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BRIEF REPORT

Discussion Topic and Observed Behavior in Couples' Problem-Solving Conversations: Do Problem Severity and Topic Choice Matter?

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Communication behavior is an integral part of relationship functioning and, therefore, a common target of relationship interventions. Between-couple variability in observed behaviors is commonly interpreted as reflecting their underlying skill in communication, but other factors, including perceived difficulty of the problem and the topic being discussed, may also covary with communication behavior. The current study examined this possibility by testing whether these two aspects of discussion topics were associated with communication behavior. Ethnically diverse newlywed couples ($N = 402$ couples) were observed in their homes as they engaged in conflict resolution tasks. Resulting behavioral codes were examined in relation to perceived difficulty of the problem and the topic of the discussion. Higher levels of husband-reported problem difficulty were associated with higher levels of husband and wife negativity, independent of relationship satisfaction. After controlling for problem difficulty and relationship satisfaction, the topic of the discussion was associated with husband and wife positivity, husband and wife negativity, and wife effectiveness, indicating that some topics elicited better or worse communication than others. The substantive focus of couples' conflicts may play an important role in how they communicate, suggesting that the topic of discussion merits close attention in studies of couples and in relationship interventions.

Keywords: couples, communication, observational, discussion topic

The way couples communicate has been consistently linked with relationship outcomes and, as a result, prevailing models of couples interventions focus on improving communication skills as a means of improving couples' relationships (e.g., Benson, McGinn, & Christensen, 2012; Halford, 2011). These studies build upon the basic assumption that observational tasks yield relatively pure samples of communication behavior, reflecting only couples' relative skill at communicating. However, other factors may contribute to the way couples communicate during observational tasks. As Fincham & Beach (1999, p. 59) noted, "some types of problems may be associated with poorer marital outcomes as well as poorer problem-solving behavior, leading to spurious conclusions if problem-solving behavior is examined in isolation." Thus, observed communication may, at least in part, be a product of the topics that couples choose to discuss. The current study was designed to test this possibility using a sample of diverse newlywed couples.

Two aspects of couples' discussions may be associated with the quality of partners' observed behaviors: the topic being discussed and how difficult the couple perceives the topic to be. To our knowledge, neither of these aspects has been explicitly tested in relation to observational data, but other evidence suggests that communication behavior reflects topic content and difficulty. With respect to discussion topics, certain relationship problems may inspire worse communication than others. For example, a diary study in which 100 couples sampled from the community reported on each instance of marital conflict they had over a 15-day period found that conflicts about money elicited more self-reported angry and depressive behavior than did conflicts about other topics (Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009). Additionally, a study in which 15 community couples were directed by researchers to discuss their most contentious sexual and nonsexual conflicts indicated that sexual topics are much more difficult for couples to discuss than nonsexual topics (Rehman et al., 2011).

With respect to perceived difficulty, couples are less effective when discussing problems that they perceive to be especially difficult. In a sample of 82 community couples, each spouse was allowed to choose one area of difficulty in their marriage to discuss with their partner. Topics rated as "highly important" by wives yielded the most demanding behavior from both partners (Vogel & Karney, 2002), suggesting that topics holding particular weight for

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couples may be more difficult to discuss and therefore elicit poorer communication behavior. However, a study of 37 couples who were instructed to discuss four different incidents that pertained to important unresolved issues in their relationship (two chosen by each spouse) found contrasting results: communication behavior covaried with the highest difficulty rating of their four topics but not with the difficulty of the particular problem they were discussing (Sanford, 2003).

While suggestive of links between discussion topic and communication behavior, all of the aforementioned studies used relatively small samples of middle-class, predominantly Caucasian couples, thus restricting power and the range of discussion topics that might be seen. Additionally, Vogel and Karney (2002) coded only for demand and withdraw behaviors, and thus did not examine a full range of communication behavior. Sanford (2003) addressed this problem by using the Rapid Couples Interaction Scoring System (RCISS) which encompasses many more communication behaviors. However, this study used difficulty ratings from a panel of clinicians rather than ratings from the couples themselves. These outside ratings address an important question but overlook the possibility that the same topic will not be equally easy or difficult for all couples. Finally, Papp et al. (2009) and Rehman et al. (2011) focused only on certain topics (money and sex, respectively) in comparison with all other topics combined, thus obscuring information about these other topics.

