CHAPTER 18

INTERACTIONAL PATTERNS IN MARITAL SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Gottman Laboratory Studies

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Our research team at the Gottman Laboratory has devoted over three decades to identifying the patterns that distinguish masters of marriage—happy, stable couples—from unhappy couples headed for divorce. Although a great deal of marital research has been based on survey methods such as questionnaires and self-reports, our research also includes detailed, in-depth observations. Traditionally, our research has focused on marital conflict, which we believe is an important and necessary part of both happy and unhappy marriages. We have found that the success or failure of a marriage depends not on whether there is conflict, but rather how conflict is handled when it does occur. This research has enabled us to expose existing myths about marriage.

Through the years, we have expanded our observational style to include nonconflict studies of couples during daily interactions and couple interviews. By looking at partners in these three distinct settings, we have identified marked differences between happy and unhappy relationships. We have also learned what factors contribute to the friendship at the foundation of happy marriages. We summarize the major results of these findings in this chapter.
DEMOGRAPHICS

This summary is based on six different longitudinal studies with a total of 667 married couples. As required by the National Institute of Mental Health, each of these studies matched the major racial and ethnic groups of the area in which the research was conducted. Approximately 30% of the total sample across all six studies was from nonwhite ethnic groups. Although our sample includes ethnic minorities, we do not make racial distinctions in our summary. This kind of future research would require oversampling a particular ethnic group to observe differing patterns in couple interactions.

Throughout this summary, we refer to couples as happily married, unhappily married, or divorced. The classification of happy or unhappy was based on marital satisfaction questionnaires given to each of the partners at various time points throughout the study. For a couple to be classified as happy, both partners had to be satisfied with the marriage. To be considered unhappy or distressed, one or both partners had to be dissatisfied with the marriage. If one partner was happy in the marriage and the other was unhappy, we considered the couple to be unhappy or distressed. In all of our studies, we have followed the couples longitudinally to determine whether they remained married. The divorce category includes all couples who went on to divorce.

FOUR HORSEMEN

One consistent characteristic of distressed couples who are headed for divorce is the expression of specific negative behaviors we call the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Gottman, 1994). Although negativity is part of any marital conflict, these are specific predictors of impending doom to a relationship. The Four Horsemen are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

The first of the Four Horsemen, criticism, is very common in distressed relationships. All couples have complaints of some kind during an argument, but criticism goes much further and is more damaging to the relationship than a simple complaint. Criticism is more global and includes character attacks such as “You didn’t take the trash out last night. Why can’t you ever remember to do it? You’re so lazy!” A complaint, on the other hand, remains specific to a situation, such as “I’m annoyed that you didn’t take the trash out last night.” The added personality attack of criticism escalates negativity and causes damage to the relationship over time.

In addition to character attacks, criticism includes global complaints, which can be identified by words such as “You always...” and “You never...,” or it can include a laundry list of complaints that imply “always” or “never.” For example, “I noticed you didn’t get a chance to clean the bathroom like you said you would. It was the same thing last week, when you said you’d organize the shelves and get up early to help make lunch for the kids.” Again, the focus of the speaker is on a character defect rather than a specific behavior.

Contempt, the next of the Four Horsemen, is the most corrosive. It is more destructive than criticism, because it conveys disgust and disrespect between spouses. A contemptuous comment might include sarcasm, mockery, insults, eye rolls, scowls, and hostile humor to belittle the partner. The attitude conveyed by contempt is one of disdain or superiority. One spouse may show condescension by taking a higher moral ground: “Did you really think showing up for just one soccer game all season would really be enough? That’s an involved parent for you.” Contempt is a type of scorn that often hinders any conciliatory attempts by the other spouse and may severely escalate negativity on both sides.

The third of the Four Horsemen is defensiveness. Although defensiveness seems a natural way to protect oneself against a perceived attack, our research shows that it usually becomes a counterattack, which further escalates negativity. Defensiveness is ineffective, because it becomes a way for one spouse to blame the other for his or her own behavior. One person might start with contempt: “Well that was pretty immature to go barhopping with your friends.” To which a defensive spouse would respond, “You did the same thing last week.” Defensiveness frequently takes on a childish tone, with the partners trying to shield themselves from both attack and personal responsibility.

Stonewalling is the fourth of the Four Horsemen. After many arguments with high levels of contempt, criticism, and defensiveness, it is easy for one spouse to feel overwhelmed by the conflict. At this point, the overwhelmed spouse begins stonewalling by conveying to the speaker that he or she does not want to interact, and appearing not to listen at all. There is no eye contact, no back-channeling, and no verbal response. The speaker is actively ignored. Stonewalling appears after the emergence of what Christensen and Heavey (1990) call the demand-withdraw pattern. This pattern shows clear gender differences, with the wife commonly demanding and the husband withdrawing, each reacting to the other as the couple becomes increasingly polarized. Stonewalling follows this same pattern, with husbands stonewalling more often than wives. Surprisingly, although the stonewaller appears to be hostile, his primary thoughts during this interaction are usually self-protective: “When is he going to quit talking?” “I can’t stand arguing about this anymore.” “If I’m quiet, she’ll leave me alone.” This kind of self-protection requires a great deal of energy and makes it impossible to listen, even if the comments are constructive and helpful.

