interaction in conflict management may have exaggerated the gender connection by commonly asking couples to engage in discussion of topics of greater salience to females than to males (for example, intimacy and childrearing practices). When researchers allowed members of couples to identify those areas in which they would like their partners to make changes and then had the couple hold two discussions, one for the topic that each person considered most important, gender patterns were more varied. Significantly more woman demand–man withdraw behavior occurred when couples addressed the woman's top issue, but there was significantly more man demand–woman withdraw behavior during discussions of issues most important to the man. Thus, it is crucial to avoid stereotyping gender patterns in partners' conflict styles; salience of the issue to each party also affects conflict behavior.

Conflict Resolution and Marital Satisfaction

Although we may perceive that "harmony" would guarantee "happiness," avoiding conflict is detrimental to relationships. However, *how couples manage conflict* is one of the most important determinants of their satisfaction and the well-being of their relationships (Greeff and DeBruyne 2000). Happy couples are not conflict free; instead, they tend to act in positive ways to resolve conflicts, such as changing behaviors (putting the cap on the toothpaste rather than denying responsibility) and presenting reasonable alternatives (purchasing toothpaste in a dispenser). Unhappy or distressed couples, in contrast, use more negative strategies in attempting to resolve conflicts (if the cap off the toothpaste bothers you, then *you* put it on).

Thus, we can talk of "constructive" and "destructive" conflict management (Greef and deBruyne 2000). Constructive conflict management is characterized by flexibility, a relationship rather than individual (self-interest) focus, an intention to learn from their dif-

ferences, and cooperation. Destructive conflict management consists of the following:

escalating spirals of manipulation, threat, and coercion

avoidance

retaliation

inflexibility

a competitive pattern of dominance and subordination

demeaning or insulting verbal and nonverbal communication

A study of happily and unhappily married couples found distinctive communication traits as these couples tried to resolve their conflicts (Ting-Toomey 1983). The communication behaviors of happily married couples displayed the following traits:

- *Summarizing.* Each person summarized what the other said: "Let me see if I can repeat the different points you were making."

- *Paraphrasing.* Each put what the other said into his or her own words: "What you are saying is that you feel bad when I don't acknowledge your feelings."

- *Validating.* Each affirmed the other's feelings: "I can understand how you feel."

- *Clarifying.* Each asked for further information to make sure that he or she understood what the other was saying: "Can you explain what you mean a little bit more to make sure that I understand you?"

In contrast, "distressed" or unhappily married couples displayed the following reciprocal patterns:

- *Confrontation.* Both partners confronted each other: "You're wrong!" "Not me, buddy. It's you who's wrong!"

- *Confrontation and defensiveness.* One partner confronted and the other defended: "You're wrong!" "I only did what I was supposed to do."

- *Complaining and defensiveness.* One partner complained and the other was defensive: "I work so hard each day to come home to this!" "This is the best I can do with no help."

- Overall, distressed couples use more negative and fewer positive statements. They become "locked in" to conflict. Thus, a major task for such couples is to find an effective or adaptive way out (Fincham and Beach 1999).

One of the strongest predictors of marital unhappiness and of the possibility of eventual divorce is

whether couples engage in **hostile conflict.** Hostile conflict is a pattern of negative interaction wherein couples engage in frequent heated arguments, call each other names and insult each other, display an unwillingness to listen to each other, and lack emotional involvement with each other (Gottman 1994; Topham, Larson, and Holman 2005). Once such patterns become the normative pattern in a relationship, they are difficult to change.

What Determines How Couples Handle Conflict?

Many factors might affect how couples approach and attempt to manage the inevitable conflict that relationships contain. Among these, premarital variables, including carryover effects of upbringing, may be particularly influential. Glade Topham, Jeffrey Larson, and Thomas Holman (2005) suggest that such influence may be conscious or unconscious; may affect behaviors and patterns of interaction, as well as attitudes, beliefs, and self-esteem; and may remain even in the absence of contact with the family of origin.

Family of origin factors can be explained by social learning theory or attachment theory. Learning theory suggests that by observing parents and how they interact with each other we develop a **marital paradigm:** a set of images about how marriage ought to be done, "for better or worse" (Marks 1986). When, as children, we fail to experience a positive model of marriage, we may develop ineffective communication or conflict resolution skills. Attachment theory suggests that our attachment style influences the way conflict is expressed in relationships (Pistole 1989). Secure parent–child relationships lead us to be more self-confident and socially confident, more likely to view others as trustworthy and dependable, and more comfortable with and within relationships. Individuals who had insecure parent–child attachments are more demanding of support and attention, more dependent on others for self-validation, and more self-deprecating and emotionally hypersensitive (Topham, Larson, and Holman 2005).

In contrast to anxious or ambivalent and avoidant adults, secure adults are more satisfied in their relationships and use conflict strategies that focus on maintaining the relationship. Helping the relationship stay cohesive is more important than "winning" the battle. Secure adults are more likely to compromise than are anxious or ambivalent adults, and anxious or ambivalent adults are more likely than avoidant adults

to give in to their partners' wishes, whether they agree with them or not.

Although either husbands' or wives' family of origin experiences *could* negatively affect marital quality and conflict management, the influences are not equivalent. Wives' family of origin experiences—including the quality of relationships with their mothers, the quality of parental discipline they received, and the overall quality of their family environments—are more important than husbands' experiences in predicting hostile marital conflict (Topham, Larson, and Holman 2005).

There are two "analytically independent" dimensions of behavior in conflict situations: assertiveness and cooperativeness (Thomas 1976; Greeff and de Bruyne 2000). **Assertiveness** refers to attempts to satisfy our own concerns; **cooperativeness** speaks to attempts to satisfy concerns of others. With these two dimensions in mind, we can identify five conflict management styles:

- **Competing:** Behavior is assertive and uncooperative, associated with "forcing behavior and win–lose arguing." This style can lead to increased conflict, as well as to either or both spouses feeling powerless and resentful (Greeff and de Bruyne 2000).