The current study sought to build upon previous work by testing whether, 1) controlling for satisfaction the self-reported difficulty of the topic and 2) controlling for satisfaction and topic difficulty, the specific topic being discussed was associated with couples' levels of observed positivity, negativity, and effectiveness during problem-solving discussions. We used a sample of ethnically and socioeconomically diverse newlyweds to allow for greater variability in communication topics and behavior. Based on previous findings indicating that behavior differed by topic importance and across topics, we hypothesized that topics rated as more difficult would be associated with poorer communication behavior (i.e., lower levels of positivity and effectiveness and higher levels of negativity). We also hypothesized that communication behaviors would differ across the discussion topics, indicating that certain topics would be associated with better or worse communication. Although we conducted exploratory analyses to examine behaviors associated with particular topics, we did not make hypotheses about specific topics because the topics tested in the current study differed from those in previous studies.

Method

Sampling

The sampling procedure was designed to yield participants who were first-married newlywed couples in which partners were of the same ethnicity, living in low-income neighborhoods in Los Angeles County. Recently married couples were identified through names and addresses on marriage license applications. Addresses were matched with census data to identify applicants living in low-income communities, defined as census block groups wherein the median household income was no more than 160% of the 1999 federal poverty level for a 4-person family. Next, names on the licenses were weighted using data from a Bayesian Census Surname Combination, which integrates census and surname information to produce a multinomial probability of membership in each of four racial/ethnic categories (Hispanic, African American, Asian, and Caucasian/other). Couples were chosen using probabilities proportionate to the ratio of target prevalences to the population prevalences, weighted by the couple's average estimated probability of being Hispanic, African American, or Caucasian, which are the three largest groups among people living in poverty in Los Angeles County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). These couples were telephoned and screened to ensure that they had married, that neither partner had been previously married, and that both spouses identified as Hispanic, African American, or Caucasian.

Participants

For the 431 couples identified with the above procedures, marriages averaged 4.8 months in duration ($SD = 2.5$), and 38.5% of couples had children. Men's mean age was 27.9 ($SD = 5.8$) and women's mean age was 26.3 ($SD = 5.0$). Wives had a mean income of \$28,672 ($SD = \$24,549$) and husbands had a mean income of \$34,153 ($SD = \$27,094$). Twelve percent of couples were African American, 12% were Caucasian and 76% were Hispanic. Of the Hispanic couples, 33% spoke Spanish and 67% spoke English. All African American and Caucasian couples spoke English. Interactions for 17 couples were not recorded, because participants declined ($n = 11$) or equipment malfunctioned ($n = 6$) leaving 414 couples providing data. Topics discussed by at least 10 couples were retained; 12 couples discussing topics with a sample size less than 10 were not included in the analyses, leaving 402 couples in the current sample.

Procedure

Couples were visited in their homes by two trained interviewers who described the IRB-approved study and obtained written informed consent from each participant. After completing self-report measures, partners were reunited for three 8-min videotaped discussions. For the first interaction, which was designed to assess problem-solving behaviors, partners were asked to jointly identify a topic of disagreement in their relationship and then to devote 8 minutes to working toward a mutually satisfying resolution of that topic. Prior to starting the interaction, the couple informed the interviewer what topic they would be discussing, and the interviewer recorded their response verbatim. Two discussions about individual rather than couple problems were also conducted, but not used in the current analyses. Upon completion of the protocol, couples were debriefed and paid \$75 for participating.