When all of the four horsemen are present during a conflict discussion, we are able to predict divorce with 94% accuracy, even with newlywed couples (Carrère, Buchman, Coan, Gottman, & Ruckstuhi, 2000; Buch-
man, Gottman, & Katz, 1992). These truly are danger signals for any relationship. When used habitually during conflict, they erode the marriage and create hostility. Although some happily married couples occasionally use defensiveness, criticism, or even stonewalling, they rarely use contempt. We believe that the disrespect characteristic of contempt is the most harmful to the relationship overall. A high frequency of all the Four Horsemen, however, creates lasting damage and, most likely, the eventual ruin of the marriage.

EMOTIONAL DIENGAGEMENT

Whereas the interational patterns we call the Four Horsemen are detrimental to a marriage, it is also damaging for a couple to display emotional disengagement (Gottman, 1994). Emotionally disengaged couples do not display extreme levels of negativity and are unlikely to include the Four Horsemen, but they also show a complete lack of positive affect. Characteristically, they demonstrate little of the interest, affection, humor, and concern characteristic of happy couples. Emotional disengagement is an interesting phenomenon because the couples appear fine on the surface but are actually highly distressed. Emotionally disengaged couples are attempting to enclave the problem, so that it does not poison the entire relationship. However, the cost of this avoidance is the erosion of intimacy and the absence of shared positive affect in their interaction. They begin editing out parts of their personality and become hidden from their partners. This further erodes their intimate connection. Couples who appear emotionally disengaged may exhibit higher levels of physiological arousal during conflicts as a result of suppressing negative affect. Gross and Levenson (1997) reported that the suppression of negative affects increases physiological arousal. In this way, emotionally disengaged couples may also expend tremendous physical effort to act as if everything is okay.

Both emotional disengagement and the Four Horsemen predict divorce, but there is a marked difference in the timing of divorce for each of these negative styles. Gottman and Levenson (2000) found that couples who frequently use contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling tend to divorce earlier in the marriage, most within 7 years. Emotionally disengaged couples, however, tend to divorce after 7-14 years. It seems that these relationships slowly atrophy as the partners become more and more distant.

FLOODING

When a conflict is tainted by the Four Horsemen pattern or by emotional disengagement, it is common for one or both partners to become emotionally and physically overwhelmed (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 1983). In our physiological research, we find that at this point of "flooding," their palms begin to sweat, their heart rate increases to over 90 beats per minute, and their breathing becomes shallow or irregular. With these physiological symptoms, the partner is unable to think clearly or participate in constructive conversation. The primary focus of the flooded spouse is reduced to self-preservation, with thoughts such as "I can’t stand this anymore" or "Why is she attacking me?" At this point, it is impossible to take in new information. Even positive interactions, such as an apology or a humorous moment, are subdued as the partner tries to protect himself from a perceived attack. Although flooding is more common for men than women, it can happen to either partner during an argument.

Flooding, an emergency state during a conflict, must be treated with respect and concern. The best antidote to flooding is to take a break from the conflict for at least 20 minutes. Taking a break, however, does not mean going to separate rooms and preparing for another attack. The person who feels flooded needs to engage in a soothing activity, such as going for a walk, reading, or listening to music. It is essential during this time to concentrate on thoughts other than the argument. To ruminate on the conflict or brood over being an innocent victim will only maintain a flooded state.

As important as it is to take time out when flooded, it is equally important to return to or reschedule the conflict discussion as soon as possible. If the couple does not return to the argument, a break to relieve flooding becomes a way to stonewall. Thus, the respite, which is intended to improve the marriage, can become a way to damage it.

NEGATIVE RECIPROCITY

Criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling are specific types of negative conflict that signal danger, but not all negativity is damaging to the relationship. One pattern of marital conflict we have studied is that of negative reciprocity (Gottman, Coan, Carrère, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977), in which one spouse responds to the other’s negativity with more negativity. There has long been a myth that this pattern is harmful to relationships; but we have found that there are two types of negative reciprocity, only one of which predicts divorce (Gottman et al., 1998).

The more harmful of the two is the pattern of negative escalation, in which negativity is responded to with increased negativity. There is an escalation of the conflict when each partner uses a more hurtful or severe response. In watching these interactions, it is as if each partner is trying to get back at the other by trying to “win.” This type of negative escalation is often found in conjunction with the Four Horsemen. A lower level of neg-
Conflicts Styles of Happy Couples

As with the myth that all negative reciprocity is destructive, an opposite myth exists regarding happy couples. This is the belief that all happily married couples talk about their problems in a way that validates each other's views. Not all satisfied couples argue in this way, however. We have found three different conflict styles (or couple types) that seem to work well for happy couples: validators, volatiles, and avoiders (Gottman, 1993, 1994).