- **Collaborating:** Behavior is assertive and cooperative; couples confront disagreements and engage in problem solving to uncover solutions. Collaborative conflict management may require relationships that are relatively equal in power and high in trust. Using this style then accentuates both the trust and the commitment couples feel.

- **Compromising:** This is an intermediate position in terms of both assertiveness and cooperativeness. Couples seek "middle ground" solutions.

- **Avoiding:** Behavior is unassertive and uncooperative, characterized by withdrawal and by refusing to take a position in disagreements.

- **Accommodating:** This style is unassertive and cooperative. One person attempts to soothe the other person and restore harmony.

Abraham Greeff and Tanya de Bruyne present these on a "conflict grid," depicting where each style falls on the axes of assertiveness and cooperativeness (see Figure 7.2).

Research has yielded inconsistent ("diverse") results about the relationship outcomes of each of these styles. Some studies favor one style—collaboration—

Figure 7.2 ■ Styles of Conflict Management

The "Conflict Grid" reveals the different combinations of assertiveness and cooperativeness that comprise the five styles of conflict management. For example, "competing" is a combination of a high degree of assertiveness and a low level of cooperativeness. An accommodating approach is low in assertiveness but high in cooperativeness.
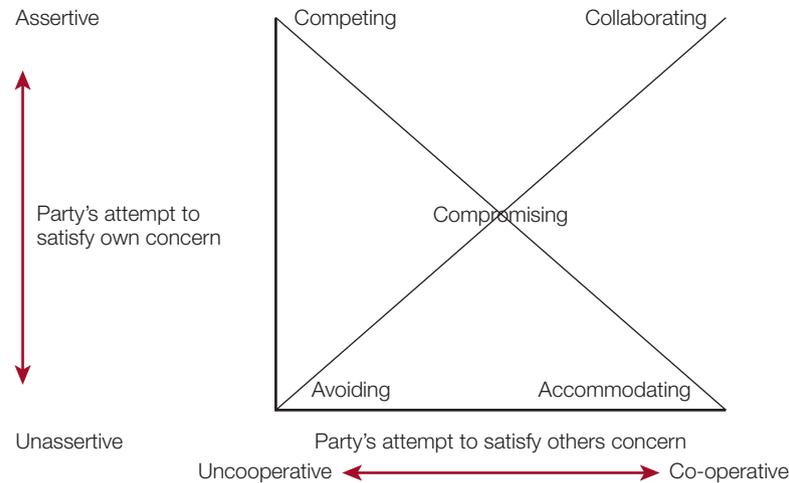
over all others as the only style displayed by satisfied couples. There is research suggesting that avoidance is dysfunctional and antisocial, and yet there is research that finds avoidance associated with satisfied, nondistressed couples. Still other research findings suggest that openly confronting conflict does not necessarily lead to higher marital quality. Finally, although some research suggests that when husbands and wives agree on how to manage conflict they have happier marriages, other findings indicate that discrepancies in spouses' beliefs about conflict are not predictive of how satisfied they are (Greeff and deBruyne 2000).

Greeff and de Bruyne point out that much literature on conflict management comes from studies of relatively young couples not long into marriage. They set out to examine the styles used by a sample of 57 Black South African couples married at least 10 years. Their findings reveal that the collaborating style led to the highest level of marital satisfaction for males and females, followed by the compromising style. Marital satisfaction was lowest when one or both spouses used the competing conflict management style. It was also low when one or both spouses used either an avoiding or an accommodating style.

They also considered how couples felt about their management of conflict. The collaborating and compromising styles were the ones with which couples expressed greatest satisfaction. Marriages where one or both spouses used a competitive approach to man-

aging conflict brought males great dissatisfaction with the conflict management in their relationships. Females were dissatisfied with conflict management when their husbands used a competitive approach but relatively satisfied when they, themselves, did. Both husbands and wives were also dissatisfied with the way conflict was managed in their marriages when either they or their spouses used a style of avoidance. Despite deliberately selecting older respondents, with longer-duration marriages, the patterns obtained were similar to what has been identified among younger couples. Like age, neither gender nor cultural background made much difference in which conflict management styles made people more satisfied with their marriages or their conflict management. Where gender did make a difference was in preferred style of conflict; males tended to use avoidance, compromise, and competition to manage conflict, whereas females showed a preference for accommodation, compromise, and avoidance (Greeff and de Bruyne 2000).

Conflict Resolution across Relationship Types

All couple relationships experience conflict. Using self-report and partner-report data, Lawrence Kurdek (1994) explored how conflicts were handled by 75 gay, 51 lesbian, 108 married nonparent, and 99 married parent couples. Essentially, the differences across couple type were less impressive than were the similarities.

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■ *Conflict is an inevitable and normal part of being in a relationship. Rather than withdrawing from and avoiding conflict, we should use it as a way to build, strengthen, and deepen our relationships.*

The four types of couples did not significantly differ in their level of ineffective arguing, and there were no noteworthy differences in their styles of conflict resolution as measured by the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI). The CRSI includes four styles of conflict resolution: (1) *positive problem solving* (including negotiation and compromise), (2) *conflict engagement* (such as personal attacks), (3) *withdrawal* (refusing to further discuss an issue), and (4) *compliance* (such as giving in). Ratings were obtained from both partners about themselves and the other partner. There was little indication that the frequency with which conflict resolution styles were used varied across couple type. As Kurdek (1994) notes, there is similarity in relationship dynamics across couple types.

Common Conflict Areas: Sex, Money, and Housework

Even if, as the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy suggested, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, marital conflicts still tend to center on certain recurring issues, especially communication, children, sex, money, personality differences, how to spend leisure time, in-laws, infidelity, and housekeeping. In this section, we focus on three areas: sex, money, and housework. Then we discuss general ways of resolving conflicts.