Behavioral Observation

Videotapes were scored by 16 trained coders using the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (IFIRS; Melby et al., 1998), a macrocoding system which has been used successfully with diverse samples (e.g., Cutrona, Russell, Burzette, Wesner, & Bryant, 2011). Coders—five of whom were native Spanish speakers—coded only in their native language. Coders participated in 10 hours of training per week for 3 months and were required to pass written and viewing tests at an 80% percent accuracy level before

coding tapes. Coders also participated in weekly 2-hr training meetings consisting of a variety of structured activities (e.g., watching examples of specific codes) designed to minimize drift and ensure fidelity to the IFIRS codes.

Coders viewed each of the interaction tasks three to four times using the Noldus Observer XT coding software, using the built-in capabilities to note behaviors of both spouses. Coders then used their recorded notations to tabulate the frequency and intensity of each type of behavior and used this information to assign a score for each spouse for each code, using the criteria from the IFIRS coding manual (Melby et al., 1998). The possible scores range from 1–9, with a score of 1 indicating that the behavior did not occur and a score of 9 indicating "the behavior occurs frequently or with significant intensity" (Melby et al., 1998, pp. 7–8).

To assess reliability, 20% of the videos were randomly assigned to be coded by two coders chosen at random from the pool of 16 coders. The scores of the two coders were compared and any scores that were discrepant by more than one point were resolved by both coders working together. Factor analysis was used to reduce the IFIRS codes to three scales (Williamson, Bradbury, Trail, & Karney, 2011).

Measures

Positivity. A composite positivity behavioral scale was created by averaging an individual's scores on the group enjoyment, positive mood, warmth/support, physical affection, humor/laugh, endearment, and listener responsiveness codes.

Negativity. A composite negativity behavioral scale was created by averaging an individual's scores on the angry coercion, contempt, denial, disruptive process, dominance, hostility, interrogation, and verbal attack codes.

Effectiveness. A composite effectiveness, or problem-solving skill, behavioral scale was created by averaging an individual's scores on the assertiveness, communication, effective process, solution quality, and solution quantity codes.

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was conceptualized as spouses' global sentiment toward the relationship and was assessed by summing responses on an 8-item questionnaire. Five items asked how satisfied the respondent was with certain areas of their relationship (e.g., "satisfaction with the amount of time spent together"), and were scored on a 5-point scale (ranging from 1 = *Very dissatisfied* to 5 = *Very satisfied*). Three items asked the degree to which the participant agreed with a statement about their relationship, (e.g., "how much do you trust your partner") and were scored on a 4-point scale (1 = *Not at all*, 2 = *Not that much*, 3 = *Somewhat,* 4 = *Completely*).

Discussion topic and difficulty. Two research assistants independently coded the verbatim descriptions of the discussion topic chosen by the couples into one of 25 categories using a list of common areas of marital disagreement (e.g., management of money, relationships with in-laws; adapted from Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Due to overlap between many of the 25 topic categories, the list was grouped by similarity and condensed into 12 topic categories, which are presented in Table 1.

Participants rated how much each of these areas was a source of difficulty/disagreement in their relationship on a scale of 0 to 10, such that higher scores reflected issues that caused frequent or intense conflict. The difficulty rating of the associated category was assigned as the difficulty level of the discussion topic. For example, if the discussion topic was "Who should be responsible for cooking dinner?" (coded into the household chores category), the difficulty rating given by the husband and wife for household chores would be assigned as each spouse's perceived difficulty of the topic they were discussing.

Table 1
Subtopics and Number of Couples Within Each Topic Category

Topic	Subcategories	*N*
Household Chores	Division of workload in the family	72
	Household chores	
Money	Money	55
Planning and decision making	Making decisions and solving problems	52
	Decisions about leisure/travel time	
	Plans for the future	
Children	Children	37
Personal habits	Personal habits	35
Communication	The way you communicate	29
	Willingness to work on improving your relationship	
How to spend time as a couple	The amount of time you spend as a couple	28
	The quality of time you spend as a couple	
	The need for either of you to spend time alone	
Relationship with in-laws	Relationship with in-laws	25
Current or future work	Career decisions	20
	Either you or your spouse's work	
Personality	Your own or your partner's personality characteristics	19
	Moods and tempers	
Closeness	Your sexual relationship	15
	Showing intimacy and affection	
	Trust	
	Jealousy/infidelity	
Friends	Friends	14

