

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: LET'S GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT: HOW
DIFFERENT TOPICS AFFECT CONFLICT
COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR

Adam Glenn Lowe, Master of Science, 2011

Thesis Directed by: Professor Norman B. Epstein
Department of Family Science

Past research suggests it is not what a conflict is about or how much conflict exists between two people, but rather how the parties interact regarding their conflicting preferences that determines whether the conflict has negative effects on their relationship. The current study examined the degrees to which couples' communication behavior in specific situations in which they discuss a conflict-related topic is influenced by the conflict topic theme that they discuss and by their general communication patterns. Conflict topics were assessed with the Relationship Issues Survey, general communication patterns with the Communication Patterns Questionnaire, and specific communication behavior during discussions with the Marital Interaction Coding System – Global. Findings indicated several significant effects of both content area and general communication style on communication behavior. Post-hoc analyses indicated that couples discussing conflicts regarding basic life values, priorities, and consideration for one's partner exhibited more negative communication behavior than those discussing issues regarding closeness, relationship commitment, emotional connectivity, and expressiveness. Possible implications of the findings are discussed.

LET'S GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT: HOW DIFFERENT TOPICS
AFFECT CONFLICT COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR

by

Adam Glenn Lowe

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Science
2011

Advisory Committee:

Professor Norman B. Epstein, Ph.D. Thesis Chair/Advisor
Professor Elaine A. Anderson, Ph.D.
Instructor Carol Werlinich, Ph.D.

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Acknowledgements

I couldn't have done this without all those who helped me on this journey.

Thank you, Norm, for your infinite patience, guidance, and wisdom these past two years. It was an honor to work with you. Thank you, Carol and Elaine, for being on my committee, for your suggestions, and for your flexibility with my unusual thesis timeline.

Thank you, Adam B., Ash, Ciara, India, Kara, Kat, Sherylls, Spencer, and Traci, for the laughs, tears, magic, and love. Thank you to our seniors and juniors as well, and Sherry.

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for providing me with the encouragement, support, meals, and love that I needed over these past two years. I greatly appreciate that you're always looking out for me.

Thank you, Nana, for your support and generosity while I was in graduate school.

Thank you, Brian, my roommate, for putting up with my dirty dishes that I was too busy or too tired to do during the last two years.

Thank you, Lisa, for keeping me sane as we both struggle through our theses. I don't know how I could have done it without your love and comfort in those moments of frustration. I can't tell you how glad I am to have you in my life.

This thesis is dedicated to my late Grandma Lowe, whose late night talks helped me learn so much about what love is and how a marriage of 50+ years should look. Your admiration for my studies motivated me greatly. You are very missed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Conflicts in relationships, or the existence of differences between two partners' preferences, desires, goals, or needs, are inevitable (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, & McIlvane, 2010). Researchers have focused on attempting to identify what it is about conflict that is potentially destructive to intimate relationships. Evidence suggests that it is not what a conflict is about or how much conflict exists between two people, but rather *how* the parties interact regarding their conflicting preferences that determines whether the conflict has negative effects (Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2001; Storaasli & Markman, 1990). Although lay use of the term "conflict" commonly conveys adversarial and aggressive behavior between the individuals, researchers have tended to reserve the term to connote incompatible positions that the parties may handle in a variety of constructive or destructive ways. Furthermore, there is evidence that couples often have relatively stable "conflict styles" (Birditt et al., 2010) or interaction patterns that occur across topics for which the partners experience conflict. These behavioral patterns commonly develop between partners beginning early in their relationship, based on a trial and error process in which the partners mutually shape each other's behavior by providing consequences (reinforcement, punishment) for each other's acts. Thus, for the purpose of the current study, conflict is defined not necessarily in terms of fighting or aggressive interactions, but rather in terms of the existence of inconsistent desires or needs between partners, which the two individuals attempt to resolve through behavioral

interactions, which may be of varied forms. For the reader's convenience, a glossary of terms is included in Appendix F.

A considerable amount of research has focused on identifying forms of communication that are constructive for dealing with relationship conflicts and forms that are destructive (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Gottman, 1994; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). For example, Gottman (1994) identified "negative cascades" or negative patterns of communication (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling or withdrawal) between members of couples that are highly predictive of separation and divorce. Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, and Christensen (2007) found that greater demand-withdraw behavior during partners' conflict discussions was associated with greater distress.

In spite of the findings indicating that particular types of communication have negative effects on couples' relationships whereas other forms of communication are constructive, it remains unknown to what extent the *type* of conflict topic that a couple discusses moderates individuals' communication behavior. The studies that have identified constructive and destructive patterns have not ruled out the possibility that differences between partners in particular content areas of their relationship might elicit particular communication behavior. Sanford (2003) found that the difficulty level of specific topics that couples discussed in particular interactions (proximal topic difficulty) did not change couples' communication behaviors, but that couples who reported dealing with more difficult issues *overall* in their relationship (distal topic difficulty) did behave more negatively with each other across topics and reported lower overall relationship satisfaction. Thus, Sanford's (2003) study provides some evidence for couples having

general conflict communication styles that are associated with the degree to which they deal with difficult areas of conflict in their relationships. However, whereas his study addresses gaps in knowledge about conflict communication, it does not fully address the possibility that specific topics with *thematic differences* (which may not correspond to differences in *topic difficulty*) may elicit different communication behaviors. Similarly, Christensen and Heavey's (1990) study indicated that the partner who chooses a topic for discussion that is important to him or her is more likely to engage in demand communication in a demand/withdraw couple pattern, but their study did not examine whether the content of the topic also influenced the couple's communication pattern.

Although there has been much research done on how females and males in heterosexual couple relationships tend to communicate when discussing topics of conflict in their relationships and how couples' interactions affect their relationship satisfaction (and vice versa), there is still a need for research that examines variation in heterosexual couples' communication behavior as a function of the type of conflict topic that they are discussing. It should be mentioned that there is a similar need for research that examines this in homosexual couples as well. Currently, minimal research has been published regarding how different areas of conflict (or communication content) can affect the couple's communication behavior during discussions regarding conflicts.

Little is known about the relative degrees to which types of *presenting issues* shape how members of couples communicate with each other versus the degree to which partners' *general communication patterns* shape how they communicate with each other. With this knowledge, mental health professionals could be aided in anticipating and assessing types of positive and negative communication likely to occur during couples'

discussions of particular types of relationship issues, could educate couples about such tendencies, and could work with distressed couples to modify negative patterns. If a couple can recognize both their own usual communication pattern when discussing areas of conflict in general as well as their relatively topic-specific communication patterns, the partners may be able to reduce some of their negative behavior through self-awareness, self-monitoring, and behavior modification.

There has been minimal research investigating how much partners' communication is based on general communication styles that they bring to all discussions with their partner, no matter what the topic, and how much their communication behavior varies according to the topic. The current study addresses this gap in knowledge with the following research questions:

- Do different areas of content of topics of disagreement or conflict between members of a couple produce different couple communication behaviors?
- Are couples' general communication patterns associated with their communication behavior in a specific situation in which they are discussing a conflict-related topic?
- What are the relative contributions that general communication patterns and type of content of the conflict topic make in determining the couple's communication behavior, and which makes more of a difference?

The hypotheses, measures, variables, and analyses used to address each research question in this study are presented in Table 3.5.

Purpose

The general purpose of this study was to investigate whether different content areas of conflict, as self-reported by members of couples, elicit different communication behavior when the partners discuss those issues. There is an important difference between Sanford's (2003) study and the current study. Whereas Sanford's variable was topic *difficulty* (how challenging and distressing the partners experience conflict to be regarding a topic to be discussed), the present study focused on the *content themes* of the areas that partners discuss. Topic difficulty and topic theme are likely to overlap to some degree, such that conflict in some content areas is more difficult to discuss. However, the topic theme may elicit different *types* of communication (i.e., messages having different structure, such as withdrawal from one's partner versus invalidating the partner's expressed opinions) rather than just different *degrees* of negative communication.

This study also examined whether a couple's overall communication pattern when discussing relationship issues (e.g., mutual avoidance) accounts for observed communication more than the specific topic being discussed, using evidence from behavioral samples of couples' communication about conflict topics. The relative degrees to which particular types of communication are a function of the topic being discussed versus a function of the couple's overall communication pattern are investigated. As gender and sexual orientation may affect couple communication, it should also be noted that the present study was limited to an examination of partners in heterosexual relationships, because the vast majority of couples for whom data are available to this researcher are heterosexual.

Sanford's (2003) study showed that partners who are dealing with more difficult issues overall in their relationship (what Sanford referred to as the distal difficulty of topics) communicate more negatively with each other across topics, and that this communication behavior is mediated by overall distress regarding their relationships. This raised the issue of taking couples' overall levels of relationship conflict into account in the present study as well. It may well be that couples who have high levels of conflict across an array of issues will demonstrate more negative behaviors and fewer positive behaviors in discussing any area of conflict. A couple that reports little or no conflict except in a small number of areas in which they have slight or moderate levels of conflict and who are then asked to discuss one of their low-conflict topics may exhibit more positive and fewer negative behaviors than a couple that reports high levels of conflict across many areas of their relationship and are asked to discuss an area in which they report only slight or moderate conflict. In the current study, in which couples' communication was observed and coded as they discussed only one area of slight to moderate conflict, we were only privy to code the behaviors that they exhibited during the single communication sample and were therefore unable to assess how conflictual and stressful the couple's discussions are in general. While Sanford looked at difficulty levels, we looked exclusively at content themes. Although this is not the same as Sanford's "difficulty" index, it is a similar type of index of how much conflict/tension exists in a couple's relationship, which may be associated with how the partners behave toward each other.

How the topic that members of a couple discuss may influence their communication behavior is an important area of research, as mental health professionals

as well as the members of distressed couples could benefit from understanding the forms of positive and negative communication likely to occur during discussions of particular types of topics. In addition, knowledge of topic-related communication patterns can help clinicians work with couples to modify any negative patterns through self-awareness, self-monitoring, and some behavior modification. If the results of this study indicated that couples' overall communication patterns (i.e., styles) account for more of the variance in their communication behavior than the topic does, this would suggest that a clinician's limited time with a couple may be better spent on adjusting their overall partner communication behavior rather than on focusing on how certain specific issues are discussed. However, if the topic being discussed accounted for a significant amount of the variance, and perhaps more than the couple's overall communication pattern, then the clinician may want to explore with the couple why it is that particular topics generate particular behaviors (i.e., how topic themes elicit particular positive or negative communication behavior).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The following literature review describes published studies regarding couple communication. It begins with how researchers focus on problem-solving discussions between partners in a couple because discussion quality can have an effect on overall relationship quality. Literature regarding similarities and differences in couple conflict behavior among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples, and its effect on relationship quality, is reviewed. Next, the ways in which a variety of factors influence males' and females' perceptions of relationship quality and communication quality, including the number of conflicts, perceived resolution, and stability of the conflict, are described. Next, a number of studies are described that investigated how conflict topics vary in their importance to the couple depending on what relationship stage the couple is in, the influence that topic difficulty has on communication behavior, how patterns of communication behavior differed depending on whether a couple was discussing an issue selected by the wife or by the husband, if communication behavior differs depending on whether the topic of discussion was a third party issue or an issue within the couple, and whether couples communicate differently about conflicts concerning money than about conflicts regarding other types of issues. These studies are reviewed for their relevance regarding the role of conflict topic in determining couple communication behavior.

Finally, a key methodological issue in research on couple communication is addressed by examining studies that investigated whether it is necessary to observe couples' behavior directly in order to predict marital outcomes or whether merely asking the couple about their communication can provide sufficient information for accurate

prediction. This issue was relevant to the present study, as it used both types of measures: individuals' self-reports of their own communication behavior, their partner's report of their behavior, and an observed sample of how the couple actually behaves during a discussion of a conflict topic in their relationship.

Background: The importance of couple communication in relationship quality.

A strong association exists between characteristics of couples' communication and their levels of relationship satisfaction. Karney and Bradbury (1995) reviewed and evaluated the literature on how the quality and stability of marriages change over time, and noted that much of the research on couple relationships from a social learning or behavioral perspective has focused on partners' interpersonal exchanges of specific behaviors, in particular those behaviors exchanged during problem-solving discussions. That large body of research has been guided by the premise that partners' global evaluations of their relationship are enhanced by rewarding/positive behaviors and harmed by punishing/negative behaviors. Although the behavioral model has been enhanced to encompass partners' cognitive responses to each other's actions (e.g., attributions regarding the causes of each other's negative actions) (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Epstein & Baucom, 2002), the major impact of communication quality on partners' judgments of relationship quality remains a core principle of the model and the treatments that follow from it.

Couples' difficulties in resolving conflicts have been identified as a major contributor to relationship distress. As Markman (1991) noted, "to the extent that normal marital disagreements are not handled well, unresolved negative feelings start to build up, fueling destructive patterns of marital interaction and eventually eroding and attacking

the positive aspects of the relationship" (p. 422). Similarly, Gottman's (1994) observational studies in which couples' specific communication behaviors as partners discussed issues in their relationships were coded indicated that critical, defensive, contemptuous, and stonewalling (withdrawing) acts not only failed to resolve issues but also predicted the dissolution of relationships.

Conflict and couple relationship quality.

Lloyd (1987) investigated the nature and characteristics of conflicts in premarital relationships. Lloyd asked 25 premarital couples to report the number and characteristics of their conflicts over a two-week period; specifically the number of conflicts, the intensity of each one, its resolution (unresolved vs. resolved), and the stability of the conflict issue (issues rarely discussed vs. issues that come up often in communication). The couple rated these characteristics using questionnaires to see which were most important to the couple's perceived relationship quality and communication quality. For Lloyd's study, "relationship quality" included the partners' ratings of love, satisfaction, and commitment, whereas "communication quality" included hostility, self-disclosure, anxiety, and use of negotiation and manipulation. The results indicated that the number of conflicts and the conflicts' perceived resolutions were the most salient to females' perceptions of relationship quality and communication quality; those who perceived more areas of conflict were less satisfied. For men, the number of conflicts and stability of conflict issues were the most salient to their perceptions of relationship quality and communication quality.

Lloyd (1987) concluded that, "Conflict may have a positive impact on the relationship when it allows differences to be aired (p. 290)." That the number of conflicts

was for both men and women one of the most significant indicators of the level of relationship quality and communication quality may be consistent with Sanford's (2003) finding that couples who experience more difficult conflict issues overall in their relationships exhibited more negative communication.

Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe (2007) examined the relationship between marital satisfaction level and couples' levels of positive and negative marital communication behavior in three different cultural groups. They conducted an observational study that examined couple communication between partners in 50 White American couples, 52 Pakistani couples in Pakistan, and 48 immigrant Pakistani couples in America. Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe predicted that marital satisfaction level would be strongly related to positive and negative communication behaviors, and in particular that the American groups would show a high correlation between marital satisfaction level and positive communication, due to the more egalitarian lifestyle in America. They also predicted, given the prevalence of arranged marriage and the emphasis on utilitarian aspects of marriage in Pakistan, that the marital communication behaviors of Pakistani couples would either be unrelated to or only modestly related to their marital satisfaction. Therefore, they also predicted that the association between communication behaviors and marital satisfaction would be significantly stronger for American couples than for Pakistani couples, and the immigrant couples would lie somewhere in between these two groups.

Each couple in the Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe (2007) study discussed one topic selected by the wife from a list of issues and one topic selected by the husband. The couple was asked to discuss each topic for 7.5 minutes while being videotaped, and the

order of topic discussions was determined randomly. The findings showed that positive and negative communication behaviors were associated with marital satisfaction within each of the three cultural groups, although with three different strengths. For the global positive code, the results showed that association between positive communication behavior and marital satisfaction was significantly greater for American couples than for Pakistani couples and immigrant couples. The strength of the association was not significantly different for Pakistani versus immigrant couples. For the global negative code, the results showed that association between negative marital communication behavior and marital satisfaction was significantly greater for American couples than for Pakistani couples. In addition, the association was significantly greater for immigrant couples than for Pakistani couples. The results show that positive and negative communication behaviors were associated with marital satisfaction within each of the three cultural groups. This suggests that marital satisfaction models focusing on marital communication behaviors are fairly robust models of marital functioning across cultures.