Fighting about Sex

Fighting and sex can be intertwined in several ways (Strong and DeVault 1997). A couple can have a specific disagreement about sex that leads to a fight. One person wants to have sexual intercourse and the other does not, so they fight. A couple can have an indirect fight about sex. The woman does not have an orgasm, and after intercourse, her partner rolls over and starts to snore. She lies in bed feeling angry and frustrated. In the morning she begins to fight with her partner over his not doing his share of the housework. The housework issue obscures why she is angry. Sex can also be used as a scapegoat for nonsexual problems. A husband is angry that his wife calls him a lousy provider. He takes it out on her sexually by calling her a lousy lover. They fight about their lovemaking rather than about the issue of his provider role. A couple can fight about the wrong sexual issue. A woman may berate her partner for being too quick during sex, but what she is really frustrated about is that he is not interested in oral sex with her. She, however, feels ambivalent about oral sex ("Maybe I smell bad"), so she cannot confront her partner with the real issue. Finally, a fight can be a cover-up. If a man feels sexually inadequate and does not want to have sex as often as his partner, he may pick a fight and make his partner so angry that the last thing she would want to do is to have sex with him.

Issues and Insights "What Are We Fighting About?"
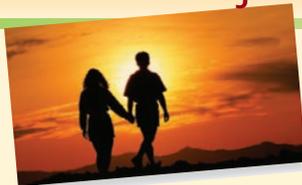
Conflict is common. Living with other people introduces numerous points of potential disagreement. Not all disagreements are equally serious or carry equal risks for the health and future of the relationship. Certain problems, such as infidelity, men's jealousy, and reckless spending of money or poor money management are more significant predictors of eventual dissolution (Fincham and Beach 1999). Other problems, such as sexual disorders or substance abuse, may be beyond the couple's ability to resolve, requiring instead outside therapeutic assistance. When researchers surveyed therapists, seeking to identify the frequency, difficulty in treating, and severity of the effect of 29 problems couples might face, they found the following problems identified as the most frequent problems couples bring to therapy: unrealistic expectations, power struggles, communication problems, sexual problems, and conflict management difficulties. Problems deemed most difficult to treat included lack of loving feelings, alcoholism, extrarelational affairs, and power struggles (Whisman, Dixon, and Johnson 1997; Miller et al. 2003).

But not all couples need or come to therapy. Seeking to determine whether problems change over time in marriage, researchers have undertaken one of two research strategies. Either they have followed a sample of couples across a period of time (Storaasli and Markman 1990) or they

have compared couples of different marital durations, seeing whether their problem areas differ in intensity at the different points in which they find themselves in their marriages (Miller et al. 2003).

One longitudinal study by Raagnar Storaasli and Howard Markman followed 40 couples over a period: beginning before they married, shortly after they married, and after they had their first child. Some problem areas changed between premarriage and early marriage; jealousy and religious problems decreased and sexual problems worsened. Between early marriage and parenthood, communication and sexual problems increased. Overall, however, most problems remained unchanged, such as those having to do with relatives, friends, or money (Storaasli and Markman 1990; Miller et al. 2003).

Using a clinical sample of 160 couples married between 1 and 20 years, Richard Miller and colleagues (2003) sought to determine whether couples at different life cycle stages experience and seek help with different kinds of problems. Couples were asked to consider as problem areas: children, communication, housecleaning, gender-role issues, financial matters, sexual issues, spiritual matters, emotional intimacy, violence, commitment, values, parents-in-law, decision making, and commitment. Couples were asked to consider where each problem ranked in frequency, from "very often a problem" (5) to "never a problem" (1). Because it was a clinical sample, couples were also asked to consider from nine choices the problem that most brought them to therapy, including as possibilities communication,

violence, sexual issues, financial matters, emotional intimacy, separation or divorce concerns, extramarital affairs, commitment issues, or some other problem.

Problems with communication and financial matters were the most commonly reported. Also frequently mentioned were emotional intimacy, sexual issues, and decision making. Gender-role issues, values, violence, and spiritual issues were not common problems. These tendencies can be seen in Table 7.2, reflecting the percentage of spouses who listed a problem as either "Very often a problem" or "Often a problem."

As far as what problem area couples were most likely to identify as their "presenting problem," by far "communication problems" were most often mentioned by both males and females, *regardless of how long they were married.* Finally, as shown in Table 7.3, there were statistically significant gender differences for six problem areas.

According to Miller and colleagues, their findings indicate that problems experienced by couples are relatively stable as opposed to varying much over the life cycle. As to gender, they remind therapists that females generally perceive more problems than males within marital relationships. Somewhat consistent with the idea of "two marriages," males and females may indeed experience relationships and problems within those relationships differently (Storaasli and Markman 1990). Women's tendencies to report problem areas as more severe or frequent suggest "a complex picture of gender-related issues." Finally, regardless of how

In power struggles, sexuality can be used as a weapon, but this is generally a destructive tactic (Szinovacz 1987). A classic strategy for the weaker person in a relationship is to withhold something that the

more powerful one wants. In male–female struggles, this is often sex. By withholding sex, a woman gains a certain degree of power. A few men also use sex in its most violent form: They rape (including date rape and

Table 7.2 ■ Percentage Reporting Area Is Either "Very Often" or "Often" a Problem

Problem	Males			Females		
	< 3 years*	3–10 years	> 10 years	< 3 years	3–10 years	> 10 years
Communication	56.7%	63.8%	53.2%	62.9%	67.4%	66.6%
Financial matters	37.8	54.4	56.3	26.9	55.1	67.7
Decision making	27.0	34.4	25.0	34.2	42.7	48.4
Emotional intimacy	21.6[+]	50.3	21.9	42.8	52.8	45.2
Sexual issues	21.6	34.1	28.2	37.2	38.2	29.0
Parent-in-law	27.0	24.2	19.4	28.5	31.5	22.6
Leisure activities	18.9[+]	30.1	15.7	34.3	40.4	35.5
Dealing with children	18.2	22.8	28.1	26.9	35.6	29.1
Commitment	21.6	19.8	9.4	11.4	18.2	32.2
Housecleaning	13.5	25.6	18.8	17.1	28.1	29.0
Gender-role issues	10.8	13.5	0.0	14.3	16.8	9.7
Values	13.5	15.7	9.4	5.7	17.0	10.0
Violence	8.8	1.3	3.4	9.4	3.9	3.6
Spiritual matters	0.0	5.6	3.1	5.8	6.9	9.7

*Numbers represent duration of marriage.
[+]Duration of marriage group differences for that gender significant at < 0.05.