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Across all discussed topics, wives' mean difficulty rating was 4.30 and husbands' mean difficulty rating was 4.09. The mean level of self-reported difficulty and relationship satisfaction, and observed positivity, negativity, and effectiveness of each of the 12 discussion topics are presented in Table 2. The behavioral variables were correlated in the expected direction, with positivity and effectiveness correlated directly (Husband, $r = .27$, $p < .001$, Wife, $r = .21$, $p < .001$) while negativity correlated inversely with positivity and effectiveness (Husband, $r = -.20$, $p < .001$, Wife, $r = -.17$, $p < .001$, and Husband, $r = -.33$, $p < .001$, Wife, $r = -.26$, $p < .001$, respectively). Husbands and wives rated *Closeness* as the most difficult topic (Husband $M = 5.95$, Wife $M = 6.33$). The least difficult discussion topic for wives was *Planning and Decision Making* ($M = 2.96$), and the least difficult topic for husbands was *Children* ($M = 2.22$). The most frequently discussed topic was *Household Chores* ($n = 72$), and the least frequently discussed topic was *Friends* (n = 14).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Discussion topics

Topic	Husband					Wife				
	Positivity Mean (*SD*)	Negativity Mean (*SD*)	Effectiveness Mean (*SD*)	Relationship satisfaction Mean (*SD*)	Difficulty Mean (*SD*)	Positivity Mean (*SD*)	Negativity Mean (*SD*)	Effectiveness Mean (*SD*)	Relationship satisfaction Mean (*SD*)	Difficulty Mean (*SD*)
Chores	2.13 (.92)	2.50 (1.19)	3.81 (1.20)	35.90 (3.49)	4.82 (3.04)	2.15 (1.01)	2.37 (.98)	4.07 (1.17)	34.97 (3.48)	5.06 (3.33)
Money	2.21 (.89)	2.02 (.81)	4.03 (1.04)	36.02 (3.27)	5.25 (2.67)	2.16 (.87)	2.27 (.91)	4.30 (1.32)	36.15 (3.39)	5.80 (2.77)
Decision making	2.10 (.67)	1.84 (.58)	4.06 (1.02)	36.56 (3.14)	2.31 (2.32)	2.02 (.71)	1.90 (.73)	4.03 (1.05)	35.48 (4.00)	2.96 (2.88)
Children	1.84 (.82)*	1.87 (.74)	4.12 (.94)	37.43 (3.23)	2.22 (2.80)	1.86 (.81)	1.80 (.66)	4.42 (1.23)	36.62 (3.51)	2.97 (3.14)
Personal habits	2.41 (.70)	2.14 (.81)	3.99 (.97)	37.11 (3.32)	3.75 (3.22)	2.39 (.73)	2.13 (.71)	4.49 (.86)	36.17 (3.23)	3.33 (3.01)
Communication	1.97 (.76)	1.84 (.56)	4.01 (1.40)	36.17 (3.91)	3.55 (3.32)	1.96 (.80)	1.93 (.54)	4.28 (.98)	34.86 (4.26)	3.69 (3.11)
Time	2.59 (.96)	2.31 (1.26)	4.17 (1.35)	36.32 (3.20)	4.11 (3.51)	2.50 (.93)	2.19 (.95)	4.31 (1.46)	35.43 (3.48)	4.61 (3.38)
In-laws	1.98 (1.05)	2.20 (.94)	4.04 (.90)	36.44 (3.83)	5.44 (3.25)	1.93 (.99)	2.25 (.92)	3.75 (1.08)	35.88 (3.10)	5.64 (3.08)
Work	2.12 (.81)	1.99 (.65)	4.05 (1.04)	35.95 (3.43)	3.60 (2.68)	1.92 (.75)	1.91 (.60)	4.03 (.74)	35.70 (3.94)	3.05 (2.93)
Personality	2.43 (1.20)	2.89 (1.33)*	3.81 (1.13)	36.63 (2.95)	4.16 (2.77)	2.11 (1.00)	2.86 (1.44)*	3.37 (.68)	36.11 (2.94)	3.32 (3.59)
Closeness	1.85 (.74)	1.96 (.92)	3.69 (.93)	34.27 (3.53)	5.93 (3.47)	1.94 (.79)	2.11 (.78)	3.85 (1.05)	33.07 (5.05)	6.33 (3.13)
Friends	2.30 (.96)	2.78 (1.19)	3.56 (1.03)	36.21 (3.56)	5.43 (3.11)	2.34 (1.16)	3.00 (1.12)*	3.75 (.91)	35.93 (5.32)	4.79 (3.70)
Alpha	.67	.82	.73	.74	—	.71	.80	.74	.72	—
Interrater reliability	.78	.73	.78	—	.80	.80	.84	.85	—	.80