Validators "talk out" their problems. These partners are very adept at validating their spouse's emotions and opinions. They are very good friends and, when questioned about their relationship, tend to emphasize "we" over "me" or "I." Validators are also noncoercive and tend to have few disagreements. But when disagreements do arise, there is a strong sense of mutual respect between these spouses. Rarely if ever, would validators raise their voices during conflict. They are very skilled at compromise and use these skills to resolve their differences.

A different approach to dealing with conflict is seen in couples with a volatile style, who have a more explosive approach to handling conflict. Their arguments tend to be higher energy and more heated than disagreements between validators. In volatile couples, both partners are highly involved in the argument, viewing each other as equals. Volatiles give significance to their own individuality and feel marriage should strengthen and accentuate their distinctiveness. During arguments, volatiles express both negative and positive emotions with vigor, though their arguments rarely contain the Four Horsemen. Volatiles tend to be passionate, however, and their displays of warmth and affection counterbalance the negativity. In fact, all stable couple types, including volatiles, exhibit five times more positive interactions than negative ones. For every negative behavior, there are five positive behaviors (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). The key to the success of volatile couples is the overall warm and loving environment they maintain in their marriage despite their negative and explosive moments.

On the opposite end of the conflict scale is the third style, the avoiders. Avoiders minimize their problems and thus avoid conflict. They emphasize any positive aspects of the marriage, while downplaying or completely ignoring any complaints. When ignoring differences is not possible, they often find it difficult to agree. The marital style of conflict avoiders has been the most difficult for the psychological community to accept, because it is a pervading myth that "avoiding conflict is wrong." We have found that some couples prefer to avoid disagreements, but they describe themselves in terms of their marriages and share a deep love for each other.

All three conflict styles can be equally effective. Whereas some couples avoid all arguments, others jump into the conflict with shouting, and still others discuss disagreements and find compromise. No one style is better or worse for a marriage, but it is important to understand that it has to work for both spouses. When people of differing styles get married, it can be a difficult situation. For example, if one spouse tends to avoid conflict, he or she is not likely to be happy with someone who argues loudly and vigorously. Thus, an avoider can be happily married to another avoider but would be unhappily married to a volatile. This does not mean that partners are hopeless and destined for divorce if they have differing styles, but the relationship will require tremendous effort and patience on the part of both spouses.

It would be interesting for future research to focus on the cultural differences related to these conflict styles. Each culture may have strong preferences in dealing with interpersonal conflict, but there may also be great variability within each system.

Regardless of the style of handling conflict, it is important to remember that each couple must offset disagreements with positive interactions. As we mentioned earlier, all couples, regardless of style, must counter each negative behavior with five positive behaviors. Maintaining this level of positive interaction is crucial to sustain a happy and stable relationship.

Solvable Versus Unsolvable Problems

Yet another myth about happily married couples is the belief that they are able to resolve all their disagreements. We have found, however, that both happy and unhappy marriages have unsolvable as well as solvable problems. In fact, we have found that all conflict can be reduced to these two categories. Solvable problems have a solution, whereas unsolvable problems are ongoing issues that may never be resolved. Unsolvable or perpetual problems often arise from fundamental personality, cultural, or reli-
gious differences, or essential needs of each spouse. One partner may love to hike and camp, while the other enjoys city attractions.

Both successful and unsuccessful marriages have disagreements, but happily married couples seem to understand the distinction between the two types of problems and handle them differently. Satisfied couples deal with perpetual problems much the way aging adults deal with persistent back pain. It may irritate them, but they learn to accept it. The aim in discussing a perpetual problem is to create an atmosphere of acceptance of the partner’s viewpoint rather than creating a condition of “gridlock.” So the goal is not to solve the problem, but for the couple to find a way to gain some degree of peace around it.

Robert and Anna Maria have opposing views on how to spend their weekends.

Anna Maria: It’s just that we have different ideas about what it means to relax. I like to sleep late and take it slow, while you jump out of bed and straight into your running shoes.

Robert: No! I usually put on my socks first. (They both laugh.)

Anna Maria: I do like it when you bring me back some coffee.

Robert: That’s good. That’s my secret to jump-start our day.

Anna Maria may never enjoy getting up early, and Robert may never sleep in, but they are able to live with each other’s style. Successful couples try to understand what is at the foundation of the differences that are causing conflicts and use this understanding to communicate amusement and affection while learning to cope with their perpetual issue. The positive effect in these discussions is in direct contrast to gridlocked discussions of perpetual problems.

Greg and Kimberly also discuss how they spend their weekends, but they become gridlocked around the problem.

Greg: We didn’t get a chance to relax all weekend. You’re constantly going from one thing to the next.

Kimberly: What do you mean? We went on that bike ride on Saturday. That was relaxing.

Greg: Relaxing? That was exhausting! You dragged me half way around the city.