Table 7.3 ■ Frequency of Reporting Areas

Problem	Males	Females
Dealing with children*	2.71	2.98
Emotional intimacy*	3.15	3.45
Sexual issues[+]	2.90	3.08
Parents-in-law[+]	2.62	2.84
Communication[@]	3.70	4.00
Decision making[+]	3.05	3.27

Range: (1) "never a problem" to (5) "very often a problem."
*Difference significant at p < 0.01
[+]Difference significant at p < 0.05
[@]Difference significant at p < 0.001

It is worth pointing out that conflict is not only driven by "what" couples fight about but also by the wider social context in which relationships exist. Taking a broader view, we need to pay attention to the effects of negative life events, essentially nonmarital stressors, that may lead to more negative communication, poorer parenting, and lower satisfaction. Likewise, the amount of social support a couple enjoys outside the marriage may influence the direction and outcomes of conflict (Fincham and Beach 1999).

long a couple has been married, couples' therapists must be prepared to assess and treat problems dealing with communication, financial matters, sexual issues, decision-making skills, and emotional intimacy because such problem areas are consistent features of married life over which couples encounter difficulty.

marital rape) to overpower and subordinate women. In rape, aggressive motivations displace sexual ones.

It is hard to tell during a fight if there are deeper causes than the one about which a couple is fighting.

Is a couple fighting because one wants to have sex now and the other doesn't? Or are there deeper reasons involving power, control, fear, or inadequacy? If they repeatedly fight about sexual issues without getting

anywhere, the ostensible cause may not be the real one. If fighting does not clear the air and make intimacy possible again, they should look for other reasons for the fights. It may be useful for them to talk with each other about why the fights do not seem to accomplish anything. Also, it would be helpful if they step back and look at the circumstances of the fight; what patterns occur; and how each feels before, during, and after a fight.

Sexual tensions and strains arise because of these other conflicts that happen to play themselves out in the physical relationship. With a more "positive, respectful, affirming process of conflict resolution," partners may deepen the respect and admiration they feel for each other, develop a greater level of trust and of self-esteem in their relationship, and grow more confident that the relationship can withstand and grow through future conflict. These can create positive feelings and comfort with each other that facilitate sexual desire (Metz and Epstein 2002). Although the conflicts being resolved need not be sexual, positive and constructive relationship conflict resolution may provide affirmation of the love and intimacy two people share. This, along with the emotional relief that comes from resolving conflict may "directly or indirectly serve as a sexual aphrodisiac" (Metz and Epstein 2002). Thus, the intensity of pleasure supposedly accompanying "make-up sex" is another reminder of how conflict and its resolution can affect sex whether or not it is about sex.

Money Conflicts

An old Yiddish proverb addresses the problem of managing money quite well: "Husband and wife are the same flesh, but they have different purses." Money is a major source of marital conflict in families in the United States and abroad.

Intimates differ about spending money probably as much as, or more than, any other single issue.

WHY PEOPLE FIGHT ABOUT MONEY. Couples disagree or fight over money for a number of reasons. One of the most important has to do with power. Earning wages has traditionally given men power in families. A woman's work in the home has not been rewarded by wages. As a result, full-time homemakers have been placed in the position of having to depend on their husbands for money. In such an arrangement, if there are disagreements, the woman is at a disadvantage. If she is de-

ferred to, the old cliché "I make the money but she spends it" has a bitter ring to it. As women increased their participation in the workforce, however, power relations within families have shifted some. Studies indicate that women's influence in financial and other decisions increases if they are employed outside the home.

Another major source of monetary conflict is allocation of the family's income. Not only does this involve deciding who makes the decisions, but it also includes setting priorities. Is it more important to pay a past due bill or to buy a new television set to replace the broken one? Is a dishwasher a necessity or a luxury? Should money be put aside for long-range goals, or should immediate needs (perhaps those your partner calls "whims") be satisfied? Setting financial priorities plays on each person's values and temperament; it is affected by basic aspects of an individual's personality. A miser probably cannot be happily married to a spendthrift. Yet we know so little of our partner's attitudes toward money before marriage that a miser might well marry a spendthrift and not know it until too late.

Dating relationships are a poor indicator of how a couple will deal with money matters in marriage. Dating has clearly defined rules about money: Either the man pays, both pay separately, or they take turns paying. In dating situations, each partner is financially independent of the other. Money is not pooled, as it usually is in a committed partnership or marriage. Power issues do not necessarily enter spending decisions because each person has his or her own money. Differences can be smoothed out fairly easily. Both individuals are financially independent before marriage but financially interdependent after marriage. Even cohabitation may not be an accurate guide to how a couple would deal with money in marriage, as cohabitators generally do not pool all (or even part) of their income. It is the working out of financial interdependence in marriage that is often so difficult.

TALKING ABOUT MONEY. Talking about money matters is often difficult. People are secretive about money. It is considered poor taste to ask people how much money they make. Children often do not know how much money is earned in their families; sometimes spouses don't know either. One woman remarked that it is easier to talk with a partner about sexual issues than about money matters: "Money is the last taboo," she said. But, as with sex, our society is obsessed with money.

Why do we find it difficult to talk about money? There may be several reasons. First, we don't want to appear to be unromantic or selfish. If a couple is about to marry, a discussion of attitudes toward money may lead to disagreements, shattering the illusion of unity or selflessness. Second, gender roles make it difficult for women to express their feelings about money because women are traditionally supposed to defer to men in financial matters. Third, because men tend to make more money than women, women feel that their right to disagree about financial matters is limited. These feelings are especially prevalent if the woman is a homemaker and does not make a financial contribution, but they devalue her childcare and housework contributions.