Note. * Behavior for this topic is significantly different from the average of all other topics combined. Interrater reliability for Positivity, Negativity, and Effectiveness was measured by an intraclass correlation coefficient. Interrater reliability for Difficulty was measured by coefficient kappa.

Relationship satisfaction did not differ among couples who chose different topics, indicating that more satisfied couples did not choose to discuss different topics than less satisfied couples [Husband: $F(17, 401) = 1.13$, $p = .32$, Wife: $F(18, 401) = .53$, $p = .94$]. All of the results presented below remained the same after controlling for ethnicity, age, and presence of children.

Topic Difficulty and Observed Behavior

To assess the association between communication behavior and topic difficulty, we conducted a series of six linear regressions. Husband and wife ratings of topic difficulty were entered concurrently as independent variables, and husband and wife relationship satisfaction were entered as control variables.[1] Husbands' and wives' communication behaviors (positivity, negativity, and effectiveness) were entered as the dependent variables. Husbands' ratings of problem difficulty were significantly associated with their own level of negativity, $\beta = .18$, $t(4,401) = 3.26$, $p = .001$, and their wives' level of negativity, $\beta = .15$, $t(4,401) = 2.67$, $p = .008$. Husbands' problem difficulty ratings were not significantly associated with husband or wife positivity, or husband or wife effectiveness. Additionally, wives' problem difficulty ratings were not significantly associated with their own communication behaviors or their spouses' communication behaviors along any of the three behavioral dimensions.

Discussion Topic and Observed Behavior

To assess the association between communication behavior and discussion topic, six ANCOVAs (one for each behavior, controlling for topic difficulty and relationship satisfaction) were conducted. Negativity varied significantly as a function of the discussion topic for husbands, $F(11, 402) = 3.68$, $p < .001$, and for wives, $F(11, 402) = 3.67$, $p < .001$. Husbands' and wives' positivity also differed significantly as a function of the discussion topic, $F(11, 402) = 2.15$, $p = .02$ and $F(11, 401) = 2.14$, $p = .02$, respectively. Wives' effectiveness differed significantly as a function of discussion topic, $F(11, 401) = 2.02$, $p = .03$, but husbands' effectiveness did not, $F(11, 401) = .57$, $p = .86$. Thus, both partners' negativity and positivity, and wives' effectiveness, differed significantly as a function of the nature of the topics they discussed, over and above the effects of relationship satisfaction and difficulty of the problem.

These analyses indicated an overall tendency for communication to differ by discussion topic, but did not allow us to determine which topics were associated with different levels of communication behavior when compared to the rest of the topics. Therefore, post hoc specific contrasts were conducted on the five communication behaviors found to differ by topic (husband and wife negativity, husband and wife positivity, and wife effectiveness). The mean level of communication behavior of each of the 12 topics was compared to the mean of the other 11 topics combined. Because 12 different tests were conducted for each behavior, a Bonferroni corrected p value was used. A family-wise error rate of $p = .05$ was chosen and divided by 12, resulting in a p value of .004 to determine significant associations.