Kurdek (1994) conducted a study on the link between the content of couple conflict and relationship satisfaction. He examined couples over a one-year period for both partners of 75 gay, 51 lesbian, and 108 heterosexual couples who lived together without children. The 20 specific conflictual issues of interest investigated were found to cluster into six groups that represented areas of conflict regarding power (e.g., being overly critical), social issues (e.g., politics and social issues), personal flaws (e.g., drinking or smoking), distrust (e.g., distrust or lying), intimacy (e.g., sex), and personal distance (e.g., job or school commitments). Across the three types of couples, the rank order of frequency of conflict of the content areas was very similar, with intimacy and power

ranking highest in all three, and distrust ranking low. Partners' *concurrent* relationship satisfaction was strongly negatively related to the frequency of arguing about areas reflecting power and intimacy, and a *decrease* in relationship satisfaction over a one-year period was linked to frequent arguing at the beginning of the study in the area of power, although arguing regarding the area of intimacy did not predict any change in relationship satisfaction. Overall, analyses indicated that more frequent conflict regarding power, social issues, personal flaws, distrust, intimacy, and personal distance was related to each partner's lower concurrent relationship satisfaction. More specifically, frequent conflict regarding power and intimacy was more salient to low relationship satisfaction than was frequent conflict regarding personal flaws, personal distance, social issues, and distrust. One possible explanation for this finding is that relative to the other areas of conflict that were sampled in the study, power and intimacy appear to reflect areas in which partners strongly control each other's outcomes. Whereas Kurdek's (1994) study assessed differences in relationship satisfaction as a function of the area of conflict, the current study examined whether discussions of different areas of conflict lead to differences in communication behavior.

Global communication patterns versus topic-specific communication behavior.

There is substantial evidence of "sentiment override" (Weiss, 1980) in which individuals' global feelings about their relationship override and color their perceptions of their partner's behavior in specific situations. Weiss (1980) noted that sentiment override commonly leads partners to communicate in a global positive or negative way toward each other, no matter how the other person has behaved in a specific situation. Therefore, couple therapists commonly invest considerable time and effort into guiding

distressed partners in attending more systematically to each other's communication behavior, especially identifying global negative patterns that can be modified (Epstein & Baucom, 2002).

In spite of evidence that couples exhibit global communication patterns, there also is evidence, to be reviewed below, that partners' communication behavior varies as a function of the context. If it can be shown that certain topics tend to elicit more hostile behaviors and fewer conflict resolution behaviors, educating couples about these may help them to be attuned to risks that certain issues in their relationship are harder to overcome than others, because such issues tend to elicit more negative communication behavior for many couples. This knowledge also would allow clinicians to work with couples to find better behaviors to use while discussing those heavily conflict-laden topics.

Communication content during different relationship stages.

As stated earlier, Storaasli and Markman (1990) suggest that the content of the conflict is not as important as the way the partners handle the conflict; i.e., it is not what couples disagree about that affects the quality of their relationship but rather how they resolve their disagreements. Storaasli and Markman (1990) gave 131 couples the Relationship Problem Inventory, which requires each partner to rate the perceived intensity (0-100) of each of 10 problem areas in their relationship: money, communication, relatives, sex, religion, recreation, friends, drugs and alcohol, children (or potential children), and jealousy, as well as the Marital Adjustment Test, a measure of overall marital satisfaction that previously was demonstrated to discriminate between distressed and nondistressed couples. The study provided descriptive information about

some of the relationship problems experienced between men and women in the early stages of marriage, as well as information about the relationships between degrees of conflict in problem areas and relationship satisfaction. Data on the couples were obtained from pre-assessment and follow-up phases of the longitudinal study: pre-assessment, 12-week follow-up; 1 1/2- year follow-up; 3-year follow-up; 4-year follow-up; and 5-year follow-up. The researchers assessed changes in the couple's relationship problems to examine family developmental stages that theory suggests couples must pass through during the course of early family development: premarriage, early marriage, and early parenting. They examined relationship problems in these stages because such problems are inevitable and represent an important predictor of marital and family satisfaction.

Storaasli and Markman (1990) found that couples' overall levels of conflict and top conflict rankings of certain topics changed over time as the couples entered new stages of development, from premarriage to marriage to early parenting. The results suggested that different issues are more important at different stages of relationship development. The rank orderings were: money, jealousy, relatives, and friends being the most intense topics during premarriage; money, communication, sex, and relatives being the most intense during early marriage; and money, sex, communication, and relatives being the most intense during early parenting.

Although Storaasli and Markman (1990) did not assess changes in conflict communication behavior across relationship stages, it seems that if a particular topic is more intense at one stage of a couple's relationship than at other stages, then discussing a topic of high intensity may elicit different communication behaviors than discussing a topic of moderate to low intensity, and that the same topic discussed at a later stage may

not produce the same communication behaviors. This suggests that the stage of the couple's relationship development may play a role in their communication behaviors while discussing certain topics. The present study does not address stages of relationship development, but instead examined whether conflict topics elicit different forms of couple communication behavior. Post-hoc analysis of the data in the study examines the length of the relationship as a potential factor for the couple's communication behavior.

Topic difficulty and communication behavior.

Sanford (2003) investigated the extent to which the difficulty of the topic being discussed influenced communication behavior. Sanford recruited a sample of 37 couples through one of three sources: (a) letters sent to residents of married student housing at a large university, (b) letters sent home with elementary school children in a public school district, and (c) letters sent to pastors at local churches. The sample couples had an average age of 36, had been married an average of 10 years, and the majority were found to be "relatively nondistressed," according to their scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. He asked each couple to discuss unresolved issues of marital conflict. The couples engaged in two 10-minute problem-solving discussions, one issue that the wife had identified and one issue that the husband identified, and in each discussion the couple attempted to resolve the issue (i.e., this is the typical communication sample protocol used in such studies). These conversations were videotaped and subsequently were transcribed for later coding using Gottman's (1996) Rapid Couples Interaction Scoring System (RCISS). The study's adapted version used the 22 categorical codes from Gottman's RCISS system to form four dimensions, with each dimension being rated on a 5-point scale:

“Every speaking turn in every conversation was assigned ratings on these four scales with -2 being negative, 0 being neutral, and +2 being positive. The first dimension, Own Views, is related to Gottman’s (1994) concepts of criticism and contempt. A negative score is given when the speaker uses contempt and criticism to express his or her own views, and a positive score is given when a person politely and constructively expresses his or her own thoughts and feelings. The second dimension, Response, is related to Gottman’s concept of defensiveness. A negative score is given when a speaker responds defensively to his or her partner, and a positive score is given when a speaker acknowledges or validates what his or her partner said on the previous speaking turn. The third dimension, Emotion, rates the extent of positive versus negative emotion displayed by the speaker. Positive scores were assigned to positive emotions and negative scores were assigned to negative emotions. Finally, the fourth dimension, Listening, is related to Gottman’s concept of withdrawal. A negative score is given when the listener appears withdrawn, or interrupts, or displays a “stonewall” facial expression while listening. A positive score is given when the listener shows responsive facial movement or appears to be comfortably enjoying listening to his or her partner.” (Sanford, 2003, p. 102)

In addition, Sanford (2003) created a coding system to classify the couple’s written incident descriptions into topic categories. By reviewing the written descriptions in the data set, as well as marital questionnaires such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), the Areas of Change scale (Weiss & Birchler, 1975; Weiss, Hops, & Patterson, 1973), and the Relationship Problem Inventory (Knox, 1970) a list of 24 different topic categories was developed. Sanford made efforts to make the list as short as possible without sacrificing potentially salient distinctions among issues. These topic categories were not identified by the couple, but rather by the coders. The researchers then assigned a *difficulty* rating to each of the 24 topic categories by recruiting 12 licensed Ph.D. psychologists who frequently work with couples in their practice to serve as a panel of experts. Each psychologist was mailed a copy of a questionnaire that listed the 24 categories in a random sequence and was asked to read each category description, and to “give your best guess as to how difficult it was for the couples raising this issue to

discuss and resolve the matter.” Difficulty ratings were then assigned using a five-point scale anchored by 1 being an extremely easy topic and 5 being an extremely difficult topic. Some topics were seen by clinicians as more difficult to discuss than others, with doubts about the relationship’s future being the most difficult (4.58), social and entertainment activities being the least difficult (1.33), and finances being near the middle (3.42). The mean score on the maximum topic difficulty variable was 3.80 ($SD = .46$) for wives and 3.78 ($SD = .57$) for husbands. This difference was reported as not being significant ($t(36) = .22, ns$). It should be noted here that this study did not examine the content themes associated with more or less content difficulty any further, in terms of linking content to couple communication or satisfaction level. The 24 topics derived in Sanford’s (2003) study are listed in Table 2.1 below, arranged in order of mean difficulty.

Table 2.1

Conflict Topics from Sanford (2003) Study Ranked by Mean Difficulty Rating

Difficulty Rating	Topic
4.58	Doubts about relationship future (divorce; separation)
4.50	Disrespectful behavior (intentional rudeness; contemptuous remarks; blatant disregard for partner's desires; lying)
4.42	Extramarital intimacy boundary issues (jealousy; use of pornography; dancing with other partners)
4.25	Excessive or inappropriate displays of anger (innocuous or innocent situation led to partner getting angry; unfair accusation; yelling or attacking)
4.17	Sexual interaction (initiation; arousal; frequency; interest)
4.00	Lack of communication (refusal to talk; not sharing feelings; not expressing desires)
3.83	In-laws and extended family (conflict with in-laws; time spent with relatives; spouse's behavior around extended family)
3.75	Confusing, erratic, or emotional behavior (suddenly becoming upset; sudden change of mind; behavior that contradicts a previous plan)
3.58	Criticism (correcting; blaming; explaining how partner should have done something; challenging partner's viewpoint)
3.46	Poor communication skills (being unclear or hard to understand; failure to negotiate)
3.42	Child rearing issues (discipline; expectations; partner's behavior in front of children)
3.42	Finances (how to spend money; dealing with bills; shopping)
3.09	Lack of follow-through (disregarding previous plans or commitments with partner; not doing something as agreed; forgetting to keep a promise)
3.08	Showing support in public or social situations (contradicting spouse in front of others; not standing up to others on spouse's behalf)
3.08	Showing affection (lack of comfort; not showing affection; lack of romance)
3.08	Lack of listening (poor listening; not listening; problem solving instead of understanding; defensive listening)
2.92	Annoying behavior (unconventional behavior; wishing partner would change a habit; undesirable language; bothersome idiosyncrasies; lack of punctuality)
2.75	Important decisions (major purchases; vacations; where to live; job change; retirement; schooling plans)
2.58	Extent or quality of time together (wanting more intimate time together; time for quality communication; being too tired or too busy to do activities together)
2.50	Careless or unthinking behavior (mistakes that cause inconvenience; forgetting something)
2.33	Household tasks (chores; cleanliness; responsibilities; standards and methods of household maintenance)
2.25	Showing recognition or appreciation (failure to notice or appreciate something; failure to acknowledge skills and competencies)
1.58	Outside frustration or potential stress (worries about a job; having a bad day)
1.33	Social and entertainment activities (whether to attend something)

Sanford (2003) differentiated between proximal and distal causes that influence communication as follows: “A proximal influence occurs when some aspect of a couple’s current, specific situation has an immediate and direct influence on their communication behavior in a specific conversation. A distal influence occurs when a global variable pertaining to the couple’s relationship as a whole has a generalized influence on communication behavior across several contexts or situations. It is possible that topic difficulty is related to communication behavior at the distal level, but not necessarily at the proximal level” (p. 99). In other words, Sanford suggested that when a couple is dealing with more difficult issues in their relationship, the strain from that general context could have a pervasive effect on many messages that the partners send and receive, whereas the degree of difficulty that a couple experiences with a particular topic may have relatively little impact on how they communicate about it.

Consistent with this distinction between distal versus proximal effects, Sanford (2003) found that both wives and husbands who scored high on an index of maximum topic difficulty were likely to use more negative forms of communication behavior across all of their conversations. For example, husbands scoring high on maximum topic difficulty were more likely to be poor listeners to their partners, across topics, than those who scored lower on maximum topic difficulty. These results reflecting distal effects contrasted with findings at the “proximal level” in which difficulty of a topic being discussed was unrelated to the degree of negativity of the partners’ communication behavior. Sanford (2003) concluded that a person who broaches a highly difficult topic would not necessarily be expected to use poorer communication behavior than when

discussing an easy topic. Furthermore, Sanford's path analysis supported his hypothesized path model in which a person's maximum topic difficulty (the difficulty level of his or her most difficult topic) is closely related to his or her level of relationship satisfaction, which in turn is related to communication behavior. Sanford concluded that these results indicated that topic difficulty has an indirect influence on communication behavior, mediated by relationship satisfaction.

The distinction between distal factors and proximal factors affecting couple communication is relevant to the present study. Whereas Sanford assessed a characteristic – maximal topic *difficulty* – that could have a global effect on communication behavior, the present study examined *themes* of topics for which couples have reported mild to moderate conflict. It appears that the theme of a particular topic that a couple discusses is a more proximal characteristic of the context for their discussion than the general level of difficulty that a couple experiences. There is no obvious correspondence between topic themes and how pervasive the problems are in a couple's relationship. Consequently, any association between topic theme and communication behavior may be more proximal and less mediated by the overall quality of the couple's relationship.

The demand/withdraw communication pattern and importance of topic.

Christensen and Heavey (1990) tested whether the frequently found pattern of females demanding and males withdrawing during discussions of conflict topics might depend on how important the topic is to each person. In studies that involve observation of samples of couple problem-solving discussions, the importance of the topic to the two partners often is not controlled. Christensen and Heavey (1990) suggest that, consistent with feminist theory, women are more often the partner who wants a change in the status

quo in the relationship, and thus they pursue change in discussions of conflict topics, while their male partners withdraw to avoid change.

Thirty-one heterosexual couples in the Christensen and Heavey (1990) study were observed as they held two discussions, one in which the husband wanted a change in his wife and the other in which the wife wanted a change in her husband. Data from the husbands, wives, and trained behavioral observers consistently revealed a significant main effect for gender. Christensen and Heavey (1990) found that the wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern was more likely to occur than the husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction overall, but that the pattern of communication differed depending on whether a couple was discussing an issue selected by the wife or by the husband. A wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was more likely than the reverse only when discussing a change that the wife wanted. Separate analyses of demand and withdraw behaviors indicated that both the husband and wife were more likely to be withdrawing when discussing a change that their partner wanted and more likely to be demanding when discussing a change that they wanted. This study provided evidence that people do not just exhibit global patterns of couple communication behavior in all situations. Karney and Bradbury (1995) also suggested that the Christensen and Heavey (1990) study broadened the behavioral model of couple interactions by emphasizing how members of couples learn to avoid certain topics.

Couple behavior during discussions of internal vs. external issues.

Cornelius and Alessi (2007) tested the Gottman, Coan, and Swanson (1998) hypothesis that the speaker-listener technique commonly used in couple therapy (in which partners are taught skills for expressing messages clearly and constructively, as

well as for effective empathic listening) may lead to improved marital satisfaction, increased positive communication and decreased negative communication behaviors when the couple is discussing a third party issue, but if they are discussing an issue about each other the use of the technique may reduce marital satisfaction, decrease positive communication, and increase negative communication. Gottman (1999) speculates that the speaker-listener technique forces distressed couples to perform patterns of “emotional gymnastics” in which they suppress negativity but remain physiologically and emotionally aroused.

Cornelius and Alessi (2007) studied a sample of 30 couples who on average had been together 18.25 years ($SD = 14.08$ months), had a mean age of 44.88 ($SD = 13.36$), and were assigned to either Group A or Group B. They randomly assigned the couples either to a condition in which they discussed an emotionally charged issue within their marriage or to a condition in which they discussed an emotionally charged issue outside their marriage. During a baseline session, each partner within a couple was asked to complete a packet of questionnaires and to generate a list of current conflicts that related to issues within or outside the marriage, depending on their experimental assignment. Examples of possible topics were provided to the participants, including finances, sex, annoyances of your partner (topics considered to exist within the marriage), or difficulties with a mutual friend, work, and family members (topics considered to exist outside the marriage). Partners were also asked to rate the severity or emotional tension surrounding that issue on a scale from 1 – 10. The couple was asked to choose one of the issues rated as a 6 or higher in terms of emotional tension, and to engage in a 10-minute conversation about that current conflict or difficulty.