Housework and Conflict

The division of responsibility for housework can be one of the most significant issues couples face, especially dual-earner couples (Kluwer, Heesink, and Van De Vliert 1997). It can become a source of tension and conflict within marriage (Hochschild 1989). Part of this is an understandable consequence of the inequality in each spouse's contribution; most men do not do much housework. Whether or not they are employed outside the home, and whether there are children in the home or not, wives bear the bulk of housework responsibility. A husband's lack of involvement can create resentment and affect the levels of both conflict and happiness in a marriage. Longitudinal research on married couples reveals that husbands whose wives perceived that the division of housework was unfair report higher levels of marital conflict over time (Faulkner, Davey, and Davey 2004). Similarly, in her acclaimed study of the division of housework among 50 dual-earner couples, Arlie Hochschild (1989) argued that men's level of sharing "the second shift" (that is, unpaid domestic work and childcare) influenced the levels of marital happiness couples enjoyed and their relative risk of divorce. This held true whether couples were traditional or egalitarian in their views of marriage.

In a study of 54 Dutch couples, Esther Kluwer, Jose Heesink, and Evert Van De Vliert (1996) found that conflict about household work was related to wives' dissatisfactions with their and their husbands' relative contributions and expenditures of time. They note that 72% of the wives preferred to do less than they actually did; that is, when they spent more time on house-work than they preferred to, they were dissatisfied. They also tended to be dissatisfied if they perceived their husbands spending less time than they preferred them to spend on housework. In the study, 52% of the wives wished their husbands would do more house-work than they actually did (Kluwer, Heesink, and Van De Vliert 1996).

How much each spouse contributes to the household is only the more observable aspect of the "politics of housework." In addition, couples must reach agreements about standards, schedules, and management of housework. Conflicts about standards are struggles over whose standards will predominate: Who decides whether things are "clean enough"? Similarly, disputes about schedules reflect whose time is more valuable and which partner works around the other's sense of priorities. Who waits for whom? Finally, arguments about who bears responsibility for organizing, initiating, or overseeing housework tasks are also disputes about who will have to ask the other for help, carry more responsibility in his or her head, and risk refusal from an uncooperative partner.

Thus, housework conflicts have both practical and symbolic dimensions. Practically, there are things that somehow must get done for households to run smoothly and families to function efficiently. Couples must decide who shall do them and how and when they should be done. On a more symbolic level, disputes over housework may be experienced as conflicts about the level of commitment each spouse feels toward the marriage. Because marriage symbolizes the union of two people who share their lives, work together, consult each other, and take each other's feelings and needs into consideration, resisting housework or doing it only under duress may be seen as a less-than-equal commitment. We look more in detail at the dynamics surrounding the division of housework in Chapter 12.

The absence of overt conflict over the allocation of tasks and time does not mean that there is no conflict. It means only that the conflict is not openly expressed. Wives in more traditional marriages are more likely than wives in egalitarian relationships to avoid conflict over housework even if they are dissatisfied with their domestic arrangements. They may withdraw from discussions of the division of labor as a way of avoiding the issue. Because egalitarian couples may engage in more open discussion and conflict over housework responsibilities, such conflict gives them more opportunity to establish a solution (Kluwer, Heesink, and Van De Vliert 1997).

Consequences of Conflict

Marital conflict has effects on a host of outcomes related to individual mental and physical health, family health, and child well-being. Frank Fincham and Steven Beach's thorough review (1999) of research on marital conflict showed the following outcomes.

Mental Health

There are links between experiencing marital conflict and suffering from depression, eating disorders, being physically and/or psychologically abusive of partners, and male alcohol problems (including excessive drinking, binge drinking, and alcoholism). There is less evidence connecting marital conflict to elevated levels of anxiety.

Physical Health

Marital conflict is associated with poorer overall physical health, as well as certain specific illnesses. These include cancer, heart disease, and chronic pain. The associations are stronger for wives than for husbands and may be the result of altered physiological functioning, including endocrine, cardiac, and immunological functioning, associated with the distress introduced by marital conflict.

Familial and Child Well-Being

Marital conflict may disrupt the entire family, especially if the conflict is frequent, intense, and unresolved. Marital conflict has been shown to be connected to poorer parenting, problematic parent–child attachments, and greater frequency and intensity of parent–child or sibling–sibling conflict. Consequences for children can be particularly harmful, "potentially profound," when the conflict centers on issues about the children and childrearing. The most destructive form of marital conflict appears to be when couples engage in attacking and withdrawing (hostility and detachment). In addition, when marriage is characterized by the absence of or low levels of warmth, mutuality, and harmony between parents, along with the presence of high levels of competitiveness and con-

flict, children develop more externalizing and peer problems (Katz and Woodin 2002). When parental marriages lack relationship cohesiveness, are devoid of playfulness and fun, and yet have high degree of conflict, children miss out on the warmth, intimacy, and security that healthy families can provide (Katz and Woodin 2002).

Research reveals numerous problematic effects of marital conflict on children including health problems, depression, anxiety, peer problems, conduct problems, and low self-esteem. When marital conflict is frequent, intense, and child centered, it has especially negative consequences for children.

How do children react to marital conflict? Research indicates that children are distressed by both verbal and physical conflict but reassured by healthy conflict resolution. Witnessing threats, personal insults, verbal and nonverbal hostility, physical aggressiveness between parents or by parents toward objects (for example, breaking or slamming things), defensiveness, and marital withdrawal all can give rise to "heightened negative emotionality" (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, and Papp 2003). Conversely, when parents engage in calm discussion, display affection and continued support even while engaged in conflict, children react positively.

Parents' displays of support, including providing validation to one another and affection during conflict, may reassure children that the marital relationship remains strong and loving even though parents disagree (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, and Papp 2003). However, the absence or failure of resolution causes anger, sadness, and distress. A frequently posed question, which we consider in Chapter 14, is whether the effects of conflict on children are worse than the effects of divorce.

Can Conflict Be Beneficial?