Kimberly: Well, I wouldn’t have to drag you if you were in better shape.

Partners who are gridlocked are firmly planted in their respective positions. As a result, their discussions include very little positive effect and one or more of the Four Horsemen. Over time, these couples feel rejected, overwhelmed, and hopeless about ever reaching any sort of a compro-

misc. Gridlocked couples seem to focus on the unsolvable problem rather than on the underlying meaning that contributes to the opposing views.

ACCEPTING INFLUENCE

One way that masterful couples deal with gridlocked conflict is by accepting “influence” from each other. This is a term we use to describe each partner’s willingness to yield during an argument, in order to “win” in the relationship. The best analogy for accepting influence is city driving. You are driving home in traffic when someone stops and illegally parks in your lane. You can’t move unless one of two things happens: either the other driver moves his car or you change lanes and drive home. It would be a waste of time and energy to park behind the offender, shout threats of traffic violations, and summon a police officer, when simply changing lanes will achieve your greater purpose. Accepting influence is similar to this idea of changing lanes and driving home. By learning to find a point of yielding, even a minor point, the spouse wins the desired purpose of a close and satisfying relationship.

Yielding to win, however, should not be mistakenly translated into a complete surrender of oneself to the other’s whims. Instead, accepting influence is the ability to find a point of agreement in the other’s position. It is important to note that both partners need to accommodate the other, or the relationship becomes skewed. Often, this agreement is only achieved when each partner tries to understand the meaning of the other’s perspective in the conflict.

Vincent and Alicia, for example, often argued about how to spend their vacation. Vincent wanted to visit his family in Virginia, and Alicia preferred that they go somewhere alone as a couple. This problem had been a continuing area of disagreement in their 10-year relationship. Each had decided that his or her position was correct, so the couple considered taking separate vacations. Vincent would go to visit his family, while Alicia would go somewhere with her best friend. To look at this problem from the standpoint of accepting influence, both Vincent and Alicia needed to understand why the other was entrenched (or parked) in their position.

Vincent only saw his family once a year and found it easy to relax and enjoy himself in their company. Alicia’s family lived nearby, so he saw them often (at least once a week) and felt he deserved to see his family more regularly. Alicia, on the other hand, didn’t get along with Vincent’s mother and found it difficult to spend an entire week with her. She also had a very stressful job and wanted to go somewhere more relaxing. Each partner had good reasons for remaining in their fixed position. This inflexibility, however, made it impossible to move toward an agreeable solution.

In contrast, if they were able to accept influence from each other, they could move from positions that were rigid and unyielding to ones of
compromise and collaboration. Vincent would be able to see that Alicia needed a break from her demanding schedule. Alicia would be able to understand Vincent’s desire to spend time with his family. If they could acknowledge some part of the other’s viewpoint, they could see the problem differently. The issue would no longer be where to go, but how to achieve both goals.

Although accepting influence is difficult at times, it has tremendous power for the marital relationship. When partners learn to yield on certain points of a conflict, they realize that they can cooperate and work together as a couple. The problem itself becomes an issue that they can conquer together as a team. This creates cohesiveness in other areas of their life as well, and they learn to move through time together.

This ability for both partners to accept influence is a skill that discriminates between happily married, unhappily married, and divorced couples in our research. In fact, we found that abusive husbands never accepted influence from their wives (Goan, Gottman, Babcock, & Jacobson, 1997). Although these abusive husbands are the extreme, their inability to accept influence highlights its importance for healthy relationships. Gottman, et al. (1998) reported that in nonviolent marriages, once again it was the husband’s rejection of influence from his wife that predicted divorce and not the wife’s rejection of influence from her husband. Wives were accepting influence at high rates in all the marriages. This finding speaks to general issues of women’s power and powerlessness in heterosexual relationships (Walsh, 1989).

**REPAIR ATTEMPTS**

In addition to accepting influence, happy couples also manage conflict and miscommunication with what we call “repair attempts,” which we have defined as interactions that decrease negative escalation. Because disagreements are a natural part of any relationship, even happy relationships, the ability to repair is crucial. This is especially true when couples are engaged in conflict. The actual issue, whether finances, in-laws, or housework, is less important than the way the couple engages in the dispute. Miscommunication during these conflicts often leads to negative escalation and erosion of the relationship; so it is important to repair the miscommunication during the conflict.

For the last 3 years, we have studied repair attempts in an effort to understand their role in preventing and reducing increased negativity. Examples of repair attempts include apologies, humor, affection, and changing the subject. These interactions are not necessarily related to the content of the argument but may simply provide a brief reprieve from it. For instance, one husband suddenly stopped in the middle of a heated debate and said, “After this, I need to stop by my sister’s house to drop off the radio we borrowed.” The wife went along with his repair by saying, “Okay. We can drop it off before we pick up the kids.” This seemingly unimportant change of subject gave the husband a brief diversion from the intensity of the conflict. Once they talked about the radio, he seemed more relaxed and was able to return to the argument. Happy couples tend to give their partner the opportunity to maneuver in the discussion. They allow the conflict to ebb and flow, with occasional unrelated topics interspersed in the conflict.