The variables in the Cornelius and Alessi (2007) study were marital satisfaction, communication skills, and physiological arousal, and they were assessed via self-report, behavioral observation, and physiological monitoring of partners' heart rates. Using a coding system consistent with Gottman's (1999) coding system and based on other behavioral coding systems such as the Marital Interaction Coding System and the Specific Affective Coding System, Cornelius and Alessi created their own system that focused more extensively on negative behaviors, as the specified purpose of their study was to detect those behaviors most detrimental to marital relationships. The coded behaviors included harsh-start up, soft start-up, negative verbal behavior, defensiveness, contempt, withdrawal, positive verbal behavior, depart from technique, and physiological arousal. Lag sequential analyses were conducted on negative and positive verbal behaviors, soft start-up, and physiological arousal, providing information on the probability that each type of act by one partner would be followed by a particular type of act by the other partner.

As Cornelius and Alessi (2007) had predicted, the results of the lag sequential analyses indicated that couples' dyadic sequences of communication behavior did *not* differ depending on the topic of discussion, failing to support Gottman, Coan, and Swanson's (1998) hypothesis. However, the findings also failed to support Cornelius and Alessi's original hypothesis that discussing a third party issue using the expresser-listener technique would increase marital satisfaction, whereas discussing an issue about each other would decrease marital satisfaction. As the study found that a couple does not behave significantly different when discussing an issue within their marriage versus when discussing an issue outside of their marriage, this suggested that in the present study it

could be expected that couples' general communication patterns were likely to account for a significant amount of variance in their communication regarding any specific relationship topic. However, Cornelius and Alessi (2007) did not differentiate among themes of conflict issues *within* couples' relationships, so the focus of the present study on the potential that communication behavior will vary according to the conflict theme was an important extension of previous research.

Discussing money issues vs. discussing non-money issues.

In another line of research relevant to the issue of whether the topic of conflict may influence communication behavior, Papp, Cummings, and Goeke-Morey (2009) tested whether couples discuss marital conflicts concerning money differently than conflicts not related to money by investigating 100 wives' and 100 husbands' diary reports of 748 conflict instances taking place in the home, rather than a clinical or laboratory setting. For each conflict instance, spouses rated its characteristics, including whether the problem was recurrent or new, its current and long-term importance to the relationship (ranging from 0 = none to 3 = high), and length (in minutes). Spouses also indicated the topic or topics involved in the conflict, including habits, relatives, leisure, money, friends, work, chores, personality, intimacy, commitment, and communication (0 = not endorsed, 1 = endorsed; see Table 2.2 below for definitions). Spouses rated their own and their partner's emotions of positivity, anger, sadness, and fear during and at the end of interactions, using scales ranging from 0 (none) to 9 (high). They also indicated the tactics used by themselves and their partners during and at the end of each marital conflict (i.e., withdrawal, defensiveness, support, humor, physical distress, physical affection, verbal affection, verbal hostility, nonverbal hostility, threat, pursuit, aggression,

personal insult, problem solving, agree to discuss later, compromise). The analyses were restricted to husbands' and wives' diaries that were determined with 100% agreement by two coders to describe the same conflict instance on the basis of the recorded date, time, and length of the discussion.

Papp et al. (2009) predicted that relative to other topics, such as leisure, relatives, and chores, money would be “associated with greater use of problem solving, a behavior of interest among couples dealing with general economic pressures (e.g., Conger et al., 1999)” and that “consistent with the proposition that money concerns are more stressful and threatening for couples than other conflict topics (e.g., Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996), money-related marital conflicts were expected to include more angry and depressive behavior expressions, along with fewer positive expressions and lower levels of resolution for partners, than nonmoney conflicts” (Papp et al., 2009, p. 94). In the study, the spouses did not rate money as the most frequent source of marital conflict in the home; in fact, the most frequently discussed topic of marital conflict in the home was children, followed by chores, communication, and leisure. Money was the sixth and fifth most discussed topic during marital conflict according to husbands and wives, occurring as a topic in 18.3% and 19.4% of disagreements, respectively (see Table 2.2 for the full set of topics).

Table 2.2

Percentages of Topics Discussed during Marital Conflict in the Home Reported by

Husbands and Wives in Papp et al. (2009) Study

Topic	Definition	Husbands (%)	Wives (%)
Habits	A habit that one of you has, such as leaving dishes on the counter, not picking up after self, chewing with mouth open	16.2	17.1
Relatives	Family, in-laws, children from previous relationship, previous spouses	10.7	11.9
Leisure	Recreational activities and fun time, different preferences for or amount of time spent in activities, how free time is spent	19.5	20.1
Money	Spending, wages, salary, bills; basically, money that comes into or goes out of the home	18.3	19.4
Friends	The friendships you or your spouse have, time spent with or activities done with friends	7.1	8.0
Work	Either your job or your spouse's, time spent at work/school, other issues related to work, volunteer work, people you or you spouse work with	19.3	18.9
Chores	Household activities, family responsibilities	25.1	24.1
Children	The behavior of your children, differences in parenting styles, who should discipline your children and when, care of your children	36.4	38.9
Personality	Personality styles or personal traits of you or your spouse, such as being too outgoing, too talkative, too shy, insensitive, lazy, being a jerk, too flirtatious; strengths of character	5.5	8.6
Intimacy	Closeness, sex, displays of affection, including how often or the way intimacy is shown	7.9	8.4
Commitment	Commitment to your relationship, may include affairs, different expectations about what it means to be committed to each other	8.2	9.1
Communication	Different styles of communicating, feeling your spouse was not listening to you, not wanting to listen to your spouse, not understanding what each other is saying, differences in whether one of you told the other something	22.1	21.8
Other issues	Any topic that does not fit into one of the other listed topics	2.8	5.1

Papp et al. (2009) found that, compared to issues unrelated to money, the marital conflicts about money were more problematic, pervasive, recurrent, and remained unresolved, despite more attempts by the couples at problem solving. Both husbands and wives reported a higher likelihood of wives' use of problem solving communication in conflicts that concerned money relative to those that did not. Discussion of money during marital conflict in the home was not reliably linked to either spouse's positive behavioral expressions/affect (differing from conflict resolution) or wives' angry behavior. Husbands and wives reported that they and their partners expressed more depressive behavior, including withdrawal, during conflicts about money, relative to other topics. Husbands expressed more angry behaviors (i.e., verbal and nonverbal hostility, defensiveness, pursuit, personal insult, physical aggression, threat, and anger) during conflicts about money compared to other issues. Discussing money was not reliably associated with partners' positive expressions (e.g., support, affection). These findings, more negative communication associated with finances, suggested that the topic of conflict may influence couple communication and supported the purpose of the present study in examining communication behavior as a function of conflict topic.

Methodological issues regarding behavior coding versus self-reports of couple communication.

The preceding literature review has looked at investigations concerning communication behaviors, relationship satisfaction, and other qualities relating to the couple. It was also important for the present study to examine previous research on how these topics have been designed, paying close attention to their methodologies. A key methodological parameter in research on couple communication, which is relevant for the

current study because it utilized both communication self-report ratings and observations from behavioral coders, was whether the modality of assessment makes a difference. As noted earlier, Gottman (1994) is known for his findings that particular types of communication behavior coded from observations of couples' discussions are highly predictive of the level of relationship dissolution. Consequently, Rogge and Bradbury (1999) tested whether it was necessary to observe couples' behavior in order to predict marital outcomes or whether merely asking the couple about their communication would provide sufficient information for accurate prediction. The researchers asked recently married couples (in their first four years of marriage) to provide self-report ratings of their communication patterns, marital satisfaction, aggression, anger, and severity of the topics they discussed in a problem-solving conversation. Rogge and Bradbury propose that because the severity of the problems that couples discuss vary naturally across couples, the possibility arises that observational data from couples who eventually become maritally discordant and dissolve their relationships are predictive of those negative outcomes simply because the couples discuss more difficult marital problems. To test this, Rogge and Bradbury (1999) did a 3 X 2 analysis of variance, with outcome as a between-subjects variable (married-satisfied, married-dissatisfied, and divorced or separated) and gender as a within-subject variable, and they found no significant effects for outcome or for gender. "These results indicate that couples from the different outcome groups did not differ on the severity of the problems they discussed, thus minimizing this rival interpretation for the predictive validity of the observational data" (p. 344).

The 15-minute conversations in the Rogge and Bradbury (1999) study were also

observed and behavior-coded by trained coders using Gottman's Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF, 1988), which considers voice tone, volume, intonation, and verbal content when coding a speaker's affect. The 15-minute interactions were subdivided into five-second blocks, and each interval was categorized according to the primary affect expressed by the speaker: anger, contempt, sadness, whining, anxiety, humor, affection, excitement, or the default code of neutral. The Marital Adjustment Test (MAT, Locke & Wallace, 1959) was used to measure marital satisfaction. Using the behavior coding data, the researchers found that the measures of communication correlated strongly with initial marital satisfaction, and that a couple's behavior within their problem-solving discussion, particularly the negative affect they express, appears to play a central role in predicting subsequent marital satisfaction, very similar to the Cornelius and Alessi (2007) study described earlier. Additionally, Rogge and Bradbury (1999) were able to successfully identify satisfied, distressed, and separated couples with 68% accuracy, and they found no significant differences in the accuracy of these predictions among the satisfied, distressed, and separated couples. That study lent support to the use of self-report ratings as an accurate means to assess couple behavior.

Sanford (2010) conducted a study concerning the short-term predictive validity of the partner-report and self-report scales of the Conflict Communication Inventory and compared the validity of these scales with the validity of observer ratings. Sanford used a sample of 83 married couples (82% Caucasian, 9% Hispanic, 6% Black or African American, and 3% other races) who were recruited through brochures that were distributed for display at businesses throughout the community. The participants had an average age of 37 ($SD = 14$), were married an average of 10 years ($SD = 11$), and had an

average annual household income of \$62,000 ($SD = \$48,000$). Each member of a couple was taken to a separate room where he or she was asked to identify a recent incident in his or her relationship that “illustrates an important unresolved issue,” and to write a brief description of that incident. Either the wife’s or the husband’s written incident description was randomly selected to be the topic for an initial videotaped problem-solving conversation. For this conversation, partners were seated together on a couch and instructed to discuss the incident for 10 minutes, with the goal of resolving the issue as best as they could. After this conversation, participants were taken back to separate rooms, and each spouse completed a Conflict Communication Inventory, which included context-specific scales with which each member of the couple reported his or her own and the partner’s behavior during the preceding conversation. Self-report ratings, partner-report ratings, and observer ratings from the first couple conversation were used to predict behavior in the second conversation, as rated by a completely separate panel of observers. In addition, Sanford’s (2010) study investigated the extent to which the questionnaires measuring context-specific arguments were distinct from an index of general relationship satisfaction.

Using data from only a single conversation, Sanford (2010) calculated correlations between questionnaire scales and observer ratings of communication behavior, and these correlations were expected to be substantial even after controlling for shared variance with relationship satisfaction. Correlations were also computed between the Conflict Communication Inventory (a new context-specific measure created and tested for reliability and validity by Sanford) and other measures of conflict communication, which are context general and measure the ways in which a couple usually communicates. The

Conflict Communication Inventory contains four behavior scales: partner adversarial engagement, partner collaborative engagement, self-adversarial engagement, and self-collaborative engagement.

Sanford (2010) reported that partners' responses to the Conflict Communication Inventory indicated that they had high levels of awareness of their own and each other's communication behaviors. He also reported that partners' perceptions of couple communication were highly correlated with third-party observations. There were high levels of association among an individual's self-reported communication behavior, their partner's report of their behavior, and how the couple actually behaved during an observed sample of their communication. Sanford notes the difference between context-specific assessment, usually observational and taking place after one incident such as one dyadic interaction, and context-general assessment (behavior in general), which is what most questionnaires assess. Correlations between two variables are likely to be higher when both variables are assessed at the same level. Sanford's findings indicated high correlations among measures even when they were assessed at different levels. Those findings are encouraging for the current study, as this study utilizes context-general questionnaires and context-specific behavioral observation of a couple's discussion.

Literature Review Summary

Karney and Bradbury (1995) noted that much of the research on couple relationships from a social learning or behavioral perspective has focused on partners' interpersonal exchanges of specific behaviors, in particular those behaviors exchanged during problem-solving discussions. The major impact of communication quality on partners' judgments of relationship quality remains a core principle of the model and the

treatments that follow from it. Couples' difficulties in resolving conflicts are identified as a major contributor to relationship distress.

The results from the Lloyd (1987) study indicated that the number of conflicts and the conflicts' perceived resolutions were the most salient to females' perceptions of relationship quality and communication quality; those who perceived more areas of conflict were less satisfied. For males, the number of conflicts and stability of conflict issues were the most salient to their perceptions of relationship quality and communication quality. That the number of conflicts was for both men and women one of the most significant indicators of the level of relationship quality and communication quality may also mean that a couple that has more overall conflict in their relationship is more likely to display hostile and negotiating behaviors, consistent with Sanford's (2003) finding that more difficult conflict issues were associated with more negative communication.

Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe (2007) examined the relationship between marital satisfaction level and couples' levels of positive and negative marital communication behavior in three different cultural groups: White American couples, Pakistani couples in Pakistan, and immigrant Pakistani couples in America. Their results showed that association between positive communication behavior and marital satisfaction was significantly greater for American couples than for Pakistani couples and immigrant couples using the global positive code. The strength of the association was not significantly different for Pakistani versus immigrant couples. For the global negative code, the results showed that association between negative marital communication behavior and marital satisfaction was significantly greater for American couples than for

Pakistani couples. In addition, the association was significantly greater for immigrant couples than for Pakistani couples. However, the overall findings indicated that there is a robust association across cultures between couple communication quality and relationship satisfaction, and the great attention paid to assessing and modifying sources of negative communication is well founded.

Kurdek (1994) conducted a study on the link between the content of couple conflict and relationship satisfaction. He examined couples over a one-year period for both partners of 75 gay couples, 51 lesbian couples, and 108 heterosexual couples who lived together without children. Analyses indicated that more frequent conflict regarding power, social issues, personal flaws, distrust, intimacy, and personal distance was related to each partner's lower concurrent relationship satisfaction. More specifically, frequent conflict regarding power and intimacy was more salient to low relationship satisfaction than was frequent conflict regarding personal flaws, personal distance, social issues, and distrust.

Storaasli and Markman (1990) asked each partner in 131 couples to rate the perceived intensity (0-100) of each of 10 problem areas in their relationship: money, communication, relatives, sex, religion, recreation, friends, drugs and alcohol, children (or potential children), and jealousy, and assessed changes in the couple's relationship problems to examine family developmental stages that theory suggests couples must pass through during the course of early family development: premarriage, early marriage, and early parenting. The results suggested that couples' overall levels of conflict and top conflict rankings of certain topics changed over time as the couples entered new stages of development, from premarriage to marriage to early parenting. This suggests that the

stage of the couple's relationship development may play a role in their communication behaviors while discussing certain topics.

Sanford (2003) found that both wives and husbands who scored high on an index of maximum topic difficulty were likely to use more negative forms of communication behavior across all of their conversations. These results reflecting distal effects contrasted with findings at the "proximal level" in which difficulty of a topic being discussed was unrelated to the degree of negativity of the partners' communication behavior. Sanford (2003) concluded that a person who broaches a highly difficult topic would not necessarily be expected to use poorer communication behavior than when discussing an easy topic. Furthermore, Sanford's path analysis supported his hypothesized path model in which a person's maximum topic difficulty (the difficulty level of his or her most difficult topic) is closely related to his or her level of relationship satisfaction, which in turn is related to communication behavior. It appears that the theme of a particular topic that a couple discusses is a more proximal characteristic of the context for their discussion than the general level of difficulty that a couple experiences.

Christensen and Heavey (1990) tested whether the frequently found pattern of females demanding and males withdrawing during discussions of conflict topics might depend on how important the topic is to each person. They found the wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern more likely to occur than the husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction overall, but that the pattern of communication differed depending on whether a couple was discussing an issue selected by the wife or by the husband. A wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was more likely than the reverse only when discussing a change that the wife wanted. Separate analyses of demand and withdraw

behaviors indicated that both the husband and wife were more likely to be withdrawing when discussing a change that their partner wanted and more likely to be demanding when discussing a change that they wanted.

