Communication, Power, and Conflict

Chapter 7

Chapter Outline

- Verbal and Nonverbal Communication
- Gender Differences in Communication
- Communication Patterns in Marriage
- Other Problems in Communication
- Power, Conflict, and Intimacy
- Explanations of Marital Power
- Intimacy and Conflict
- Dealing with Conflict
- Consequences of Conflict
- Resolving Conflicts
- Helping Yourself by Getting Help

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

- **Verbal communication** expresses the *basic content* of the message
- **Nonverbal communication** reflects more of the *relationship* part of the message
  - The attitude of the speaker
  - Indicates how the words are to be interpreted
The Functions of Nonverbal Communication

- Nonverbal communication has the following three important functions in marriage:
  1. Conveying interpersonal attitudes
  2. Expressing emotions
  3. Handling the ongoing interaction.

Proximity, Eye Contact, and Touch

- **Proximity**
  - Nearness, in terms of physical space, time, and so on
  - A distance of 0 to 18 inches is considered an **intimate zone**

- **Eye Contact and Facial Expressions**
  - Eye contact may be best understood as part of a broader category of information and emotions conveyed and communicated with one’s face.

Touch

- A review of the research on touch finds it to be extremely important in human development, health, and sexuality.
Gender Differences in Communication
- 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
  - maintain more eye contact with others with whom they are interacting

Gender Differences in Partner Communication
- Researchers have identified several gender differences in how heterosexual spouses or partners communicate. In general, wives tend to:
  - Send clearer messages
  - Give more positive or negative messages
  - Set the emotional tone of an argument
  - Use emotional appeals more than husbands

Premarital Communication Patterns and Marital Satisfaction
- Many couples who communicate poorly before marriage are likely to continue the same way after marriage.
- Self-disclosure—the revelation of our own deeply personal information—before or soon after marriage is related to relationship satisfaction later
Cohabitation and Later Marital Communication

- Couples who live together before marrying are more likely to separate and divorce than couples who don’t live together before marriage.
- Couples who live together come from backgrounds that may predispose them to poorer communication abilities.
- People who cohabit may be more accepting of divorce and less committed to marriage.

Marital Communication Patterns and Satisfaction

- The following characteristics tend to be found among couples in satisfying marriages:
  - Willingness to accept conflict but to engage in conflict in nondestructive ways.
  - Less frequent conflict and less time spent in conflict.
  - The ability to disclose or reveal private thoughts and feelings, especially positive ones, to a partner.

Cont...

- 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.
Demand–Withdraw Communication

- A pattern in which one person makes an effort to engage the other person in a discussion of some issue of importance.
- The other party, in response, withdraws by either leaving the discussion, failing to reply, or changing the subject.

Other Problems in Communication

- Topic-Related Difficulty
- Barriers to Effective Communication
- Obstacles to Self-Awareness
- Problems in Self-Disclosure
  - How Much Openness?
  - “Can I Trust You?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Difficulty Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship make (possibility of divorce)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stigmatized behavior (lying, seduction)</td>
<td>4.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Externalized intimacy (loss of personal identity)</td>
<td>4.40</td>
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<td>Excessive or inappropriate display of anger (yelling, aggression)</td>
<td>4.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual intimacy</td>
<td>4.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of communication (related to kids)</td>
<td>4.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-laws and extended family</td>
<td>3.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disclosing secrets, evidence behavior</td>
<td>3.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>3.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor communication skills (difficult to understand)</td>
<td>3.85</td>
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* 1 = extremely easy, 5 = extremely difficult.
The Importance of Feedback

Power, Conflict, and Intimacy

- The politics of family life—who has more power, who makes the decisions, and who does what—are complex and can be a source of conflict between spouses or intimate partners.
- Power in marital and other relationships has been said to consist of:
  - Power bases
  - Power processes
  - Power outcomes

Sources of Marital Power

- Traditionally, husbands have held authority over their wives.
- The U.S. courts formally institutionalized these power relationships.
- Legal and social support for the husband’s control of the family declined through most of the twentieth century.
Explanations of Marital Power

- Relative love and need theory
  - Explains power in terms of the individual’s involvement and needs in the relationship

- Principle of least interest
  - The partner with the least interest in continuing a relationship enjoys the most power in it

- Resource theory of power
  - The partner with the sole or larger source of the financial resources on which couples depend has the most power

Intimacy and Conflict

- Experiencing Conflict
  - In the healthiest of relationships, it is common and normal for couples to have disagreements or 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.

Marital Conflict


- Marital heterogamy (marriage of two people from different backgrounds and/or with different demographic characteristics) was associated with more marital conflict than couples who were homogamous.

- Couples who maintained more egalitarian relationships, sharing decision making equally, expressed less marital conflict.

- People with no religious affiliation reported higher levels of marital conflict.
Comparing Conflict in Marriage and Cohabitation

- Most research has revealed no significant differences between cohabiting and married couples in their frequency of conflict over such relationship aspects as:
  - time spent together
  - in-laws
  - Money
  - Sex
  - Decisions about childbearing
  - the division of responsibilities.

How Women and Men Handle Conflict

- Women are more likely than men are to initiate discussions of contested relationship issues.
- Women are more aware of the emotional quality of and the events that occur in the relationship.
- Men approach conflict resolution from a task-oriented stance, as in "problem solving"; women are more emotionally expressive as they pursue intimacy.

Conflict Resolution and Relationship Satisfaction

- How couples manage conflict is one of the most important determinants of their satisfaction and the well-being of their relationships.
- Constructive Conflict Management
  - Summarizing.
  - Paraphrasing.
  - Validating.
  - Clarifying
Destructive conflict management

- Escalating spirals of manipulation, threat, and coercion
- Avoidance
- Retaliation
- Inflexibility
- A competitive pattern of dominance and subordination
- Demeaning or insulting verbal and nonverbal communication

Common Conflict Areas: Sex, Money, and Housework

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Conflict Areas: Sex, Money, and Housework</th>
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<tr>
<td>Table 7.2: Percentage Reporting Across Issues “Strongly Disagree” or “Disagree” in Problems</td>
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Consequences of Conflict

- While conflict is a normal part of marriages and relationships, excessive conflict can have negative personal or relationship consequences
- Marital conflict is associated with poorer overall physical health, as well as certain specific illnesses
- Marital conflict may disrupt the entire family, especially if the conflict is frequent, intense, and unresolved
Consequences of Conflict

• Children react to parental conflict in a variety of ways, depending on how the parents handle themselves.

Resolving Conflicts