Unhappy couples frequently respond to these types of repairs by interpreting the interaction in a negative way. Rather than allowing the change of subject, an unhappy spouse may respond, “You’re not listening to me!” or “Who cares about the stupid radio?” As a result, unhappy couples may remain adamantly fixed on the discussion topic and not allow breaks in the argument. This rigid adherence to the conflict seems to escalate further negativity. Allowing a change of topic, however, must not be misconstrued as avoiding the topic. Happy couples return to the argument and do not allow the reprieve to derail their discussion, even if the topic is uncomfortable or tense.

In addition to accepting the repairs, we have seen that couples who use repairs early in the conflict prevent it from becoming too negative. Happily married couples tend to use repairs throughout their discussion, whereas distressed couples wait until the argument is heated and divisive. When the argument is at a point of severe negativity, repair attempts are often less effective and may even backfire. One couple was in the middle of a heated and hostile debate about finances, when the husband tried to lighten the moment with a joke about a stain on his T-shirt. Rather than reducing the negative tone of the conflict, this attempt at humor enraged the wife, who responded with increased anger and contempt. Repairs do not always have this backlash effect during high negativity, but it is common for unhappy spouses to ignore or reject them when the conflict is too intense. We are currently exploring this area further to see if certain repairs are better able to relieve these highly charged moments. At this point, however, we’ve found that using repairs early and often is more effective than waiting until the conflict is more severe.

When there is a balance of repair attempts between the spouses, the conflict also tends to maintain a lower level of negativity. If, however, one partner is making repair after repair, while the other plunges on with the conflict, the argument will continue to escalate. This pattern of uneven repair attempts seems characteristic of distressed couples.

Another important component of repair attempts is each partner’s ability to respond in a positive way when a repair is made. If one partner recognizes a repair and allows his or her spouse to lighten the moment or gain a reprieve, the overall conflict is more positive. For example, one couple in our lab was involved in an intense disagreement about the husband’s disappointment with their oldest son. During a brief pause in the
argumen, the husband commented, "I do admire the fact that you're able to stay calm no matter what he says." The wife smiled and simply said, "Thanks." After this moment of affection (compliment), both the husband and wife returned to the conflict discussion. As this example shows, repairs do not avoid the conflict or demean the partner, but they also inject some positive moments into difficult discussions. Repair attempts are tools that can be used effectively to reduce negativity and provide a break from the argument. The conflict will continue in a more positive manner when repairs are used often and accepted well.

TURNING TOWARD

We believe that one of the most important leaps we made in our way of thinking occurred when we started studying marriages in the day-to-day moments outside of conflict. By observing couples' interactions in our apartment laboratory at the University of Washington, and by interviewing couples about the history of their relationship, we have discovered several key factors that contribute to successful marriages.

In couple therapy, there is often an emphasis on the major events in the couple's lives, such as conflict discussions. However, the minor, everyday moments for a couple may determine how the partners interact when major events unfold. As a foundation for approaching major events, daily interactions are a crucial component for marital success. Imagine, for example, that a husband gives his wife a dozen roses for Valentine's Day. These roses have a completely different meaning, depending on daily interactions: whether the husband has been aloof, crabby and absent or attentive, positive and helpful. In the first instance, the roses would be an inadequate attempt to make up for his neglect; in the second, they would be a loving and romantic gesture. The giving of roses comes with current and ongoing contexts.

To understand these daily interactions, we designed one of our studies to accommodate couples in an apartment laboratory setting. We asked the couples to live in a studio-type apartment and videotaped them for 12 of the 24 hours they stayed there. We allowed them to bring anything from home that would help them feel comfortable, such as groceries, CDs, videos, and work. One couple even brought their cat. The only instruction we gave to each couple was to ask them to live as they would at home.

To capture their everyday interactions, we created an observational coding system that categorizes ways in which couples initiate and respond to each other on a moment-to-moment basis. We defined an invitation to interact as a "bid." For each bid, we noted the needs and demands involved, from information exchange to sharing emotional support. The responses to these bids ranged from mere eye movement to playfulness and were categorized as "turning toward," "turning away," and "turning against."

From these data, we found that each time one partner initiates an interaction (or "bids" for attention), the other spouse is given a choice that will improve or erode the marriage. Ignoring the interaction or responding in a negative way fosters distance and separation, whereas even a minor response helps promote emotional connection and friendship. Suppose, for example, that Stephanie and Carl are sitting in the living room reading. Stephanie looks up and comments that there's a sparrow outside their window. At that moment, Carl faces a series of choices for his response. He can ignore the comment and continue reading (turning away); he can comment that he thinks bird watching is a waste of time (turning against): he can momentarily set aside his book to look at the bird (low-level turning toward); or he can look at the bird and comment on its activity (enthusiastic turning toward). If Carl responds by ignoring Stephanie or making a negative comment, it discourages her from making further attempts to interact. Such responses lead to reduced bidding and connection. On the other hand, if Carl responds by looking at the bird and making a comment, he is welcoming her interaction, which will lead to increased interactions and increased marital connection.