Cornelius and Alessi (2007) tested the Gottman, Coan, and Swanson (1998) hypothesis that the speaker-listener communication technique commonly used in couple therapy may lead to improved marital satisfaction, increased positive communication and decreased negative communication behaviors when the couple is discussing a third party issue, but if they are discussing an issue about each other the use of the skills technique may have opposite effects, reducing marital satisfaction, decreasing positive communication, and increasing negative communication. As Cornelius and Alessi (2007) had predicted, the results indicated that couples' dyadic sequences of communication behavior did not differ depending on the topic of discussion, failing to support Gottman, Coan, and Swanson's (1998) hypothesis. The findings also failed to support Cornelius and Alessi's hypothesis that discussing a third party issue using the expresser-listener technique would be associated with greater marital satisfaction than discussing an issue about each. Thus, the Cornelius and Alessi (2007) study provided evidence that a couple does not behave markedly different when discussing an issue within their marriage versus an issue outside of their marriage. This suggests that in the present study couples' overall communication patterns may predict their communication behavior whatever the content of the communication topic may be.

Papp, Cummings, and Goeke-Morey (2009) tested whether couples discuss marital conflict concerning money differently than conflicts not related to money. Compared to issues unrelated to money, the marital conflicts about money were more problematic,

pervasive, recurrent, and remained unresolved, despite more attempts at problem solving. Discussing money was not reliably associated with partners' positive expressions (e.g., support, affection). This finding that different topics may be more difficult to resolve, when combined with Sanford's (2003) findings, suggest that the more negative communication associated with finances may have been due to that topic being high in difficulty. The present study takes this into account by testing whether any differences in couples' communication that are associated with variation in conflict topics may be accounted for by the overall level of conflict in the couple's relationship.

As for the literature concerning the present study's methodological approach, Rogge and Bradbury (1999) tested whether it was necessary to observe couples' behavior in order to predict marital outcomes or whether merely asking the couple about their communication would provide sufficient information for accurate prediction. In the study, Rogge and Bradbury and their research team were able to successfully identify satisfied, distressed, and separated couples with 68% accuracy, and they found no significant differences in the accuracy of these predictions among the satisfied, distressed, and separated couples. This study lends support to the use of self-report ratings as an accurate means to identify couple behavior. The researchers also found that the measures of communication correlated strongly with initial marital satisfaction, and that a couple's behavior within their problem-solving discussion, particularly the negative affect they express, appears to play a central role in predicting subsequent marital satisfaction.

Furthermore, Sanford's (2010) study investigated the extent to which the questionnaires measuring context-specific arguments were distinct from an index of

general relationship satisfaction. He reported that partners' responses to the Conflict Communication Inventory indicated that they had high levels of awareness of their own and each other's communication behaviors. He also reported that partners' perceptions of couple communication were highly correlated with third-party observations. There were high levels of association among an individual's self-reported communication behavior, their partner's report of their behavior, and how the couple actually behaves during an observed sample of their communication.

Overall, although the prior studies show that some topics are more difficult than others for couples to discuss, they have not focused on whether the topics lead to different communication behaviors. There is some evidence that general couple communication patterns influence a couple's behavior in individual discussions, and evidence that some characteristics of the topic itself (e.g., how important it is to each partner, difficulty of topic) also influence couple communication. Further evidence indicates that several factors contribute to communication quality, but no studies have as yet addressed variation in couple communication behavior as a function of the conflict topic's theme. The purpose of the present study was to fill this gap in knowledge regarding factors influencing couple communication.

Hypotheses

Based on the prior research on couple communication, *it was hypothesized that a couple's context-general behavior for discussing issues of conflict (i.e., their self-reports of their overall communication behavior patterns) is associated with the context-specific behavior that they exhibit during a communication sample that they provide when discussing a topic that is a source of mild to moderate conflict in their relationship.* Past

research on communication styles suggests that couples' general communication patterns involving constructive communication, mutual avoidance, and a demand-withdraw pattern are associated with similar forms of behavior during specific discussions of areas of conflict. It was expected that such associations between general positive and negative communication styles and the positive and negative forms of communication during the couple's specific discussion would occur in the present study as well.

It also was expected that there would be significant differences in the communication behaviors of the couples based on major themes of the topics that they discussed. As described in the Method section below, this study identified four clusters of relationship issues that couples in the sample discuss in their communication samples: (1) *basic life values and priorities*, (2) *closeness and commitment in the relationship*, (3) *emotional connectivity and expressiveness*, and (4) *consideration for one's partner*. The derivation of those four clusters of relationship issues is described in the Method section. Based on prior literature on what factors can affect couple communication (Cornelius & Alessi, 2007; Sanford, 2003), it was expected that certain topics of disagreement inherently produce different styles of behavior between partners. Because there are no prior research findings specifically addressing particular communication behaviors associated with particular conflict topics, this aspect of the study was exploratory, and the *research question* posed for the study was: *Are there differences in partners' forms of positive and negative communication as a function of different contents of the areas of relationship conflict that they are discussing?*

A second research question examined the relative degrees to which type of topic and general communication patterns are associated with couples' communication

behavior during conflict discussions. The question was: *What are the relative influences of the type of topic and the couple's general communication pattern on the communication behavior that couples engage in during conflict discussions?*

The hypotheses, measures, variables, and analyses used to address each research question in this study are presented in Table 3.5.

Theoretical Basis for the Study

The theoretical basis for the current investigation is the cognitive-behavioral model of couple relationships. This model includes the interplay among a person's thoughts, affect, and behaviors, with the understanding that our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors influence each other in reciprocal ways (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Among the many of such paths, as described in the preceding literature review, when members of a couple use negative forms of communication when attempting to resolve conflicts, this commonly results in distressed emotions regarding their relationship. There is also substantial empirical evidence that partners who experience negative cognitions about each other (e.g., make negative attributions regarding each other's motives) behave more negatively toward each other during problem-solving discussions. Furthermore, an individual's general sentiment about a partner can override the partner's current behavior in determining how the individual perceives the partner's actions (Weiss, 1980).

One component of the cognitive-behavioral model is social-exchange theory (Gehart & Tuttle, 2003), that in interpersonal relationships, people seek to maximize "rewards" and minimize "costs" in their interactions. If two people reward each other at equitable rates, this is called reciprocity, which theoretically will lead to more stable and satisfying relationships. But when members of the relationship perceive that the costs and

rewards are not well-balanced, dissatisfaction increases, which is often played out within their communication patterns.

Additionally, partners within a couple may have differing “family schemas,” or sets of beliefs about characteristics of family and life (Gehart & Tuttle, 2003). For example, each member of a couple typically has schemas regarding how important various areas of a relationship are (e.g., how important financial security is) and schemas about the roles that members of the relationship should enact. An individual tends to develop his or her schemas through observations of others in similar situations (e.g., observations of one’s parents’ relationship or family relationships that are modeled in media presentations such as movies). These family schemas serve as templates that the members of a relationship use to organize their couple and family interactions. If members of a couple have differing schemas about how their relationship should be (i.e., their schemas are in conflict), this can result in increased distress for one or both partners.

The cognitive-behavioral model also focuses on the behavioral repertoires that members of relationships have developed for sharing information and solving problems. Communication and problem-solving skills are learned through observation of others as well as through trial and error processes in which an individual is reinforced for some types of behavior and punished for other actions (Bandura, 1977; Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Individuals also learn to enact particular types of behavior in particular situations, again through observing others do so and by being selectively reinforced. Therefore, the cognitive-behavioral model would predict that members of couples may use different communication behaviors when discussing different relationship topics.

Cognitive-behavioral couple researchers and therapists often employ communication samples in order to assess a couple's behavioral process. By observing partners' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to each other's behaviors and to the relationship topics, the assessor can identify broader patterns within the relationship that may need attention in therapeutic interventions (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Questionnaires describing behavioral patterns also are used as a source of information about interaction patterns.

Thus, the cognitive-behavioral model emphasizes how internal experiences (cognitions and emotions) both influence and are influenced by couple behavioral interactions. This theoretical model is relevant to the current study, because this study focused on factors that influence partners' communication behaviors within a specific type of interaction context – a focused discussion of a conflict topic in the couple's relationship. On the one hand, the communication in that situation may be shaped by general patterns of learned behavior that have become established in a couple's interaction repertoire. On the other hand, communication behavior may vary according to the theme of the conflict topic, as topics that have different meanings (cognitive content) for the partners may elicit different behavior. The current study investigated whether certain topics that are sources of couple conflict contribute to variance in couple communication behavior.

Variables

The dependent variables that were examined in this study were forms of positive communication behavior (problem solving, facilitation, and validation) and negative communication behavior (conflict, withdrawal, and invalidation) exhibited by members of couples as they engage in a discussion of a topic of conflict in their relationship.

The first of the independent variables was the topic content area that a couple discussed for a sample of their communication. This variable was not manipulated by the investigator, but was selected by each couple and their therapists as an issue of mild to moderate disagreement or conflict in their relationship. The topic for each couple is chosen from the Relationship Inventory Survey (RIS) (Epstein, 1999) that partners complete as part of the set of self-report assessment questionnaires administered to all couples who have sought therapy at the Center for Healthy Families at the University of Maryland – College Park. This can be found in Appendix A. The couple's therapists guide them in selecting a topic that both partners have rated as being a source of slight to moderate conflict. As described in the Measures section, a data reduction procedure using factor analysis of the RIS conducted for the present study yielded four categories of topic content. Thus, this independent variable is a categorical variable with four levels.

The second set of independent variables used in the study was the partners' general communication patterns during discussions regarding conflicts in their relationship. Three major dyadic communication patterns that have been studied in previous research include (a) mutual constructive communication, (b) a demand-withdraw pattern in which one partner pursues the other in an attempt to influence him or her and the other partner withdraws from interaction, and (c) mutual avoidance (Heavey,

et al., 1996). Such patterns might override situational variation in communication based on the topic being discussed. Thus, this study examined the relative associations of topic and the three general communication patterns with partners' communication behavior during a specific discussion. Each of the three general communication patterns occurs in degrees and thus is a continuous variable.

There is evidence from prior research of some gender differences in couple communication, such as the tendency for females in heterosexual relationships to engage in more demanding/pursuing behavior in discussions of relationships conflicts and males to engage in more withdrawal (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). However, the present study did not examine gender differences, because the communication patterns that it investigated are dyadic (e.g., mutual avoidance), and the behaviors of the two members of a relationship were assessed in a manner such that they are highly interdependent.

Chapter 3: Method

Sample

The source of the data for this study is the University of Maryland's Center for Healthy Families (CHF), specifically assessment data from 110 of the couples who came to the CHF for couple therapy between November 2000 and August 2011. Typically, the couples live in the communities adjacent to the University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland. The couples had been together an average of 6.52 years ($SD = 6.22$). Females reported an average age of 31.92 ($SD = 9.69$) and males reported an average age of 33.94 ($SD = 10.22$). Females reported an average annual income of \$26,852.57 ($SD =$ \$29,101.66) and males reported an average annual income of \$45,636.36 ($SD =$ \$35,952.19). Females' and males' relationship status, race, and highest level of education completed can be found in Tables 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, respectively.

Table 3.1

Sample Relationship Status

Relationship Status	Frequency	Percent
Currently married, living together	54	49.1
Currently married, separated	4	3.6
Living together, not married	19	17.3
Separated	4	3.6
Dating, not living together	17	15.5
Single	9	8.2
Widowed	2	1.8
Did not specify	1	0.9

Table 3.2

Sample Race

Race	Female Frequency	Female Percent	Male Frequency	Male Percent
African American	34	30.9%	29	26.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4	3.6%	2	1.8%
Hispanic	14	12.7%	12	10.9%
White	51	46.4%	54	49.1%
Native American	0	0%	3	2.7%
Other	4	3.6%	8	7.3%%
Did not specify	3	2.7%	2	1.8%

Table 3.3

Sample Highest Level of Education Completed

Highest Level of Education Completed	Female Frequency	Female Percent	Male Frequency	Male Percent
Some high school	4	3.6%	5	4.5%
High school diploma	7	6.4%	17	15.5%
Some college	35	31.8%	20	18.2%
Associate degree	6	5.5%	6	5.5%
Bachelors degree	7	6.4%	10	9.1%
Some graduate education	18	16.4%	19	17.3%
Masters degree	17	15.5%	15	13.6%
Doctoral degree	12	10.9%	14	12.7%
Trade school	4	3.6%	4	3.6%

Almost half of the couples are currently married, Caucasian, and over half had at least a bachelor's degree. These demographics indicate that the sample is largely well-educated, and that the males' income is greater than that of the females, consistent with the national trend.

Prior to September 1, 2004, all couple cases at the CHF that met the selection criteria (English-speaking, at least 18 years old, in a committed relationship with the partner for at least six months, seeing each other at least once a week, not court ordered, no severe violence resulting in injury requiring medical treatment, no untreated substance abuse) were asked to provide a communication sample that is an essential component of the current study. Since September 2004, all couples presenting for therapy complete a communication sample.

The couple's first appointment at the CHF takes approximately two hours and is mostly spent completing assessment materials, including the Relationship Issues Survey assessing areas of relationship conflict and the Communication Patterns Questionnaire assessing overall couple communication patterns. The second appointment takes approximately one and a half hours and is spent completing additional questionnaires and a 10-minute communication sample. Both of these assessment sessions are at no cost to the client couples.

Measures

The following measures were used to assess the dependent and independent variables.

Dependent variable: Communication behavior during conflict-resolution discussion.

During the couple's second assessment session, their therapists identify the Relationship Issues Survey (RIS; see description below) items on which the partners indicated a slight to moderate source of contention in their relationship. The therapists present those topics to the couple and ask them to select one they would like to discuss in order to provide a sample of their communication. They are seated in a room with video-recording equipment and are asked to discuss the contentious issue for ten minutes and attempt to reach some conclusion. The discussion is video-recorded for later behavioral coding.

The Marital Interaction Coding System – Global (MICS-G; Weiss & Tolman, 1990) was used to assess the couples' 10-minute communication samples, using ratings provided by a team of trained undergraduates. A copy of the MICS-G can be found in Appendix C. The MICS-G assesses three forms of positive communication and three forms of negative communication. These categories and the behavioral cues used to rate their occurrence are:

- *Conflict*: complain, criticize, negative mindreading, put downs/insults, negative command, hostility, sarcasm, and angry/bitter voice
- *Problem solving*: problem description, proposing solution, compromise, and reasonableness

- *Validation*: agreement, approval, accept responsibility, assent, receptivity, and encouragement
- *Invalidation*: disagreement, denial of responsibility, changing the subject, consistent interruption, turn-off behavior, and domineering behaviors
- *Facilitation*: positive mindreading, paraphrasing, humor, positive physical contact, smile/laugh, and open posture
- *Withdrawal*: negation, no response, turn away from partner, increasing distance, erect barriers, and noncontributive

Trained coders rate on a Likert scale of 0-5 the degrees to which each member of a couple exhibits each of these six forms of communication. Anchors of zero (none) indicate the partner did not display any behavior in the category during the interaction, and one (very low) indicate a very low level of behavior in that category, with 10% or less of the interaction time involving this category of behavior or any behaviors that did occur had minimal impact. A rating of two (low) indicates the behavior in the category did occur at more than a minimal level, but with low intensity, and either the category behaviors occurred somewhat often but had little impact on the situation or that 30% of the interaction time involved behaviors in this category. A rating of three (moderate) means that behaviors in the category occurred often in the session and with some intensity, with either half of the time in the session involving the behaviors in this category or the behaviors had a strong impact on the session. A four rating (high) means a high intensity of behaviors in this category, that either 70% of the interactive time involved behaviors in this category or the behaviors occurred with a lot of energy. A rating of five (very high) indicates that the partner's behavior for the category was very

intense and characterized most or all of the interaction, with either 90% of the interactive time involving the category behavior, or a few behaviors occurred with great intensity and emotional involvement.