As we noted earlier, conflict is a normal and predictable part of living with other people, especially given the intensity of emotions that exist within marriage. Conflict, itself, is not necessarily damaging; there may be "reversal effects" of conflict, in which spouses' "conflict engagement" (especially that of husbands) predicts positive change in husbands' and wives' satisfaction with marriage. It appears as though some negative behavior—such as conflict—may be both healthy and necessary for long-term marital well-being. Too little conflict (suggestive of avoidance),
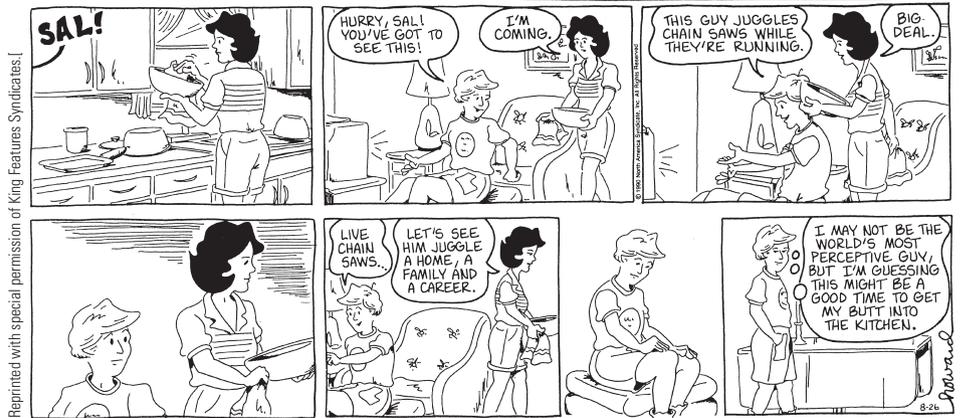
■ *Children react to parental conflict in a variety of ways, depending on how the parents handle themselves. Although children can be hurt by outward displays of anger and especially by witnessing violence, "healthy conflict management" may be beneficial for children to witness.*

like too much conflict, may lead to poorer outcomes. However, the outcome of conflict varies, along with the meaning and function of conflict behavior. It can as easily reflect engagement with a problem as it can suggest withdrawal from the problem (Christensen and Pasch 1993). Furthermore, it may be part of an effort to maintain the relationship or conversely indicate that one or both partners have given up on the relationship (Holmes and Murray 1996). Thus, as Frank Fincham and Steven Beach (1999) suggest, "we have to identify the circumstances in which conflict behaviors are likely to result in enhancement rather than deterioration of marital relationships" (1999, 54).

Resolving Conflicts

There are a number of ways to end conflicts and solve problems. You can give in, but unless you believe that the conflict ended fairly, you are likely to feel resentful. You can try to impose your will through the use of power, force, or the threat of force, but using power to end conflict leaves your partner with the bitter taste of injustice. Less productive conflict resolution strategies include *coercion* (threats, blame, and sarcasm), *manipulation* (attempting to make your partner feel guilty), and *avoidance* (Regan 2003).

More positive strategies for resolving conflict, include *supporting your partner* (through active listening, compromise, or agreement), *assertion* (clearly stating your position and keeping the conversation on topic), and *reason* (the use of rational argument and the consideration of alternatives) (Regan 2003). Finally, you can end the conflict through negotiation. In negotiation, both partners sit down and work out their differences until they come to a mutually acceptable agreement (see Figure 7.3). Conflicts can be solved through negotiation in three primary ways: agreement as a gift, bargaining, and coexistence.

Agreement as a Gift

If you and your partner disagree on an issue, you can freely agree with your partner as a gift. If you want to go to the Caribbean for a vacation and your partner wants to go backpacking in Alaska, you can freely agree to go to Alaska. An agreement as a gift is different from giving in. When you give in, you do something you don't want to do. When you agree without coercion or threats, the agreement is a gift of love, given freely without resentment. As in all exchanges of gifts, there will be reciprocation. Your partner will be more likely to give you a gift of agreement. This gift of agreement is based on referent power, discussed earlier.

Figure 7.3 ■ Family Problem-Solving Loop

Most family problem solving occurs in the ebb and flow of daily family events. Although family dynamics and transition take various forms, it is interesting to note the types that might have relevance for family issues.

Enter Here

Exit to Next Loop

1 Identification of the problem

2 Restatement or formulation of goal

3 Assessment of resources

4 Generation of alternatives

5 Assessment of alternatives

6 Selection of best alternative

7 Action or implementation of alternative

8 Evaluation of action and problem-solving process
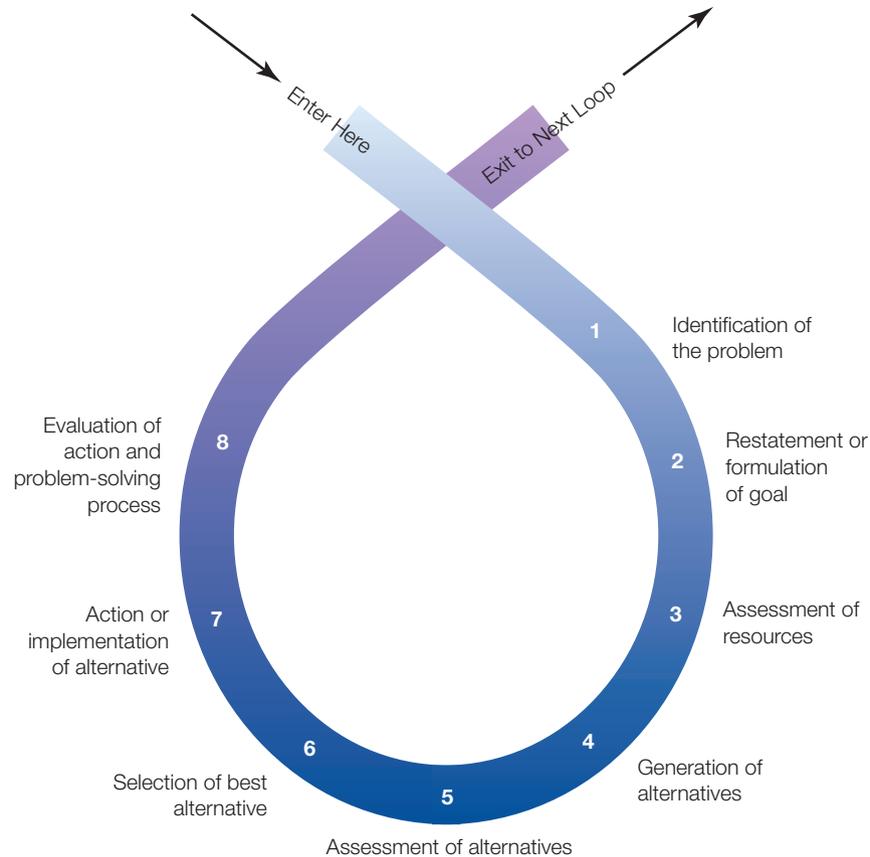
SOURCE: Kieren, Maguire, and Hurlbut 1996, 442–455. Copyright © 1996 by the National Council on Family Relations. Used by permission.