We have found that happily married couples rarely ignore their partners. Nearly 85% of their bids were met with some kind of positive response. What is interesting about these responses is that they were not always overtly attentive or enthusiastic. One partner may simply look up and smile. Acknowledging the bid in some way seemed to play an important role in maintaining a healthy relationship. This does not mean, however, that satisfied couples always made low-level responses. Their responses ranged from low-level to playful. With this variety, spouses expressed their willingness and interest to interact.

Having an eagerness to interact, we believe, creates more interaction and increased friendship. In fact, our happily married couples made up to 77 bids in 10 minutes. Contrast this to some distressed couples that made 10-20 bids in 10 minutes. A positive response to a bid appears to lead to increased bidding and strengthened friendship.

Playful bidding was another characteristic of happy couples. We defined "playfulness" as good-natured teasing with some physical sparring. For example, a husband might throw a crumpled napkin at his wife in a mock snowball fight. Such playful interactions were nonexistent for distressed couples. What was important, however, was that couples who used playfulness and enthusiasm in their daily interactions had better access to humor and affection during their conflict discussions (Driver & Gottman, 2001). In a longitudinal study of middle-aged and senior couples in first marriages, humor and affection during conflict was a characteristic of happily married, stable, older couples (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995). Thus, if daily interactions contribute to more positive affect during conflict, the overall quality of the relationship is affected by these minor moments.
REWRITING THE PAST

Another nonconflict situation we have studied is the way that couples describe their relationship. We have found that a couple's description of the past predicts the future of the marriage (Buehlin et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrère, 2000). Over and over again, we have seen that partners who are deeply entrenched in a negative view of their spouse and their marriage often revise the past, such that they only remember and talk about the negative things that have happened in their relationship. Happy couples, in contrast, highlight their good memories. This revision of their marital history has allowed us to predict stability in marriage versus divorce with 88-94% accuracy (Carrère et al., 2000; Buehlin et al., 1992). These historical descriptions have also allowed us to identify buffers that appear to protect couples from decline in marital satisfaction during the stressful adjustment to parenting (Shapiro et al., 2000).

To engage the couple in a description of their marital history, we use the Oral History Interview (OHI), developed in our laboratory by Buehlin and Gottman (1996). This interview asks couples about the beginnings of their relationship, their philosophy of marriage, how their relationship has changed over time, and what marriage was like in their family of origin. By interviewing the couples in this way, we are able to capture the dynamics of their marital journey and their identity as a couple. Although they may tell us about their past in detail, our focus is not on content, but rather on how the couples describe their relationship (Buehlin & Gottman, 1996).

Most couples enter marriage with high hopes and great expectations. When a marriage is not going well, however, history gets rewritten for the worst. In a distressed marriage, the wife is more likely to recall that her husband was 30 minutes late to the ceremony. He, in a similar way, may focus on all the time she spent talking to his best man and may even speculate that she was actually flirting with him.

Along with remembering the worst, unhappy couples find the past difficult to remember. It's as though the memory is unimportant or painful and they let it fade away. Their lack of appropriate detail, along with their negative perspective, gives us tremendous insight into their marital distress.

In happy marriages, couples tend to look back on their early days with fondness. Even if the wedding wasn't perfect, they emphasize the highlights rather than the low points, and even joke about the low points and imperfections. This is also true for the way they remember and describe each other. They reminisce about how positive they felt early on, how excited they were when they first met, and how much admiration they had for each other. When they talk about the tough times, they emphasize the strength they drew from each other rather than the specific struggles.

Through categorizing couples' descriptions during the OHI, we have been able to separate the masters of marriage from the disasters. Unhappy spouses headed toward divorce were negative to each other, thought of their lives as chaotic, and expressed disappointment in the marriage. Happy couples used fondness during their interview, used expressions of "we-ness," were expansive in their descriptions, showing their awareness of each other's worlds, and tended to glorify any hardships. We would like to describe each of these categories in more detail.

UNHAPPY COUPLES

Negativity toward Spouse

Distressed spouses tended to express negativity and criticism toward each other, even when remembering such pleasant events as their wedding or honeymoon. A husband describing the honeymoon might only remember tension and unpleasant experiences: "It seems like all we did was fight; she nagged me all the time... Oh, and the mosquitoes were terrible. I could barely step foot outside." Unhappy spouses may also be vague and unclear about what attracted them to their spouse. The husband and wife may wrack their brains to think of a single quality they admired about their spouse before they were married, and sometimes what they remember is not very flattering. One wife's first impression of her husband was "Well, I guess I thought he was cute enough but, boy was he a bad dresser!"