The MICS-G was developed to provide more global, easily rated indices of couple communication than is gathered from using the micro-analytic versions of the MICS (Weiss & Tolman, 1990). To establish its reliability and validity, the researchers had observers use the MICS-G to rate 80 three-minute videotaped interaction samples from 40 couples reporting varied levels of marital distress. Their results indicated overall moderate to substantial relationships between summary categories defined by MICS codes and similar MICS-G global category ratings. The observers rated distressed couples significantly higher on “conflict,” “invalidation,” and “withdrawal,” but lower on “validation” and “facilitation,” compared to non-distressed couples. In its overall ability to classify interactions correctly as either distressed or non-distressed, Weiss and Tolman (1990) found the MICS-G to be equal or slightly superior to the original micro-analytic MICS.

Interrater reliability was established for the MICS-G assessment of couples’ communication at the Center for Healthy Families by having the behavior coders watch and rate each communication sample alone, later bringing the two coders together and seeing if each rating was within a one-point difference of the other. A copy of the MICS-G Consensus Sheet can be found in Appendix D. For example, if Coder 1 scored the female as having a 3 on sarcasm during the second time interval, and Coder 2 scored the female as having a 2, while these scores are different, they are close enough to be considered “in consensus” with one another. If Coder 1 scored the female as having a 3

and Coder 2 scored her as a 1, we would say the coders are not in consensus, and the two coders would review the tape and transcript with the behavior coding facilitator. After a careful review, the two coders would decide what is the correct behavior code for the interval in question, and would adjust their scores accordingly. Behavior coders go through rigorous training and practice on how to behavior code before attempting to code new data.

Independent variable: Conflict topic themes.

The Relationship Issue Survey (RIS; Epstein, 1999) was used to assess the content themes of the topics that couples discussed during their 10-minute, video-recorded, conflict-resolution discussion. The RIS asks each member of a couple about the level of conflict or disagreement that the respondent perceives the couple presently has in each of 28 areas of their relationship, ranging from relationships with friends, to personal habits, to sexual relationships, to trust, to honesty, and many others. The respondent rates each area of potential conflict on the RIS with a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 indicating no source of conflict or disagreement to 3 indicating very much a source of conflict or disagreement.

For the purposes of the current study, factor analysis was used to reduce the set of 28 RIS items to a smaller set of dimensions or themes on which couples were experiencing conflict. The factor analysis indicated that the relationship topics on the RIS loaded on four factors or dimensions (see Table 3.4 for the item factor loadings):

- Factor 1: Career and job issues, religion or personal philosophy of life, finances, goals and things believed important in life, child rearing/parenting approaches, daily life schedules and routines, leisure activities and interests, amount of time

spent together, and alcohol and drugs. The underlying dimension appears to be *basic life values and priorities*.

- Factor 2: Relationship with friends, amount of commitment to the relationship, affairs, privacy, honesty, and trustworthiness. The underlying dimension seems to involve *closeness and commitment in the relationship*.
- Factor 3: Sexual relationship, understanding of each other's stresses and problems, how negative thoughts and emotions are communicated, how positive thoughts and emotions are communicated, and expressions of caring and affection. The underlying dimension seems to involve *emotional connectivity and expressiveness*.
- Factor 4: Relationship with family of origin (parents, siblings), personal habits, personal manners, household tasks and management, taking care of possessions, personal standard for neatness, how decisions are made, and personal grooming. The underlying dimension seems to be *consideration for one's partner*.

Table 3.4

Relationship Issues Survey Factors with Item Loadings

Item	Factor			
	1 – Basic Life Values and Priorities	2 – Closeness and Commitment in the Relationship	3 – Emotional Connectivity and Expressiveness	4 – Consideration for One's Partner
Relationship with friends	.20	-.59	.01	-.33
Career and job issues	.62	.08	-.27	-.16
Religion or personal philosophy of life	.56	.23	-.03	-.14
Finances	.40	.27	-.40	-.38
Goals and things believed important in life	.62	.20	-.43	-.31
Relationship with family of origin (parents, siblings)	.34	.25	-.16	-.50
Sexual Relationship	.27	.04	-.60	-.32
Child rearing/parenting approaches	.39	.18	-.27	-.34
Personal habits	.52	.26	-.07	-.63
Amount of commitment to the relationship	.46	.55	-.53	-.27
Understanding of each other's stresses or problems	.47	.40	-.69	-.35
Daily life schedules and routines	.72	.23	-.33	-.45
Personal manners	.39	.35	-.34	-.67
How negative thoughts and emotions are communicated	.12	.28	-.64	-.31
How positive thoughts and emotions are communicated	.30	.33	-.60	-.38
Leisure activities and interests	-.73	.37	-.13	-.41
Household tasks and management	.50	.16	-.40	-.66
Amount of time spent together	.54	.37	-.33	-.36
Affairs	.20	.74	-.16	-.13
Privacy	.30	.70	-.17	-.30
Honesty	.25	.86	-.20	-.19
Expressions of caring and affection	.36	.34	-.69	-.30
Trustworthiness	.20	.85	-.19	-.17
Alcohol and drugs	.35	.30	.27	-.14
Taking care of possessions	.42	.30	-.08	-.54
Personal standard for neatness	.20	.13	-.24	-.82
How decisions are made	.34	.39	-.48	-.65
Personal grooming	.04	.12	-.25	-.67
<i>Factor Eigenvalue</i>	8.11	2.50	1.35	1.25

Note. Bold loading for each item is its primary factor loading.

Independent variable: General communication patterns.

The couple's general communication patterns were assessed with the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen, 1988), a self-report instrument that assesses dyadic communication patterns in three phases of couple conflict – when a relationship problem initially arises, during a discussion of a relationship problem, and after the discussion of a relationship problem. The CPQ can be found in Appendix B. The CPQ initially was developed to assess three types of dyadic communication patterns: mutual constructive communication, mutual avoidance, and demand/withdraw (with separate subscales for female demand/male withdraw and male demand/female withdraw), and the CPQ subscales for those three communication patterns were used in the present study.

The CPQ asks each member of a couple to rate the likelihood of particular communication behaviors occurring during conflict with his/her partner, using a 9-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 = very unlikely to 9 = very likely. Following procedures that are commonly used when both members of couples report on the same aspects of couple interactions, in the present study composite scores on the CPQ subscales were computed by averaging the two partners' reports about each type of dyadic communication. Specifically, the two partners' scores on each CPQ subscale were averaged to obtain an overall score on that subscale.

Internal consistency reliabilities for the CPQ subscales have been found to be acceptable, ranging from .62 to .84, with a mean of .71 (Christensen & Shenk, 1991). The subscales reliably distinguish between distressed and non-distressed couples and are

significantly related to marital adjustment in the expected direction (e.g., $r = -.55$ for the total demand/withdraw subscale) (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Noller & White, 1990). Finally, there appears to be a reliable concordance between spouses in responding to the subscales (e.g., $r = .73$ for inter-partner agreement on the total demand/withdraw subscale) (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Noller & White, 1990).

Heavey et al., (1996) found that the subscale on Constructive Communication had high internal consistency and moderately high agreement between spouses, and was also strongly associated with observer ratings of the spouses' constructiveness during videotaped problem-solving discussions. Additionally, CPQ-CC was strongly associated with spouses' self-reported marital adjustment.

Research has demonstrated the CPQ's validity (Christensen, 1988, Noller & White, 1988, Heavey, et al., 1996), its ability to be used cross-culturally (Bodenmann, et al., 1998), and its utility as a self-report measure (Hahlweg et al., 2000; Heavey, et al., 1996). The CPQ was used in the study to investigate the degree to which couples' context-general communication behavior predicts their context-specific behavior during their discussion of a specific conflict topic regarding their relationship.

Procedure

This study was a secondary analysis of pre-therapy assessment data that were collected from couples who sought therapy at the Center for Healthy Families (CHF) at the University of Maryland – College Park. Currently, all couples at the CHF that meet the selection criteria (English-speaking, at least 18 years old, in a committed relationship with the partner for at least six months, seeing each other at least once a week, not court ordered, no severe violence resulting in injury requiring medical treatment, no untreated

substance abuse) are asked to provide a communication sample that is an essential component of the current study.

The first appointment takes approximately two hours and is mostly spent completing assessment materials, including the Relationship Issues Survey assessing areas of relationship conflict and the Communication Patterns Questionnaire assessing overall couple communication patterns. The second appointment takes approximately one and a half hours and is spent completing additional questionnaires and a 10-minute communication sample, which subsequently is coded with the MICS-G. Both of these assessment sessions are at no cost to the client couples.

Each partner's MICS-G scores for problem solving, validation, and facilitation from the 10-minute communication sample taken before the onset of therapy were added together to create a composite positive communication score. For example, for a couple, if female problem solving = 0.6, female validation = 0.4, and female facilitation = 0.2, the female positive communication composite score was 1.2, and if male problem solving = 0.5, male validation = 0.7, and male facilitation = 0.8, then the male positive communication composite score was 2.0. Consequently, that couple's composite positive behavior score was $(1.2 + 2.0) = 3.2$; a similar process was used to calculate the couple's negative communication composite score from the partners' three types of coded negative communication behavior (conflict, invalidation, and withdrawal). The range of a couple's MICS-G score could be anywhere from zero to ten.

The present study did not involve any direct interaction with human subjects, as it used previously collected assessment data.

Table 3.5

Current Study's Research Questions, Hypotheses, Measures, Variables, and Analyses

Research Questions	Hypotheses	Measures	Variables	Analyses
Do different areas of content of topics of disagreement or conflict between members of a couple produce different couple communication behaviors?	There will be significant differences in the communication behaviors of the couples based on major themes of the topics that they discuss.	Independent variable: Relationship Issue Survey (content); Dependent variable: Marital Interaction Coding System – Global (for communication behavior)	The conflict topic from the RIS the couple will attempt to resolve in their communication sample (one of the four categories named later), the behavior coders' ratings on the MICS-G	Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)
Are couples' general communication patterns associated with their communication behavior in a specific situation in which they are discussing a conflict-related topic?	A couple's context-general behavior for discussing issues of conflict (i.e., their self-reports of their overall communication behavior patterns) will be associated with the context-specific behavior that they exhibit during a communication sample that they provide when discussing a topic that is a source of mild to moderate conflict in their relationship.	Independent variable: Communication Pattern Questionnaire (context general behavior); Dependent variable: Marital Interaction Coding System – Global (for communication behavior)	A couple's self-report ratings on the CPQ with the subscales of Mutual Avoidance, Mutual Construction, and Demand-Withdrawal, averaging the two partners' scores, the behavior coders' ratings on the MICS-G	Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)
What are the relative contributions that <u>general communication</u>	No hypothesis (exploratory).	Independent variables: Relationship Issue Survey (content),	The conflict topic from the RIS the couple will attempt to resolve in their	Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

<p><u>patterns and type of content of the conflict topic</u> make in determining the couple's communication behavior, and which makes more of a difference?</p>		<p>Communication Pattern Questionnaire (context general behavior); Dependent variable: Marital Interaction Coding System – Global (for communication behavior)</p>	<p>communication sample (one of the four categories named later), a couple's self-report ratings on the CPQ with the subscales of Mutual Avoidance, Mutual Construction, and Demand-Withdrawal, averaging the two partners' scores, the behavior coders' ratings on the MICS-G</p>	
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Chapter 4: Results

Overview of Analyses

This study used a 4 X 2 factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) to assess the main and interaction effects of the independent variables of discussion topic and overall communication pattern in determining the couples' observed specific forms of positive and negative communication behavior. Because the RIS has been split into four categories of topic theme, the analysis used four categories of topic. Those four topics were basic life values and priorities (RIS Factor 1), closeness and commitment in the relationship (RIS Factor 2), emotional connectivity and expressiveness (RIS Factor 3), and consideration for one's partner (RIS Factor 4). Each couple was categorized into one of four groups depending on which of the four RIS topic themes they discussed.

As individuals' scores on each subscale of the CPQ are a continuous variable, in order to use them in the ANOVAs the researcher split the sample's distribution of scores on each subscale (the average of the two partners' CPQ scores for the mutual constructive communication subscale, for the demand-withdraw subscale, and for the mutual avoidance subscale) at the median for each subscale to create dichotomous variables (e.g., higher mutual constructive communication versus lower mutual constructive communication).

For each of the three CPQ subscales, each partner's responses to the set of a subscale's items were added together to create a subscale total score. Then the subscale scores of the two members of a couple were averaged to create a subscale composite that reflected both partners' perceptions of how the dyad typically communicates. For example, for the CPQ's Mutual Avoidance subscale, each partner's scores from three

items were added together to create a subscale total score: Item A1 (Both members avoid discussing the problem) + item C2 (Both withdraw from each other after the discussion) + item C4 (Neither partner is giving to the other after the discussion). Then the two partners' Mutual Avoidance subscale scores were averaged: $[(\text{Female's answers for } A1+C2+C4) + (\text{Male's answers for } A1+C2+C4)]/2 = \text{Couple's average CPQ Mutual Avoidance subscale score.}$

For the CPQ's Demand/Withdrawal subscale, scores from six items were added together to create each partner's subscale score: A3m (Man tries to start a discussion while Woman tries to avoid a discussion) + A3w (Woman tries to start a discussion while Man tries to avoid a discussion) + B5m (Man nags and demans while Woman withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further) + B5w (Woman nags and demans while Man withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further) + B6m (Man criticizes while Woman defends herself) + B6f (Woman criticizes while Man defends himself). Then the couple's composite score on Demand/withdrawal was calculated: $[(\text{Female's answers for } A3m+A3w+B5m+B5w+B6m+B6w) + (\text{Male's answers for } A3m+A3w+B5m+B5w+B6m+B6w)] / 2 = \text{Couple's average CPQ Demand Withdrawal subscale score.}$

For the CPQ's Mutual Constructive Communication subscale, scores from five items were added together to create each partner's subscale score: A2 (Both members try to discuss the problem) + B2 (Both members express their feelings to each other) + B4 (Both members suggest possible solutions and compromises) + C1 (Both feel each other has understood his/her position) + C3 (Both feel that the problem has been solved) = CPQ Mutual Constructive Communication subscale score. Then the couple's composite score

on the Mutual Constructive Communication subscale was calculated: [(Female's answers for A2+B2+B4+C1+C3)+(Male's answers for A2+B2+B4+C1+C3)]/2 = Couple's average CPQ Mutual Constructive Communication subscale score.

Scores from the CPQ subscales were divided into "higher" scores and "lower" scores by dividing the total distribution of scores for each subscale at the median. Those scores that fell below the median were considered "lower" and those that fell above the median were considered "higher" within their subscales. Thus, for the CPQ's Demand Withdrawal subscale, those scores falling at 28.50 or below were defined "lower" and those scores falling at 29.00 or above were defined as "higher." For the CPQ's Mutual Constructive Communication subscale, those scores falling at 26.50 or below were "lower" and those scores falling at 27.00 or above were "higher." For the CPQ's Mutual Avoidance subscale, those scores falling at 12.50 or below were "lower" and those scores falling at 13.00 or above were "higher." Therefore the analysis involved three 4 X 2 factorial analyses of variance, one for each type of communication pattern and each using four categories of discussion topic theme.

The dependent variables were the composites of positive or negative MICS-G behaviors exhibited by the two members of the couple. Table 4.1 presents means and standard deviations for the MICS-G positive and negative communication behaviors within each of the four RIS factors. Because the current study used a composite of the male's and female's behaviors, a composite MICS-G score of zero to two indicated minimal impact on the situation or that 10% or less of the interaction time involved this category of behavior, and a score of two to four indicated either that the category of behaviors occurred somewhat often but had little impact on the situation or that 30% of

the interaction time involved behaviors in this category. A score of four to six indicated that behaviors in the category occurred often in the session and with some intensity, with either half of the time in the session involving the behaviors in this category or the behaviors had a strong impact on the session. A composite MICS-G score of six to eight indicated a high intensity of behaviors in this category, that either 70% of the interactive time involved behaviors in this category or the behaviors occurred with a lot of energy, and a composite score of eight to ten indicated that the behavior for the category was very intense and characterized most or all of the interaction, with either 90% of the interactive time involving the category behavior, or a few behaviors occurred with great intensity and emotional involvement.