Bargaining

Bargaining in relationships—the process of making compromises—is different from bargaining in the marketplace or in politics. In relationships, you want what is best for the relationship, the most equitable deal for both you and your partner, not just the best deal for yourself. During the bargaining process, you need to trust your partner to do the same. In a marriage, both partners need to win. The result of conflict in a marriage should be to solidify the relationship, not to make one partner the winner and the other the loser. To achieve your end by exercising coercive power or withholding love, affection, or sex is a destructive form of bargaining. If you get what you want, how will that affect your partner and the relationship? Will your partner feel you are being unfair and become resentful? A solution has to be fair to both, or it won't enhance the relationship.

Coexistence

Although unresolved conflict may, over time, wear away at marital quality, sometimes differences simply can't be resolved. In such instances, they may need to be lived with. If a relationship is sound, often differences can be absorbed without undermining the basic ties. All too often we regard a difference as a threat rather than as the unique expression of two personalities. Rather than being driven mad by the cap left off the toothpaste, perhaps we can learn to live with it.

Understanding Yourself

Helping Yourself May Mean Getting Help
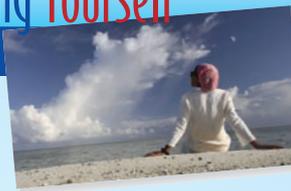
Despite good intentions and communication skills, we may not be able to resolve our relationship problems on our own. Accepting the need for professional assistance may be a significant first step toward reconciliation and change. Experts advise counseling when communication is hostile, conflict goes unresolved, individuals cannot resolve their differences, and/or a partner is thinking about leaving.

Marriage and partners counseling are professional services whose purpose is to assist individuals, couples, and families gain insight into their motivations and actions within the context of a relationship while providing tools and support to make positive changes. A skilled counselor offers objective, expert, and discreet help. Much of what counselors do is crisis or intervention oriented.

It may be more valuable and perhaps more effective to take a preventive approach and explore dynamics and behaviors before they cause more significant problems. This may occur at any point in relationships: during the engagement, before an anticipated pregnancy, or at the departure of a last child.

Each state has its own degree and qualifications for marriage counselors. The American Association for Marital and Family Therapy (AAMFT) is one association that provides proof of education and special training in marriage and family therapy. Graduate education from an accredited program in social work, psychology, psychiatry, or human development is coupled with a license in that field ensures both education and training, as well as offering the consumer recourse if questionable or unethical practices occur. This recourse is, however, only available if the practitioner holds a valid license issued by the state in which he or she practices. Mental health workers belong to any one of several professions:

- *Psychiatrists* are licensed medical doctors who, in addition to completing at least 6 years of post-baccalaureate medical and psychological training, can prescribe medication.
- *Clinical psychologists* have usually completed a Ph.D., which requires at least 6 years of postbaccalaureate course work. A license requires additional training and the passing of state boards.
- *Marriage and family counselors* typically have a master's degree and additional training to be eligible for state board exams.
- *Social workers* have master's degrees requiring at least 2 years of graduate study plus additional training to be eligible for state board exams.
- *Pastoral counselors* are clergy who have special training in addition to their religious studies.

Financial considerations may be one consideration when selecting which one of the preceding to see. Typically, the more training a professional has, the more he or she will charge for services.

A therapist can be found through a referral from a physician, school counselor, family, friend, clergy, or the state department of mental health. In any case, it is important to meet personally with the counselor to decide if he or she is right for you. Besides inquiring about his or her basic professional qualifications, it is important to feel comfortable with this person, to decide whether your value and belief systems are compatible, and to assess his or her psychological orientation. Shopping for the right counselor may be as important a decision as deciding to enter counseling in the first place.

Marriage or partnership counseling has a variety of approaches: Individual counseling focuses on one partner at a time; joint marital counseling involves both people in the relationship; and family systems therapy includes as many family members as possible. Regardless of the approach, all share the premise that to be effective, those involved should be willing to cooperate. Additional logistical questions, such as the number and frequency of sessions, depend on the type of therapy.

At any time during the therapeutic process, you have the right to stop or change therapists. Before you do, however, ask yourself whether your discomfort is personal or has to do with the techniques or personality of the therapist. Discuss this issue with the therapist before making a change. Finally, if you believe that your therapy is not benefiting you, change therapists.

Forgiveness

Related to the issues of conflict and its resolution is the topic of **forgiveness.** Conceptualized as a reduction in negative feelings and an increase in positive feelings toward a "transgressor" after a transgression, an attitude of good will toward someone who has done us harm, and showing compassion and foregoing resentment toward someone who has caused us pain, research has determined that forgiveness has long-term

physical and mental health benefits for the person forgiving. Forgiveness is associated with enhanced self-esteem, positive feelings toward the transgressor, and reduced levels of negative emotions such as anger, grief, revenge, and depression. In a relationship context, forgiveness has been defined as "the tendency to forgive partner transgressions over time and across situations" (Fincham and Beach 2002).

Forgiveness has been found to be a crucial element of married life. It is an important aspect of efforts to restore trust and relationship harmony after a transgression. Most "forgiveness narratives" mention motivations such as a partner's well-being, restoration of the relationship, and love (Fincham and Beach 2002). Forgiveness has been shown to resolve existing difficulties and prevent future ones. It also enhances marital quality, as can be seen in the positive association between forgiveness and marital satisfaction and longevity (Kachadourian, Fincham, and Davila 2004).