Chaotic Perceptions

Many couples face struggles such as financial loss or stress at work. When these events occur, however, unhappy couples tend to view their lives as out of control or chaotic. They see themselves as pummeled by outside events: "It's just one thing after another. It seems like one of us is always needed somewhere. If it's not our families, it's the kids or one of our jobs. There's pressure from every angle and there's no way to stop it. We can't do anything about our situation." There is a helpless quality to these chaotic perceptions; couples feel unable to overcome stress and hardship. Often these couples are dealing with major stresses, such as sick parents, but the critical thing that defines their relationships is hopelessness. They believe that there is no solution.

Disappointment/Disillusionment

One final pattern of unhappy couples is their disappointment and disillusionment with their relationship. Each partner has given up on their marriage and expresses depression about the relationship: "We used to be
such good friends and now we don’t agree about anything. This is not what I expected.” A tone of sadness and resignation often accompanies these statements. Unhappy couples also seem unable to articulate what makes a successful marriage. It’s as if their personal disappointment alters their general view of marriage, making it difficult to define a happy relationship. During the relationship interviews, negativity and chaos were predictive of divorce, but this tendency toward disappointment was the strongest divorce predictor (Buchman et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000).

**HAPPY COUPLES**

**Fondness and Admiration**

Happy couples that were still “in love” also showed unique characteristics in the way they described their marital past. Fondness and admiration are two of the most crucial elements in a rewarding and lasting romance. Partners conveyed a fundamental sense that their spouse was worthy of admiration, respect, and love. In a marriage with much fondness and admiration, the wife might recall her first impressions of her husband as being “perfect, like a dream.” In a marriage with less fondness, the wife might describe him being “a nice, stable guy.” Although even happily married couples have times of frustration with their partners’ flaws, they still remember that the person they married is worthy of honor and respect. When this sense is completely missing from a marriage, we believe the relationship cannot be revived.

**Awareness or Love Maps**

Along with fondness and admiration, happy spouses usually show an awareness of each other and their relationship. This is clear in the way expansive couples describe the details of their past. They are expressive and descriptive during the interview, and will often finish each other’s sentences.

For example, Richard and Judy describe their first date:

**JUDY:** He took me to a fun restaurant with a Polynesian theme. There were palm trees and hammocks inside. I was wearing my favorite dress.

**RICHARD:** The dress was red and black—she looked great.

**JUDY:** He was dressed up too, which at the time was rare to see. . . .

**RICHARD:** I use to be in construction, so I usually wore jeans and a t-shirt.

This dimension shows not only each spouse’s expressiveness, but how both respond to and expand on their partner’s comments. In contrast, distressed spouses respond to questions with just a few short sentences, seem withdrawn, and don’t add to the description. An unhappy spouse would describe the same first date by saying, “We went out to dinner.”

Happy spouses are also intimately familiar with their partner’s world. They remember the major events in each other’s history and keep updating these facts/feelings as their partner’s world changes. We call this a richly detailed “love map.” When she orders him a salad, she knows to ask for his favorite dressing. We believe that this type of awareness works together with fondness and admiration to create a satisfying relationship. Suppose, for example, that the wife is having a difficult time with her boss at work. If the husband is aware of his wife’s distress, he may respond by expressing warmth and emotional support. Thus, the level of awareness is directly related to his ability to express comfort.

**Glorifying the Struggle**

In contrast to couples who are unhappy in their marriage, happy couples approach hardships as trials to be overcome together and believe that these struggles make their relationship stronger (Walsh, 1993, see Walsh, Chapter 15, this volume). They emphasize how they conquered their difficulties together as a couple: “It was really hard at first when he was laid off, but we managed to support each other and things started to work out.” Sometimes the hardships are even about the relationship or adjusting to marriage: “Marriage is the hardest job you’ll ever have, but it’s worth it.” Happy couples emphasize both the difficulty of their experiences and pride in how they managed through it all. Their struggles bring them closer together as they endure challenging outside events and work to prevail.

**We-ness**

When happy couples describe their marital past, each partner tends to use the words “we” and “us” as opposed to “he or she” or “I.” This simple pattern reflects the degree to which couples perceive themselves as a team rather than as individuals: “We oversaw the remodeling of our house. It was difficult at times, but we were able to work it out.” If this same couple were low in we-ness, each partner would talk about the remodeling in individual terms: “The remodeling was difficult, but I was able to work with the contractor.” Couples who use “we” more often also tend to emphasize the same beliefs, values, and goals.

Although happy couples tend to use the terms “we” and “us,” this does not describe their level of differentiation. For example, happy partners may phone each other daily and spend most of their free time together. Other equally happy partners may merely call during the day, have separate friends, and enjoy different interests. Regardless of their level of independence, happy couples will continue to talk about their relationship in terms of teamwork and collaboration. These couples maintain
their desired level of unity or separateness, while referring to themselves as "we" and "us." It is their perception of we-ness that is important.

TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

After the arrival of a new baby, there is often a dramatic decline in marital satisfaction for women. In fact, 67% of the wives in our study showed this trend (Shapiro et al., 2000). Not all of these couples experienced a decline in marital satisfaction, however. So we again turned to the OHI to better understand why some couples are vulnerable, while others are resilient during transition to parenthood (see also Cowan & Cowan, Chapter 16, this volume). By looking at the way couples talked about their marital past, we were able to predict this decline in marital satisfaction. It is particularly interesting that this prediction was based on OHI scores with couples when they were newlyweds and not on prebirth interviews.

Our classifications of couples in the OHI’s can be seen as reflecting the health of the couples’ marital friendship. We have found that this friendship can be seen in the early months of marriage and becomes an important buffer when the couple encounters stresses such as the transition to parenthood.

VULNERABLE COUPLES

Based on the newlywed interviews, we have been able to identify two warning signs of couples who are vulnerable to marital decline with the arrival of the first baby: First, the husbands tended to express negativity toward their wives; and second, the partners were likely to view their lives as chaotic. Although these were newlywed and not prebirth interviews, these patterns provided valuable information about couples at risk for marital decline.

When husbands were critical and negative toward their wives in the newlywed interview, the marital satisfaction of both partners plummeted with the arrival of the first baby. Early in their marriage, these husbands tended to express negativity toward their wives and disappointment in the marriage. Here, again, we see the corrosiveness of criticism and negativity eating away at the quality of the marriage. We found that wives were particularly sensitive and vulnerable to their husbands’ negativity and marital disappointment when they became parents. Thus, a habit of negativity seems to affect greater damage after the baby is born.

As mentioned earlier, unhappy partners tend to view their lives as chaotic and out of control. This feeling was exacerbated with the disorder that often accompanies life with a new infant. The feelings of chaos expressed by distressed newlywed couples make them particularly vulnerable in coping with the additional duties necessary for parenting. They were more likely to see parenting challenges as problems beyond their control that throw their lives and their relationship into disarray. Difficulties such as getting up in the middle of the night seemed insurmountable and overwhelming.

RESILIENT COUPLES

Stable couples, in contrast, used awareness, with fondness and admiration, to buffer the marriage through this stressful period. A husband with a high level of awareness or a detailed love map of his wife’s world would know when she was feeling overwhelmed by the challenges she was facing as a new mother. He would then respond to her stress by expressing his fondness and admiration for her and increasing his level of participation in child care and household tasks. A wife who was highly aware of her husband’s world would also sympathize with his husband’s frustrations and increasingly support him as well. Regardless of the level of participation prior to becoming parents, the increased activity of both spouses predicted stable relationships.

THE INFLUENCE OF NEW FATHERS

It is interesting to note that the most important sign of continuing relationship satisfaction after the first baby is born is the husband’s descriptions during the newlywed OHI. Wives are most vulnerable to a decline in marital satisfaction over the transition to parenthood, probably because the wife traditionally bears the bulk of the child-rearing responsibilities. They are expected to know naturally how to be good mothers. It is, however, the husband’s fondness, awareness, and lack of negativity and disappointment during the newlywed interview that buffers his wife’s decline in marital satisfaction when the first baby arrives.

Overall, the OHI provides a dynamic index to the marital relationship. The quality of the couple’s friendship makes stressful periods, such as the transition to parenthood, either more difficult or smoother. Disappointment in the marriage, negativity towards one’s spouse, and the feeling of chaos in a couple’s lives may reflect vulnerabilities in the relationship that become particularly problematic during stressful periods. On the other hand, qualities such as fondness, admiration, and awareness seem to act as buffers in protecting the relationship during stressful changes.

CONCLUSIONS

Through careful, observational research, we have identified patterns that determine both happy and unhappy marriages. The relationships that end
in divorce tend to gravitate toward the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and negative reciprocity during conflict discussions. This leads to the dysfunctional coping mechanisms of flooding and eventual emotional disengagement as partners struggle to protect themselves. Likewise, in their daily interactions, they reject bids and attempts and become more and more distant. When stressors such as parenthood come along, these relationships are vulnerable, and the couples become distressed in response to the added pressure.

In contrast, masters of marriage use repair attempts and accepting influence to moderate their negativity. The use of these skills keeps their arguments from escalating out of control and allows them to stay engaged in the conflict. This, in turn, allows them to find possible solutions to their disagreements. If their conflicts are over issues without resolution, they use humor and acceptance to arrive at some peace with the issue. In their daily lives, they encourage interaction and stay emotionally connected. As they encounter life stressors, they are more aware of each other's struggles and use this awareness to support and encourage one another. Later, when the stress has subsided, these couples emphasize their teamwork in conquering the problem.

We believe that finding these clear differences between unhappy and happy couples is the first step toward effecting lasting change for distressed couples. The next step in our marital research involves developing useful interventions aimed at improving couples' marital friendship by increasing positive affect in their daily lives. Our goal is to combine clinical practice with research to create effective, empirically based interventions that are tailored to each couple's needs and values.

REFERENCES