Table 4.1

Positive and Negative Communication Behavior Means Within Four Topic Areas

	RIS Factor 1	RIS Factor 2	RIS Factor 3	RIS Factor 4	Marginal Means
Positive Means	6.22 (SD = 2.09)	6.17 (SD = 2.53)	5.74 (SD = 2.46)	6.00 (SD = 2.47)	6.04 (SD = 2.37)
Negative Means	2.23 (SD = 1.67)	1.48 (SD = 1.08)	1.62 (SD = 1.15)	2.25 (SD = 1.88)	1.98 (SD = 1.57)

Note: RIS Factor 1 is basic life values and priorities, RIS Factor 2 is closeness and commitment in the relationship, RIS Factor 3 is emotional connectivity and expressiveness, RIS Factor 4 is consideration for one's partner.

Overall, the scores across the four RIS factors indicated that couples displayed less negative communication behavior and more positive communication behavior. The fact that the negative communication behavior means were lower helps explain their smaller associated standard deviations, and the higher standard deviations for positive behavior suggests that the lack of significant effects of the independent variables on positive

communication behavior was not due to a restricted range of positive communication scores.

The present study tested two hypotheses and one research question:

- Hypothesis One: *There will be differences in the communication behaviors of the couples based on the major themes of the topics that they discuss.*
- Hypothesis Two: *A couple's context-general behavior for discussing issues of conflict (i.e., their self-reports of their overall communication behavior patterns) will be associated with the context-specific behavior that they exhibit during a communication sample that they provide when discussing a topic that is a source of mild to moderate conflict in their relationship. Specifically, higher overall mutual constructive communication will be associated with more positive and less negative communication behavior during couple discussions, whereas higher overall demand-withdrawal and higher overall mutual avoidance communication will be associated with less positive and more negative communication behavior during couple discussions.*
- Research Question: *What are the relative contributions that general communication patterns and type of content of the conflict topic make in determining the couple's communication behavior? Which of those makes more of a difference is explored.*

Analysis for Hypothesis 1

There will be differences in the communication behaviors of the couples based on major themes of the topics that they discuss.

To test this hypothesis, univariate factor analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine any significant effects of the type of content of the conflict topic chosen from the RIS, which were compiled into four different factors, on the MICS-G's positive and negative communication behavior scores.

Analysis for Hypothesis 2

A couple's context-general behavior for discussing issues of conflict (i.e., their self-reports of their overall communication behavior patterns) will be associated with the context-specific behavior that they exhibit during a communication sample that they provide when discussing a topic that is a source of mild to moderate conflict in their relationship. Specifically, higher overall mutual constructive communication will be associated with more positive and less negative communication behavior during couple discussions, whereas higher overall demand-withdrawal and higher overall mutual avoidance communication will be associated with less positive and more negative communication behavior during couple discussions.

To test this hypothesis, univariate factor analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine any significant effects of the couples' CPQ's mutual constructive communication subscale, demand-withdrawal subscale, and mutual avoidance subscale scores on their MICS-G positive and negative communication behavior scores.

Analysis for Research Question

What are the relative contributions that general communication patterns and type of content of the conflict topic make in determining the couple's communication behavior?

To investigate this research question, the univariate factor analyses of variance (ANOVA) described for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were examined to determine the

relative degrees to which the type of content of the conflict topic chosen from the RIS and couples' general communication patterns assessed with the CPQ mutual constructive communication subscale, demand-withdrawal subscale, and mutual avoidance subscale predicted couples communication behavior assessed with the MICS-G positive and negative communication behavior scores.

Positive Communication Behavior as a Function of Discussion Topic Theme and General Communication Pattern

Three 4 X 2 univariate factorial analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to analyze the data regarding couples' positive communication during their video-recorded discussion. The independent variables for each ANOVA were discussion topic theme (4 levels) and general communication pattern (2 levels), and the dependent variable was the couple's positive MICS communication composite score.

CPQ mutual constructive communication subscale.

In the ANOVA that included the CPQ mutual constructive communication subscale when examining determinants of the composite positive behaviors on the MICS-G, there was a significant main effect for mutual constructive communication [$F(1, 100) = 5.76, p = .018$]. The mean MICS-G positive behavior score was 5.54 for couples who reported lower mutual constructive communication and the mean was 6.70 for couples who reported higher mutual constructive communication. The RIS content area that the couple discussed had no significant main effect on their MICS-G positive communication behavior [$F(3, 100) = .26, p = .85$], and there was no significant interaction between the two independent variables [$F(3, 100) = 1.34, p = .27$].

CPQ demand-withdrawal subscale.

In the ANOVA that included the CPQ demand/withdrawal communication subscale when examining determinants of the composite positive behaviors on the MICS-G, there was no significant main effect for the RIS conversation topic factor [$F(3, 102) = .01, p = .99$], or for the demand/withdrawal subscale independent variable [$F(1, 102) = .72, p = .40$]. The communication topic by demand/withdrawal interaction effect also was not significant [$F(3, 102) = .83, p = .48$].

CPQ mutual avoidance subscale.

In the ANOVA that included the CPQ mutual avoidance communication subscale when examining determinants of the composite positive behaviors on the MICS-G, there was no significant main effect for the RIS communication topic independent variable [$F(3, 101) = .18, p = .91$], no significant main effect for the mutual avoidance variable [$F(1, 101) = .67, p = .42$], and no significant interaction between the two independent variables [$F(3, 101) = .18, p = .91$].

In summary, couples' reports of their general pattern of mutual constructive communication did predict their positive behaviors during their discussion of a relationship issue, but their reports of demand-withdrawal communication and mutual avoidance did not predict their positive communication during their discussion. Furthermore, the topic of discussion did not predict couples' positive communication.

Negative Communication Behavior as a Function of Discussion Topic Theme and General Communication Pattern

CPQ mutual constructive communication subscale.

In the ANOVA that included the CPQ mutual constructive communication subscale when examining determinants of the composite negative communication behaviors on the MICS-G, the RIS discussion topic area had no significant effect [$F(1, 100) = 1.76, p = .16$]. There also was no significant main effect of mutual constructive communication on negative communication behavior during the couple's discussion [$F(1, 100) = .36, p = .55$], and no significant interaction between the two independent variables [$F(3, 100) = .39, p = .76$].

CPQ demand-withdrawal subscale.

In the ANOVA that included the CPQ demand/withdrawal communication subscale when examining determinants of the composite negative behaviors on the MICS-G, there was a significant main effect for the RIS content area being discussed [$F(3, 102) = 2.80, p = .04$] for negative communication behavior when examining the CPQ's demand-withdrawal subscale. Couples' mean MICS-G negative communication behaviors were higher when they discussed RIS Factor 1 topics (life values and priorities) (Mean = 2.36) and RIS Factor 4 topics (consideration for one's partner) (Mean = 2.21) than when they discussed RIS Factor 3 topics (emotional connectivity and expressiveness) (Mean = 1.46) or RIS Factor 2 topics (closeness and commitment in the relationship) (Mean = 1.50). Post-hoc paired comparisons of the means for the four topic areas, using both Student-Newman-Keuls and Scheffe tests, did not indicate pairs of means that were significantly different, in spite of the overall significant main effect F

test for topic area; thus, there was insufficient statistical power to detect which of the four means were different using those relatively conservative paired comparison post-hoc tests. It is safest to conclude that the two means that were furthest apart (2.36 for Factor 1 and 1.46 for Factor 3) were significantly different.

There also was a significant main effect for the couple's overall demand-withdrawal behavior on their negative communication behavior during their discussion [$F(1, 102) = 18.34, p < .001$]. The mean negative communication score for couples with higher demand-withdrawal communication was 2.57, and the mean for those with lower demand-withdrawal communication was 1.32. There was no significant interaction between the two independent variables [$F(3, 102) = 1.45, p = .23$].

CPQ mutual avoidance subscale.

In the ANOVA that included the CPQ mutual avoidance communication subscale when examining determinants of the composite negative behaviors on the MICS-G, there was a significant main effect for mutual avoidance [$F(1, 101) = 7.42, p = .01$]. The negative communication behavior means were 2.32 for couples who scored high on the CPQ's mutual avoidance subscale and 1.51 for couples who scored low. The content area had no significant main effect on couple negative communication behavior [$F(3, 101) = 2.00, p = .12$], and there was no significant interaction between the two variables [$F(3, 101) = 1.08, p = .36$].

Thus, overall, the pattern of findings suggests that couples' general communication styles had more influence on their communication behavior during their discussions than did the content the couple discussed. Tables 4.2 through 4.7 provide the couples' mean MICS-G positive and negative communication behavior scores for each of

the four RIS factors within the CPQ's mutual constructive communication subscale, demand-withdrawal subscale, and mutual avoidance subscale.

Table 4.2

Mean Positive Communication Behavior Displayed During Discussions as a Function of Topic Content Areas and Overall Mutual Constructive Communication

	RIS Factor 1	RIS Factor 2	RIS Factor 3	RIS Factor 4	Marginal Means
Higher CPQ Mutual Constructive Communication subscale scores	7.23 (SD = 1.57)	6.31 (SD = 2.15)	7.20 (SD = 2.05)	6.05 (SD = 2.56)	6.59 (SD = 2.20)
Lower CPQ Mutual Constructive Communication subscale scores	5.63 (SD = 2.16)	5.92 (SD = 3.33)	4.71 (SD = 2.53)	5.91 (SD = 2.39)	5.48 (SD = 2.42)
Marginal Means	6.22 (SD = 2.09)	6.17 (SD = 2.53)	5.74 (SD = 2.61)	6.00 (SD = 2.47)	6.04 (SD = 2.37)

Note: RIS Factor 1 is basic life values and priorities, RIS Factor 2 is closeness and commitment in the relationship, RIS Factor 3 is emotional connectivity and expressiveness, RIS Factor 4 is consideration for one's partner.

Table 4.3

Mean Negative Communication Behavior Displayed During Discussions as a Function of Topic Content Areas and Overall Mutual Constructive Communication

	RIS Factor 1	RIS Factor 2	RIS Factor 3	RIS Factor 4	Marginal Means
Higher CPQ Mutual Constructive Communication subscale scores	2.17 (SD = 2.03)	1.79 (SD = 1.19)	1.68 (SD = .79)	2.22 (SD = 1.94)	2.02 (SD = 1.65)
Lower CPQ Mutual Constructive Communication subscale scores	2.27 (SD = 1.47)	0.92 (SD = .57)	1.57 (SD = 1.39)	2.31 (SD = 1.83)	1.94 (SD = 1.50)
Marginal Means	2.23 (SD = 1.67)	1.48 (SD = 1.08)	1.62 (SD = 1.15)	2.25 (SD = 1.88)	1.98 (SD = 1.58)

Note: RIS Factor 1 is basic life values and priorities, RIS Factor 2 is closeness and commitment in the relationship, RIS Factor 3 is emotional connectivity and expressiveness, RIS Factor 4 is consideration for one's partner.

Table 4.4

Mean Positive Communication Behaviors Displayed During Discussions as a Function of Topic Content Areas and Overall Demand-Withdrawal Subscale

	RIS Factor 1	RIS Factor 2	RIS Factor 3	RIS Factor 4	Marginal Means
Higher CPQ Demand/Withdrawal subscale scores	5.30 (SD = 1.79)	6.03 (SD = 2.46)	5.46 (SD = 2.34)	6.17 (SD = 2.07)	5.72 (SD = 2.11)
Lower CPQ Demand/Withdrawal subscale scores	6.65 (SD = 2.33)	5.86 (SD = 2.94)	6.31 (SD = 3.19)	5.81 (SD = 2.96)	6.23 (SD = 2.70)
Marginal Means	6.09 (SD = 2.20)	5.94 (SD = 2.63)	5.74 (SD = 2.61)	6.00 (SD = 2.47)	5.97 (SD = 2.41)

Note: RIS Factor 1 is basic life values and priorities, RIS Factor 2 is closeness and commitment in the relationship, RIS Factor 3 is Emotional connectivity and expressiveness, RIS Factor 4 is consideration for one's partner.

Table 4.5

Mean Negative Communication Behaviors Displayed During Discussions as a Function of Topic Content Areas and Overall Demand-Withdrawal Subscale

	RIS Factor 1	RIS Factor 2	RIS Factor 3	RIS Factor 4	Marginal Means
Higher CPQ Demand/Withdrawal subscale scores	3.37 (SD = 1.65)	1.77 (SD = 1.20)	1.93 (SD = 1.21)	2.90 (SD = 2.08)	2.57 (SD = 1.72)
Lower CPQ Demand/Withdrawal subscale scores	1.34 (SD = 1.09)	1.27 (SD = .90)	.99 (SD = .76)	1.51 (SD = 1.38)	1.32 (SD = 1.08)
Marginal Means	2.19 (SD = 1.67)	1.50 (SD = 1.05)	1.62 (SD = 1.15)	2.25 (SD = 1.88)	1.97 (SD = 1.57)

Note: RIS Factor 1 is basic life values and priorities, RIS Factor 2 is closeness and commitment in the relationship, RIS Factor 3 is emotional connectivity and expressiveness, RIS Factor 4 is consideration for one's partner.

Table 4.6

Mean Positive Communication Behaviors Displayed During Discussions as a Function of Topic Content Areas and Overall Mutual Avoidance Subscale

	RIS Factor 1	RIS Factor 2	RIS Factor 3	RIS Factor 4	Marginal Means
Higher CPQ Mutual Avoidance Communication subscale scores	6.08 (SD = 1.84)	5.40 (SD = 1.94)	5.69 (SD = 2.48)	5.95 (SD = 1.42)	5.83 (SD = 1.92)
Lower CPQ Mutual Avoidance Communication subscale scores	6.37 (SD = 2.37)	6.49 (SD = 3.21)	5.82 (SD = 2.93)	6.04 (SD = 3.02)	6.18 (SD = 2.78)
Marginal Means	6.22 (SD = 2.09)	5.94 (SD = 2.63)	5.74 (SD = 2.61)	6.00 (SD = 2.47)	6.01 (SD = 2.39)

Note: RIS Factor 1 is basic life values and priorities, RIS Factor 2 is closeness and commitment in the relationship, RIS Factor 3 is emotional connectivity and expressiveness, RIS Factor 4 is consideration for one's partner.

Table 4.7

Mean Negative Communication Behaviors Displayed During Discussions as a Function of Topic Content Areas and Overall Mutual Avoidance Subscale

	RIS Factor 1	RIS Factor 2	RIS Factor 3	RIS Factor 4	Marginal Means
Higher CPQ Mutual Avoidance Communication subscale scores	3.01 (SD = 1.76)	1.74 (SD = 1.22)	1.74 (SD = 1.32)	2.19 (SD = 1.67)	2.41 (SD = 1.66)
Lower CPQ Mutual Avoidance Communication subscale scores	1.42 (SD = 1.12)	1.27 (SD = .87)	1.45 (SD = .91)	1.88 (SD = 1.87)	1.56 (SD = 1.36)
Marginal Means	2.23 (SD = 1.67)	1.50 (SD = 1.05)	1.62 (SD = 1.15)	2.25 (SD = 1.88)	1.98 (SD = 1.57)

Note: RIS Factor 1 is basic life values and priorities, RIS Factor 2 is closeness and commitment in the relationship, RIS Factor 3 is emotional connectivity and expressiveness, RIS Factor 4 is consideration for one's partner.

Post-hoc Analyses

In the post-hoc analyses, the investigator decided to combine RIS Factors 1 (basic life values and priorities) and 4 (consideration for one's partner), and also to combine RIS Factors 2 (closeness and commitment in the relationship) and 3 (emotional connectivity and expressiveness), in order to increase the sample sizes in the cells of the ANOVA and thus the statistical power. The justification for combining RIS Factors 1 and 4 and RIS Factors 2 and 3 together is that those combinations seem to have similar content areas. Table 4.8 gives the MICS-G positive and negative communication behavior means for the post-hoc factor composite.

Table 4.8

Positive and Negative Communication Behavior Means for Post-hoc Factor Composites

	Composite of RIS Factors 1 and 4	Composite of RIS Factors 2 and 3
Positive Behaviors	6.12 (<i>SD</i> = 2.26)	5.92 (<i>SD</i> = 2.56)
Negative Behaviors	2.24 (<i>SD</i> = 1.76)	1.56 (<i>SD</i> = 1.11)

Note: RIS Factor 1 is basic life values and priorities, RIS Factor 2 is closeness and commitment in the relationship, RIS Factor 3 is emotional connectivity and expressiveness, RIS Factor 4 is consideration for one's partner.