[1] The pattern of results remains the same when problem topic (coded as a series of 11 dummy codes) is added as a covariate.

The topic of *Personality* was significantly associated with higher levels of husband negativity, $F(1, 386) = 11.90$, $p = .001$, and wife negativity, $F(1, 386) = 12.47$, $p < .001$. The topic of *Friends* was significantly associated with higher levels of wife negativity, $F(1, 386) = 12.49$, $p < .001$. The topic of *Children* was associated with lower levels of husband positivity, $F(1, 385) = 9.03$, $p = .003$. Several additional results approached statistical significance. The topic of *Children* was associated with lower levels of wife positivity, $F(1, 385) = 7.64$, $p = .006$, and the topic of *How to spend time as a couple* was associated with higher levels of husband positivity, $F(1, 385) = 7.95$, $p = .005$, and wife positivity, $F(1, 385) = 6.82$, $p = .009$. The topic of *Personality* was associated with lower levels of wife effectiveness, $F(1, 385) = 8.00$, $p = .005$.

Discussion

Although couples' communication during observational lab tasks is typically interpreted as reflecting couples' problem-solving skills, alternative perspectives argue that poor observed communication might also arise from content of couples' discussions (Fincham & Beach, 1999). The current study tested these views by examining the association between two dimensions of discussion content—the perceived difficulty of the problem and the topic being discussed—and their association with observed positivity, negativity, and effectiveness in a sample of 402 diverse newlywed couples. Consistent with the view that communication behavior is related in meaningful ways to the content of the discussion, husbands and wives engaged in more negative behavior when they discussed a problem that husbands rated as more difficult. Moreover, husbands' and wives' observed positivity, husbands' and wives' observed negativity, and wives' observed effectiveness differed as a function of discussion topic, indicating that some topics elicited better or worse communication than others. These findings were robust even when controlling for couples' perception of the difficulty of the topic and their concurrent satisfaction, ruling out the possibility that these factors inflated the associations between topic and behavior.

These findings have several implications for research and theory regarding the role of communication in couples' lives. First, they emphasize a basic point: it is not only how couples communicate regarding their problems but also what they communicate about that matters. In some ways, this fact is not surprising—communication is a way for couples to address problems. Yet communication behaviors are typically viewed as an entity in their own right, and the substantive issues driving this communication are typically ignored. These findings indicate that interpreting between-couple variability in observed behaviors as a reflection solely of their communication skills may not be justified, as the types of problems couples discuss are indeed associated with observed communication at a between-couple level. This raises new questions about how to interpret between-couple differences in communication behavior, especially if they prove predictive of subsequent marital outcomes. For example, given that some of the between-couple variability in negativity is due to perceived problem severity and topic choice, is the association between observed negativity and couples' marital satisfaction over time (e.g., Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010) due to certain couples having a relative deficit in communication skills, as is commonly assumed, or is it due to the fact that certain couples have more severe problems or certain types of problems? The cross-sectional design of the current study did not allow us to test these types of questions, but it does highlight a need for longitudinal studies to disentangle the roles of problem severity, problem topic, and communication skills in predicting marital outcomes.

The results of the current study also have practical implications for research utilizing observational communication designs and for practitioners working with couples. First, they suggest that typical observational paradigms in which couples choose their own discussion topics create variance that cannot be attributed solely to couples' communication skills. This may prove problematic in between-couple designs, as differences in observed negativity could be due either to differences in problem severity, topic choice, skill, or some combination of all three (see Fincham & Beach, 1999; Heyman, 2001). Statistically controlling for problem severity and topic choice may be an important first step in assessing the unique contribution of communication skills versus the content of the conversation itself. Sampling and averaging behavior across multiple topics may also help reduce some of this variability. Further study is needed to determine which methodological adjustments will best account for the error variance introduced by topic without obscuring important and predictive variance in communication.