Research has identified both personal and relationship qualities associated with the ability or tendency to forgive. Qualities such as agreeableness, religiosity, humility, emotional stability, and empathy are associated with forgiveness. Pride and narcissism are associated with decreased tendencies to forgive. Individuals who are more accommodating within their relationships, more securely attached, and have more positive models of self and others are also more likely to be forgiving toward partners who have committed transgressions.

Not all relationship transgressions are equivalent. The ability to forgive relatively minor transgressions doesn't automatically guarantee forgiveness of more major transgressions. Wives who display tendencies to forgive seem able to do so in both minor and major transgressions. For husbands, on the other hand, tendencies to forgive apply more to major transgressions. It appears as though men may not consider minor transgressions important enough to warrant either receiving apologies or granting forgiveness (Kachadourian, Fincham, and Davila 2004).

If we can't talk about what we like and what we want, there is a good chance that we won't get either. Communication is the basis for good relationships. Communication and intimacy are reciprocal: Communication creates intimacy, and intimacy in turn helps create good communication.

If we fail to communicate, we are likely to turn our relationships into empty facades, with each person acting a role rather than revealing his or her deepest self. But communication is learned behavior. If we have learned *how not to* communicate, we can learn *how to* communicate. Communication will allow us to maintain and expand ourselves and our relationships.

Summary

- Communication includes both verbal and nonverbal communication. For the meaning of communication to be clear, verbal and nonverbal messages must agree.

- The functions of nonverbal communication are to convey interpersonal attitudes, express emotions, and handle the ongoing interaction. Much nonverbal communication, such as levels of touching, varies across cultures and between women and men.

- Nonverbal communication patterns can reveal whether a relationship is healthy or troubled.

- How well a couple communicates before marriage can be an important predictor of later marital satisfaction. *Self-disclosure* before marriage is related to relationship satisfaction later.

- Research indicates that happily married couples engage in less frequent and less destructive conflict, disclose more of their thoughts and feelings, and more accurately and effectively communicate.

- In marital communication, wives send clearer, less ambiguous messages; send more positive, more negative, and fewer neutral, messages; and take more active roles in arguments than husbands do.

- *Demand–withdraw communication* is common among married couples. One partner, more often the wife, will raise an issue for discussion, and the other partner, more likely the husband, will withdraw from the conversation instead of attempting to communicate.

- Satisfying sexual relationships require effective sexual communication.

- Some topics are more highly charged and more sensitive to discuss.

- Virginia Satir placed people into four categories based on their style of miscommunication: (1) placaters, (2) blamers, (3) computers, and (4) distractors. Placaters are passive, helpless, and always agreeable; blamers act superior, are often angry, do not listen, and try to escape responsibility; computers are correct, reasonable, and expressionless; and distractors are frenetic and tend to change the subject.

- Barriers to communication include the traditional male gender role; personal reasons, such as feelings of inadequacy; the fear of conflict; and an absence of self awareness.

- Some research reflects a curvilinear relationship between self-disclosure and marital satisfaction: both low and high levels of self-disclosure associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction. Other research supports a more linear model: high levels of self-disclosure result in higher levels of marital satisfaction.

- *Trust* is the belief in the reliability and integrity of a person. Self-disclosure requires trust. How much you trust a person influences the way you are likely to interpret ambiguous or unexpected messages from him or her.

- *Feedback* is the ongoing process in which participants and their messages create a given result and are subsequently modified by the result.

- The basis of good communication in a relationship is *mutual affirmation.* Mutual affirmation includes mutual acceptance, mutual liking, and expressing liking in words and actions.

- *Power* is the ability or potential ability to influence another person or group. There are six types of marital power: coercive, reward, expert, legitimate, referent, and informational.

- Self-described equal (or egalitarian) couples often still reveal power differences and inequalities that more often favor men.

- Conflict is natural in intimate relationships. *Basic conflicts* challenge fundamental rules; *nonbasic conflicts* do not threaten basic assumptions and may be negotiable. *Situational conflicts* are based on specific issues. *Personality conflicts* are unrealistic conflicts, potentially stemming from fundamental personality differences.

- People usually handle anger in relationships by suppressing or venting it. When anger arises, it is useful to think of it as a signal that change is necessary.

- Among heterosexual couples, women have greater awareness of the emotional quality of the relationship and are more likely to initiate discussion of contested issues. Men are more likely to approach conflict from a task oriented stance or to withdraw.

- Hostile conflict, characterized by frequent heated arguments, name calling, an unwillingness to listen to each other, is a particularly strong predictor of eventual divorce.

- Premarital variables help determine how we handle conflict. From observations of parental interaction, we develop a *marital paradigm*—a set of images of how marriage should be, "for better or worse." Conflict management may also be affected by our attachment style and by the wider social context in which relationships exist.

- There are two dimensions of behavior in conflict situations—*assertiveness* (attempting to satisfy our own concerns) and *cooperativeness* (attempting to satisfy the other person's concerns), which can be differently combined to form five styles of conflict management: *competing* (assertive and uncooperative), *collaborating* (assertive and cooperative), *compromising* (intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness), *avoiding* (unassertive and uncooperative), and *accommodating* (unassertive and cooperative).

- Major sources of conflict include sex, money, and housework.

- Conflict can have effects on the mental and physical health of spouses or partners, the health of the relationship, and the well-being of the children. Especially when conflict is intense, frequent, and centers on issues related to the children, it is likely to negatively affect children. Seeing parents constructively engage in calm discussion and display affection and continued support even while engaged in conflict is beneficial for children.

- Happily married couples use certain techniques to resolve conflict, including summarizing, paraphrasing, validating, and clarifying. Unhappy couples use confrontation, confrontation and defensiveness, and complaining and defensiveness.

- Conflict resolution may be achieved through negotiation in three ways: agreement as a freely given gift, bargaining, and coexistence.

■ *Forgiveness* is an important part of efforts to restore trust and rebuild relationship harmony. It is positively associated with both relationship satisfaction and stability (that is, longevity).

Key Terms

accommodating 263

assertiveness 263

avoiding 263

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collaborating 263

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Companion Website for This Book

http://www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/strong

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