Positive Communication Behaviors

CPQ mutual constructive communication subscale.

The content area had no significant effect on couple's positive communication behavior [$F(1, 104) = 0.21, p = .65$], and the couples' levels of mutual constructive communication had an effect on their positive communication behavior as it did in the original analysis [$F(1, 104) = 7.04, p = .01$], with a mean of 6.62 for the couples who scored higher on mutual constructive communication and a mean of 5.40 for the couples

who scored lower on mutual constructive communication. Finally, there was no significant interaction between the two independent variables [$F(1, 104) = 0.91, p = .34$].

CPQ demand-withdrawal subscale.

The content area had no significant effect on couple's positive communication behavior [$F(1, 106) = 0.12, p = .73$], level of demand-withdrawal communication had no effect on the couple's positive communication behavior [$F(1, 106) = 0.96, p = .33$], and there was no significant interaction between the two independent variables [$F(1, 106) = .02, p = 0.89$].

CPQ mutual avoidance subscale.

The content area had no significant effect on couple's positive communication behavior [$F(1, 105) = 0.28, p = .60$], the degree of mutual avoidance had no effect on the couple's positive communication behavior [$F(1, 105) = 0.59, p = .44$], and there was no significant interaction between the two independent variables [$F(1, 105) = .17, p = .68$].

The CPQ mutual constructive communication subscale had a significant effect on the couple's MICS-G positive communication behavior, but the CPQ demand-withdrawal subscale and mutual avoidance subscale were still not significant predictors of the MICS-G positive communication behavior, and neither was the topic area variable that was collapsed into two factors.

Negative Communication Behaviors

CPQ mutual constructive communication subscale.

For the MICS-G negative communication behavior and the collapsed RIS, the effect for the couple's discussion topic content was significant [$F(1, 104) = 4.93, p =$

.03], with those couples discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness having a mean of 1.56 on the MICS-G negative communication behavior score, and those discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner having a mean of 2.24 on the MICS-G negative communication. As in the initial analysis that used four RIS topic content factors, in the present analysis there was no significant main effect for degree of the couple's overall mutual constructive communication [$F(1, 104) = 0.20, p = .66$]. There also was no significant interaction between the two independent variables [$F(1, 104) = 0.52, p = .47$].

CPQ demand-withdrawal subscale.

There was a significant main effect for the composite MICS-G negative behaviors for the content area being discussed [$F(1, 106) = 7.81, p = .01$], with those couples discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness having a mean of 1.50 on MICS-G negative communication behavior and those discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner having a mean of 2.27. This was similar to findings in the original analysis. There was no significant interaction between the content area and the level of general demand-withdrawal communication [$F(1, 106) = 3.23, p = .08$], although Table 4.9 below does yield an interesting pattern for the statistical trend.

Table 4.9

Negative Communication Means as a Function of Overall Demand-Withdrawal

Communication and Topic Content

	RIS Composite 2 (closeness)	RIS Composite 1 (values/consideration)
Demand-withdrawal higher	1.86	3.12
Demand-withdrawal lower	1.14	1.41

Again, this is not a significant interaction between the content area and the demand-withdrawal pattern, but it does indicate a potential trend. It seems that both demand-withdrawal and negative communication goes up somewhat with RIS Composite 2 (closeness), but goes up more for RIS Composite 1 (values and consideration). If a couple's demand withdrawal was lower in general, their negative communication stayed low no matter what, but if a couple's demand-withdrawal was higher in general, then negative communication went up if they are talking about closeness, but much more so when the couple was discussing values and consideration for one's partner. More demand-withdrawal lead to more negative communication with closeness, but there was a bigger difference with values and consideration. The demand-withdrawal scores also had a main effect on the couple's negative communication behavior [$F(1, 106) = 19.65, p < .01$], with couples who scored higher on the CPQ demand-withdrawal subscale having a mean of 2.49 on MICS-G negative communication behavior and couples who scored lower on the CPQ demand-withdrawal subscale having a mean of 1.28 on MICS-G negative communication behavior.

CPQ mutual avoidance subscale.

When the RIS topics were collapsed from four content areas to two content areas, a significant main effect was found again for the topic content [$F(1, 105) = 6.46, p = .01$], with those couples discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness having a mean of 1.55 on MICS-G negative communication behavior and those discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner having a mean of 2.29 on MICS-G negative communication behavior. Additionally, the level of overall couple mutual avoidance had a main effect on the couple's negative communication behavior [$F(1, 105) = 7.79, p = .01$], with a mean of 2.32 for the couples who scored higher on the CPQ mutual avoidance subscale and a mean of 1.51 for the couples who scored lower on the mutual avoidance subscale. The interaction between topic content and level of mutual avoidance was not significant [$F(1, 105) = 2.30, p = .13$].

Years Together

Pearson correlations were computed between the number of years that couples had been together and their levels of MICS-G positive and negative communication behavior, to examine whether length of time together was associated with variation in communication behavior. No significant correlations were found between the couple's number of years together and their MICS-G positive communication behavior or their negative communication behavior. A significant positive correlation was found between number of years together and the couple's composite CPQ Mutual Avoidance subscale

scores ($r = .23, p = .02$), with more years together associated with a higher composite mutual avoidance score.

Average Level of Conflict

The RIS items ask respondents how much conflict exists within their couple relationship in each of 28 areas. A total RIS score (sum of an individual's responses to the 28 items) was computed for each member of each couple in order to produce an index of level of overall relationship conflict. Then the two partners' total RIS scores were averaged to create a couple composite relationship conflict index. Pearson correlations were computed between this relationship conflict index and MICS-G positive and negative communication scores. A significant negative correlation was found between the couple's RIS conflict score and the couple's MICS-G positive communication behavior ($r = -.24, p = .03$), but there was no association between relationship conflict and negative communication. Years together was not significantly correlated with the couple's overall level of conflict ($r = .15, p = .18$).

All significant findings from this study are listed in Tables 4.10 and 4.11 below.

Table 4.10

Significant Findings for Discussion Topic Content Affecting Communication Behavior

Communication Behavior	CPQ Subscale	Significance	Finding
Negative	Demand-Withdrawal	$F(3, 102) = 2.80, p = .04$	RIS Factor 1 (life values and priorities) (Mean = 2.36) was significantly higher than RIS Factor 3 (emotional connectivity and expressiveness) (Mean = 1.46) for their MICS-G negative communication behaviors.
Negative	Mutual Constructive Communication	$F(1, 104) = 4.93, p = .03$	In post-hoc analysis, the couples discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness had a mean of 1.56 on the MICS-G negative communication behavior score, and the couples discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner had a mean of 2.24 on the MICS-G negative communication behavior score.
Negative	Demand-Withdrawal	$F(1, 106) = 7.81, p = .01$	In post-hoc analysis, those couples discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness having a mean of 1.50 on the MICS-G negative communication behavior score, and those discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner having a mean of 2.27 on the MICS-G negative communication behavior score
Negative	Mutual Avoidance	$F(1, 105) = 6.46, p = .01$	In post-hoc analysis, the couples discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness had a mean of 1.55 on the MICS-G negative communication behavior score, and the couples discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner had a mean of 2.29 on the MICS-G negative communication behavior score.

Table 4.11

Significant Findings for Communication Pattern Affecting Communication Behavior

Communication Behavior	CPQ Subscale	Significance	Finding
Positive	Mutual Constructive Communication	$F(1, 100) = 5.76, p = .02$	The mean MICS-G positive behavior score was 6.70 for couples who reported higher mutual constructive communication and 5.54 for couples who reported lower mutual constructive communication
Negative	Mutual Avoidance	$F(1, 101) = 7.42, p = .01$	The negative communication behavior means were 2.32 for couples who reported higher mutual avoidance and 1.51 for couples who reported lower mutual avoidance
Positive	Mutual Constructive Communication	$F(1, 104) = 7.04, p = .01$	In post-hoc analysis, the couples who scored higher on the mutual constructive communication subscale had a mean of 6.62 for positive communication behavior the couples who scored lower on the mutual constructive communication subscale had a mean of 5.40 for positive communication behavior
Negative	Mutual Avoidance	$F(1, 105) = 7.79, p = .01$	In post-hoc analysis, the couples who scored higher on the mutual avoidance subscale had a mean of 2.32 for MICS-G negative communication behavior, and the couples who scored lower on the mutual avoidance subscale had a mean of 1.51 for MICS-G negative communication behavior.

Chapter 5: Discussion

One of the purposes of this study was to determine whether there are differences in couples' communication behaviors based on the themes of the conflict topics that they discuss. Previous research suggests that the couple's context-general behavior (i.e., general communication patterns) for discussing issues of conflict may play a greater role in a couple's communication behavior than the theme of any particular topic that they discuss. This study was designed to examine the relative contributions made by general communication patterns and type of content of the conflict topic in determining the couples' communication behavior during discussions of issues in their relationships. It was hypothesized that there would be differences in couples' communication behaviors when discussing a topic that is a source of mild to moderate conflict in their relationship based on the major themes of the topics they discuss, as well as based on couples' context-general behavior for discussing issues of conflict (i.e., their self-reports of their overall communication behavior patterns). Certain significant differences in couples' MICS-G negative communication behavior scores were found among the RIS content areas discussed, and other significant differences in MICS-G communication behavior were found for higher versus lower levels of general communication patterns as assessed by CPQ subscales. These findings are summarized below.

Summary of Results

Table 5.1 summarizes the hypotheses of this study and the findings for each of them. The results suggest that there are significant relationships between a couple's discussion content and the negative communication behavior that they exhibit during the discussion, but not their positive communication behavior. In addition, there were

significant relationships between couples' general communication patterns and their communication behaviors when discussing topics of mild to moderate conflict in their relationship. In the original analysis testing the study's hypotheses, it was found that the couple's context-general behavior more often plays a role in shaping conflict discussions than the topic that they are discussing. Table 5.1 lists each hypothesis and its results.

Table 5.1

Hypotheses and Results

Hypothesis	Results
There will be significant differences in the communication behaviors of the couples based on major themes of the topics that they discuss.	Only between RIS Factors 1 (Basic life values and priorities) and 3 (consideration for one's partner) in the demand-withdrawal subscale when examining negative communication behaviors in the original analyses. In post-hoc analysis when RIS Factors 1 and 4 were collapsed, as were RIS Factors 2 and 3, the topic themes had significant differences in negative communication behaviors within the mutual constructive communication, demand-withdrawal, and mutual avoidance subscales.
A couple's context-general behavior for discussing issues of conflict (i.e., their self-reports of their overall communication behavior patterns) will be associated with the context-specific behavior that they exhibit during a communication sample that they provide when discussing a topic that is a source of mild to moderate conflict in their relationship.	The mutual constructive communication subscale had a significant effect on positive communication behavior, and the mutual avoidance subscale had a significant effect on negative communication behavior. In post-hoc analysis when the content areas were condensed, mutual constructive communication and mutual avoidance again had significant effects on positive communication behavior and negative communication behavior, respectively.
The relative contributions that general communication patterns and type of content of the conflict topic make in determining the couple's communication behavior will be explored, particularly which of those makes more of a difference.	In the original analysis, the general communication patterns makes more of a difference than the type of content of the conflict topic in couple's positive and negative communication behavior. In post-hoc analysis, the type of content of the conflict topic makes more of a difference in couple's communication behavior, but only for negative communication behavior.

The post-hoc paired comparisons among the means for couple communication in the four topic content themes assessed with the RIS indicated that couples who discussed closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness engaged in less negative communication behavior than those discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner. The MICS-G negative communication behavior score average for those discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness was 1.54, while those discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner was 2.27. This finding suggests that discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner creates more negative communication behaviors than those discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness.

Analysis of Results in Context of Previous Research

The current research found no significant correlation between years together and average level of relationship conflict or couples' MICS-G positive and negative communication behavior. These findings do not support the research of Storaasli and Markman (1990), who found that couples' overall levels of conflict and top conflict rankings of certain topics changed over time as the couples entered new stages of development, from premarriage to marriage to early parenting, though this could in part be due to the older ages of those in the current sample, as well as the fact that the current sample came from a clinical population.

However, this study did find a significant positive correlation between number of

years together and couples' composite CPQ Mutual Avoidance subscale scores, indicating that couples who had been together longer reported a general pattern of engaging in more mutual avoidance when in conflict. Although this finding seems consistent with Storaasli and Markman's (1990) finding that the stage of a relationship may influence couple communication, the present study did not specifically test the association between length of relationship and specific forms of communication during conflict discussions (withdrawal was only one of three forms of negative communication in the MICS-G negative communication composite index). A next step in research in this area would be to test whether length of relationship predicts particular forms of positive and negative communication when couples are discussing conflict topics.

Sanford (2003) found that couples who experience more difficult conflict issues overall in their relationships exhibited more negative communication. In the present study, a negative correlation was found between the couple's average total RIS score (which assesses the overall level of conflict across 28 areas of the relationship) and the couple's positive communication behavior during their conflict discussion ($r = -.24, p = .03$). Although this is different from Sanford's finding linking greater overall conflict with more *negative* communication, the present finding does indicate negative consequences that overall relationship conflict can have for couple communication. The findings also provide evidence that are consistent with Sanford's (2003) finding that context-general behavior often plays a greater role in communication behavior than context-specific behavior, as the present findings indicated more consistent influences for couples' overall communication styles than for specific discussion topics.

The present study's findings are inconsistent with Cornelius and Alessi's (2007) results, which indicated that couples' dyadic sequences of communication behavior did *not* differ depending on the topic of discussion. In the 4 X 2 ANOVA for RIS content area and higher versus lower CPQ demand-withdrawal communication, this study found that RIS Factor 1 (basic life values and priorities) elicited more negative communication behavior than RIS Factor 3 (emotional connectivity and expressiveness). In post-hoc analysis when RIS Factors 1 and 4 were collapsed, as were RIS Factors 2 and 3, the topic themes had significant differences in negative communication behaviors within the ANOVAs that included mutual constructive communication, demand-withdrawal, and mutual avoidance subscales, with those discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness having lower means on the MICS-G's negative communication behavior score than those discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner. Thus, this study found clear evidence that the conflict topic that partners discuss does influence their degree of negative communication. In particular, the findings suggest that discussing conflicts regarding life values and how one expresses consideration for one's partner is more likely to elicit negative communication behavior than discussing issues regarding closeness between partners.

It is important to explore possible explanations for these results. First, it may be that discussing closeness and commitment in the relationship and emotional connectivity and expressiveness is less distressing for couples than discussing basic life values and priorities and consideration for one's partner. Basic life values, priorities, and consideration for one's partner are often more abstract topics, more difficult to put into

words, which may increase frustration, and could often be more about a partner standing their ground than coming together with their partner for a mutual understanding. It is often said that, concerning proper etiquette, discussing money, politics, or religion is not to be done in polite conversation. Perhaps these findings lend some credence to that point of view, as to discuss these topics is to examine and possibly challenge peoples' beliefs and what they hold important in the world. In comparison, discussing matters such as closeness, commitment in the relationship, emotional connectivity, and expressiveness is all about discussing how one person is relating to another, with both sides wishing to be understood by the other and possibly each partner being more patient with both themselves and their partner when the understanding doesn't immediately present itself. Generally, people seem to like relating to one another, feeling close to one another, and being understood.

Papp et al. (2009) found that, compared to issues unrelated to money, the marital conflicts about money were more problematic, pervasive, recurrent, and remained unresolved, despite more attempts by the couples at problem solving. Consistent with Papp et al. (2009), couples in the present study who discussed the RIS factors that addressed money (Factor 1 in the original analyses, and Factors 1 and 4 in the post-hoc analyses), engaged in more negative communication behavior. Because the present study did not separate money from other RIS Factor 1 topics involving values, a more direct comparison between this study and that of Papp et al. (2009) is not possible, but the findings are still consistent with Papp et al.'s (2009) study that certain topics elicit different communication behaviors from others. The present findings provide evidence of a significant relationship between a couple's specific discussion content and their

negative communication behaviors, allowing it to be reasonably said that both the topic being discussed and the couple's general communication pattern influence the couple's negative communication behavior, but only the couple's general communication pattern influences the couple's positive communication behavior.