Future research is also needed to determine how the degree of choice couples have in topic selection affects their communication behaviors. For example, although these results were generally consistent with previous studies showing that certain topics elicit poorer communication behavior than other topics (Papp et al., 2009; Rehman et al., 2011), the most difficult topics were slightly different. Specifically, in the only previous study to explicitly test communication differences across multiple topics, S*ex* was more difficult to discuss than other topics, whereas the current study found that *Personality*, C*hildren*, and *Friends* were the most difficult topics. One possible explanation for this difference is that in the study of sexual and nonsexual discussions, all participants were instructed to have a discussion about sex, whereas in the current study participants were allowed to choose their discussion topic—and only 15 couples chose to talk about *Closeness* (the overarching category for sexual topics). This suggests the possibility that some couples may have chosen to avoid talking about sex because it is a difficult topic. Within-person comparisons of communication behavior when couples (or individual partners) are allowed to choose the topic of discussion versus a researcher-imposed topic of discussion will refine understanding of whether couples communicate more negatively when guided to discuss contentious topics they might have otherwise avoided.

For practitioners, these findings indicate that interpreting communication behaviors as "skills" without considering how the severity and types of problems couples face affect their patterns of interacting neglects important information. This view supports cognitive–behavioral interventions that emphasize prioritizing and tracking the issues couples are struggling with, rather than trying to improve their communication skills in isolation. Therapists may wish to address these issues directly, either by providing psychoeducation about the particular content areas being discussed, such as financial planning or parenting challenges (Baucom, Epstein, LaTaillade, & Kirby, 2008), or by drawing attention to certain themes in the couples' relationship, such as boundaries or concerns about

relative power (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). In this manner, the content of couples' conversations can be used as a target of intervention as well, rather than as an exemplar of their poor communication patterns. The results presented here suggest that personality, friends, and children may be among the most difficult for couples to discuss, and suggest that additional attention to these types of concerns may be warranted when working with couples similar to the diverse newlyweds studied here.

Several methodological limitations of the current study must be acknowledged. First, because the study is a cross-sectional, between-couples design, we cannot be certain that greater problem severity or particular topics caused couples to communicate poorly. Communicating poorly may have led to greater problem severity, for example, or some third variable other than relationship satisfaction or problem severity may explain the association between problem topic and observed communication. Although this limitation does not alter our conclusions that certain characteristics of the problem are associated in consistent ways with communication behavior, future studies should nonetheless employ an experimental, within-couples designs to test the causal association between discussion topic and behavior (e.g., if all couples are more negative when discussing *Personality* compared to *Work*). Second, ratings of problem severity were made for the overall problem category and not for the specific problem itself, which may have underestimated how severe the specific problem was (e.g., a couple might have reported that *Chores* in general were not much of a problem, even though deciding who cooks dinner might have been rated as a significant problem). This methodology adds information not available in prior studies in which third-party ratings of problem severity were used (e.g., Sanford, 2003), as these were likely to be even more disconnected from the way in which any individual couple experienced problems in their relationship. Nevertheless, future research would benefit from asking couples to report on the difficulty of the specific problem. Third, we caution that as a result of the study design, husbands' and wives' communication were not independent, and thus do not comprise completely distinct behavioral dimensions. Finally, the study used a sample of low-income, ethnically diverse, first-married, newlywed couples. Although this sampling strategy allowed for a larger range of problems than is likely to be seen in a sample of middle-class White couples, the results may not generalize to other populations, such as more established couples, remarried couples, gay and lesbian couples, and low-income, ethnically diverse couples who choose not to marry. In particular, the relative percentage of couples reporting specific problems is likely to vary depending on sample characteristics, as might the relative severity and communication behavior associated with any particular problem (e.g., in a sample of older adults, health problems might present more pressing concerns).

In sum, the severity and types of problems couples discuss during problem-solving tasks appear to be associated with their observed behavior in these tasks. Communication behaviors are affected by the content of couples' lives in addition to their particular skills in talking with one another about their difficulties. Future work examining these multiple dimensions will enhance understanding of the role communication skills do play in predicting marital outcomes and clarify appropriate targets for intervention.

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