Rogge and Bradbury (1999) tested whether it was necessary to observe couples' behavior in order to predict marital outcomes or whether merely asking the couple about their communication would provide sufficient information for accurate prediction. They found support for the use of self-report ratings as a reliable method of gathering information about the couple and how they communicate. Sanford (2010) reported that partners' responses to the Conflict Communication Inventory indicated that they had high levels of awareness of their own and each other's communication behaviors. He also reported that partners' perceptions of couple communication were highly correlated with third-party observations. There were high levels of association among an individual's self-reported communication behavior, their partner's report of their behavior, and how the couple actually behaved during an observed sample of their communication. Consistent with Rogge and Bradbury (1999) and Sanford (2010), the current study found correlations between a couple's positive communication behavior score derived from direct behavioral observation and their self-reported CPQ Mutual Constructive Communication subscale score ($r = .24, p = .01$) and correlations between a couple's negative communication behavior score and their CPQ Demand-Withdrawal subscale score ($r = .40, p < .01$) and their CPQ Mutual Avoidance subscale score ($r = .27, p < .01$). Thus, the present study demonstrated that self-reports of communication have validity as indices of how couples actually communicate. However, the magnitude of the

associations found between self-reports and observed behavior actually are modest, so it seems important for researchers and clinicians to assess communication both ways.

Since a significant positive correlation was found between number of years together and the couple's composite CPQ Mutual Avoidance subscale scores, a finding that seems counterintuitive, it is important to note that a common cognitive-behavioral therapeutic technique is the "time-out" (Gehart & Tuttle, 2003). Typically when a couple is having an increasingly distressing engagement, it may benefit the couple to agree to a "time-out" of sorts, in which one person in the couple requests a specific amount of time apart from their partner. This is done in order to decrease the negative interaction and give the partners time to think about alternatives to their negative views of each other and calm down emotionally, in the hope that the time apart will allow for their next encounter to be more positive. It could be that in the current study, the couples who have stayed together the longest do so in part by taking some unofficial "time-outs," because they may have learned from experience that discussing the problem will increase their negative thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. Consequently, they simply avoid the negative escalation, withdrawing from each other after the discussion in order to cool off and reflect on the discussion. Unfortunately, it is not possible to differentiate between such a constructive avoidance pattern and mutual avoidance that involves cutting off one's partner and refusing to consider his or her preferences. The CPQ mutual avoidance subscale was designed to assess the latter, more negative pattern, which previously has been found to be related to relationship distress. Therefore, it is unclear what the present finding of greater mutual avoidance in longer-term relationships may represent. Future

research should address this issue, examining different forms of avoidance between partners.

Another possible explanation for the positive correlation between years together and mutual avoidance is Christensen and Jacobson's (1998) acceptance concept within their Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT) model. Within IBCT, members of a couple learn to understand that there are certain things about their partner that are highly unlikely to change, and the members learn to develop acceptance of these differences through new emotions and perspectives. It could be that the more time couples are together, the more they learn to accept that which they cannot change and to avoid certain topics of conflict that seem to have no foreseeable resolution.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study involves the secondary analysis of preexisting data. Some of the couples did not attempt to solve the source of conflict they were discussing, as they had been instructed to do, but rather just listed their grievances about the situation, or quite often, their grievances about the other person, so this process might also have further influenced the results. However, this finding might reflect their typical communication pattern, in which reiteration of problems serves as a form of mutual avoidance of negotiation. Because the study was restricted to the MICS-G coding categories that were used in the original data collection, it was not possible to explore other communication behaviors that also may be problematic.

In addition, as this study was conducted with a limited sample size (110 couples), it may be that with a larger sample size there would have been more couples who discussed each topic area, providing greater statistical power for detecting group

differences. This possibility was supported within the current study, as the post-hoc analysis yielded more significant results when the four RIS factors were collapsed into two factors, allowing more power for the analysis. Since the investigating therapists only asked the couples to talk about an issue of mild to moderate conflict in their relationship, it also could be that couples arguing about an issue of profound conflict in their relationship could exhibit different behaviors than those observed in this study. Because the sample was from a clinical population of couples seeking therapy, the study was also unable to assess if couples not seeking therapy behave differently when discussing conflict issues than those seeking therapy, or if discussing non-conflict issues may elicit more positive communication behaviors.

Additionally, there were some limitations in how the MICS-G codes were used. Because the negative MICS-G behaviors include withdrawal as well as conflict, which might have differed across topic themes, and because the CPQ has these as separate subscales, it is reasonable to question whether or not the positive and negative composites of coded behaviors should have been used. A study by Caughlin and Huston (2002) using factor analysis suggested that demand–withdraw communication is distinct from global behavioral negativity. Caughlin and Huston (2002) concluded that demand/withdraw behavior and negativity are empirically separable, so for the purposes of this research, the MICS-G positive and negative composite scores were used as two dependent variables. It is recommended that, in future research, the individual negative behaviors be analyzed separately.

Though RIS factor loadings did seem to cluster to reflect underlying macro-level themes more than the micro-themes, the factor analysis of the RIS had its limitations.

This study marked the first attempt at factor analyzing the RIS, and if this analysis was to be cross-validated, it could be that some items on each factor might not load together.

Although at face value some of the items on each factor may seem unrelated, Epstein and Baucom's (2002) discussion of macro-themes suggests that seemingly tangentially related items on a factor (for example, Factor 4's items regarding relationship with family of origin and personal grooming) may actually be related vis-à-vis the meaning that couples attach to each issue. The factor analysis allowed the identification of possible underlying meanings of discussion topics more than methods in previous studies did.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could be conducted both on clinical and non-clinical samples. Additionally, as the present data were gathered at a low-fee clinic, it may well be that the findings would be different if there was more socioeconomic heterogeneity within the sample, as the average fee for an hour of therapy at the clinic at the time of this research was \$5, whereas in private practice, an hour of therapy would cost a couple much more. Also, other general communication patterns beyond mutual constructive communication, demand-withdrawal, and mutual avoidance could be assessed in future studies, as could different combinations of conflict issues beyond the four composites that were used in the current research. As the topics used in the sample were sources of mild to moderate disagreement within the couples, and as these conversations were found to produce negative communication behavior, it would be interesting to see how couples behave differently while discussing issues on which they tend to agree, as those seem likely to produce more positive communication behaviors.

Application of Findings to Cognitive Behavioral Theory

The present findings contribute to cognitive-behavioral theory in several ways. First, because the couples' general behavior patterns (as self-reported on the CPQ subscales) often matched the couples' specific behaviors (negative and positive scores on the MICS-G) when discussing a given area of conflict, the present findings gave further support to the theory that a couple's learned, ingrained behavioral patterns are elicited in relevant situations. Second, because significant differences in negative behavior were found among couples discussing different topics of conflict, and as the major categories of topics that were identified appear to differ in their macro-level meanings, the present findings reinforced the theory that cognitions, or the couple's created meaning of the situation, affect their behavior.

Implications for Research

As described above, future research should use more heterogeneous samples and more varied measures of general communication patterns and specific forms of observed communication behavior. In addition, further research should be conducted on why mutual avoidance behavior is positively correlated with relationship longevity. When most clinicians and researchers would agree that discussing problems is generally a good step in solving the problem, and good problem-solving behavior would likely lead to longer relationships, it certainly seems counter intuitive that couples who stay together longer have more behaviors that involve avoiding discussing the problem, withdrawing from each other after the discussion, and not giving in to the other partner after the discussion.

Implications for Clinical Practice

As the results suggest that negative communication behavior is associated with the conflict topic, clinicians could focus their attention more on reinforcing the positive communication behaviors instead of extinguishing the negative communication behaviors while couples discuss issues of conflict in their relationship. Clinicians could also point out to couples when they are using their usual negative communication patterns (such as demand-withdrawal behavior and mutual avoidance behavior), reminding them that this is how they normally behave when discussing most topics of conflict, and that awareness can foster patience and understanding for members within the couple. Furthermore, as we increase knowledge of why particular topics elicit more negative communication, interventions can focus more on the meanings that the topics have for members of distressed couples.

Conclusions

Much of the prior literature on couple conflict has suggested that it is not what a conflict is about or how much conflict exists between two people, but rather how the parties interact regarding their conflicting preferences that determines whether the conflict has negative effects. The current study examined the extent to which the type of conflict topic that a couple discusses contributes to communication behavior, whether couples' general communication patterns are associated with their communication behavior in a specific situation in which they are discussing a conflict-related topic, and the relative contributions of each. The findings indicate several significant effects for both content area and general communication style on communication behavior. Mutual avoidance was found to have a significant effect on negative communication behaviors,

as did mutual constructive communication on positive communication behaviors. Post-hoc analyses indicated that couples discussing basic life values, priorities, and consideration for one's partner exhibited more negative communication behavior than those discussing closeness, commitment in the relationship, emotional connectivity, and expressiveness. Further research is recommended in the area of how conflict topic affects communication behavior.

Appendix A: Relationship Issues Survey

RIS

There are a variety of areas in a couple's relationship that can become sources of disagreement and conflict. Please indicate how much each of the areas is **presently** a source of disagreement and conflict in your relationship with your partner. Select the number on the scale which indicates how much the area is an issue in your relationship.

0 = Not at all a source of disagreement or conflict

1 = Slightly a source of disagreement or conflict

2 = Moderately a source of disagreement or conflict

3 = Very much a source of disagreement or conflict

- _____ 1. Relationships with friends
- _____ 2. Career and job issues
- _____ 3. Religion or personal philosophy of life
- _____ 4. Finances (income, how money is spent, etc.)
- _____ 5. Goals and things believed important in life
- _____ 6. Relationship with family of origin (parents, siblings)
- _____ 7. Sexual relationship
- _____ 8. Child rearing/parenting approaches
- _____ 9. Personal habits
- _____ 10. Amount of commitment to the relationship
- _____ 11. Understanding of each other's stresses or problems
- _____ 12. Daily life schedules and routines
- _____ 13. Personal manners
- _____ 14. How negative thoughts and emotions are communicated
- _____ 15. How positive thoughts and emotions are communicated
- _____ 16. Leisure activities and interests
- _____ 17. Household tasks and management
- _____ 18. Amount of time spent together
- _____ 19. Affairs
- _____ 20. Privacy
- _____ 21. Honesty
- _____ 22. Expressions of caring and affection
- _____ 23. Trustworthiness
- _____ 24. Alcohol and drugs
- _____ 25. Taking care of possessions
- _____ 26. Personal standard for neatness
- _____ 27. How decisions are made
- _____ 28. Personal grooming

Appendix B: Communication Pattern Questionnaire

[Researcher's note: Subscales are added at end of items, with MA indicating a Mutual Avoidance subscale item, MCC indicating a Mutual Constructive Communication subscale item, and DW indicating a Demand-Withdrawal subscale item]

CPQ

Directions: We are interested in how you and your partner typically deal with problems in your relationship.

Please rate each item on a scale of 1 (=very unlikely) to 9 (=very likely).

A. WHEN SOME PROBLEM IN THE RELATIONSHIP ARISES:

		Very <u>Unlikely</u>							Very <u>Likely</u>
1. Both members avoid discussing the problem. (MA)									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 9
2. Both members try to discuss the problem. (MCC)									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 9
3. Man tries to start a discussion while Woman tries to avoid a discussion. (DW)									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 9
Woman tries to start a discussion while Man tries to avoid a discussion. (DW)									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 9

B. DURING A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM:

		Very <u>Unlikely</u>							Very <u>Likely</u>
1. Both members blame, accuse, and criticize each other.									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 9
2. Both members express their feelings to each other. (MCC)									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 9
3. Both members threaten each other with negative consequences.									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 9
4. Both members suggest possible solutions and compromises. (MCC)									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 9
5. Man nags and demands while Woman withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further. (DW)									

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Woman nags and demands while Man withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further.									
6. Man criticizes while Woman defends herself.									
Woman criticizes while Man defends himself.									
7. Man pressures Woman to take some action or stop some action, while Woman resists.									
Woman pressures Man to take some action or stop some action, while Man resists.									
8. Man expresses feelings while Woman offers reasons and solutions.									
Woman expresses feelings while Man offers reasons and solutions.									
9. Man threatens negative consequences and Woman gives in or backs down.									
Woman threatens negative consequences and Man gives in or backs down.									
10. Man calls Woman names, swears at her, or attacks her character.									
Woman calls Man names, swears at him, or attacks his character.									
11. Man pushes, shoves, slaps, hits, or kicks Woman.									
Woman pushes, shoves, slaps, hits, or kicks Man.									

C. AFTER A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM

	Very Unlikely	Very Likely
1. Both feel each other has understood his/her position (MCC)		

	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
2. Both withdraw from each other after the discussion. (MA)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
3. Both feel that the problem has been solved. (MCC)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
4. Neither partner is giving to the other after the discussion. (MA)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
5. After the discussion, both try to be especially nice to each other.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
6. Man feels guilty for what he said or did while Woman feels hurt.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
----- Woman feels guilty for what she said or did while Man feels hurt.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
7. Man tries to be especially nice, acts as if things are back to normal, while Woman acts distant.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
----- Woman tries to be especially nice, acts as if things are back to normal, while Man acts distant.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
Man pressures Woman to apologize or promise to do better, while Woman resists.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
----- Woman pressures Man to apologize or promise to do better, while Man resists.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
9. Man seeks support from others (parent, friend, children)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
----- Woman seeks support from others (parent, friend, children)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Appendix C: Marital Interaction Coding System – Global

LOW 0 1 2 3 4 5 HIGH

CONFLICT

1. Complain
2. Criticize
3. Negative Mindreading
4. Put Downs/Insults
5. Negative Command
6. Hostility
7. Sarcasm
8. Angry/Bitter Voice

M ₁	F ₁	M ₂	F ₂	M ₃	F ₃	M ₄	F ₄	M ₅	F ₅

CATEGORY RATING									
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5

PROBLEM SOLVING

1. Problem Description
2. Proposing Solution
3. Compromise
4. Reasonableness

M ₁	F ₁	M ₂	F ₂	M ₃	F ₃	M ₄	F ₄	M ₅	F ₅

CATEGORY RATING									
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5

VALIDATION

1. Agreement
2. Approval
3. Accept Responsibility
4. Assent
5. Receptivity
6. Encouragement

M ₁	F ₁	M ₂	F ₂	M ₃	F ₃	M ₄	F ₄	M ₅	F ₅

CATEGORY RATING									
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5

INVALIDTION

1. Disagreement
2. Denial of Responsibility
3. Changing the Subject
4. Consistent Interruption
5. Turn-Off Behavior
6. Domineering Behaviors

M ₁	F ₁	M ₂	F ₂	M ₃	F ₃	M ₄	F ₄	M ₅	F ₅

CATEGORY RATING									
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5

FACILITATION

1. Positive Mindreading
2. Paraphrasing
3. Humor
4. Positive Physical Contact
5. Smile/Laugh
6. Open Posture

M ₁	F ₁	M ₂	F ₂	M ₃	F ₃	M ₄	F ₄	M ₅	F ₅

CATEGORY RATING									
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5

WITHDRAWAL

1. Negation
2. No Response
3. Turn Away from Partner
4. Increasing Distance
5. Erects Barriers
6. Noncontributive

M ₁	F ₁	M ₂	F ₂	M ₃	F ₃	M ₄	F ₄	M ₅	F ₅

CATEGORY RATING									
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5

Appendix D: MICS-G Code Consensus Sheet

CODER 1:

CODER 2:

	M ₁	F ₁	M ₂	F ₂	M ₃	F ₃	M ₄	F ₄	M ₅	F ₅	Avg. M	Avg.F
Conflict Coder 1												
Conflict Coder 2												
CONFLICT CONSENSUS												
Problem Solving Coder 1												
Problem Solving Coder 2												
PROBLEM SOLVING CONSENSUS												
Validation Coder 1												
Validation Coder 2												
VALIDATION CONSENSUS												
Invalidation Coder 1												
Invalidation Coder 2												
INVALIDATION CONSENSUS												
Facilitation Coder 1												
Facilitation Coder 2												
FACILITATION CONSENSUS												
Withdrawal Coder 1												
Withdrawal Coder 2												
WITHDRAWAL CONSENSUS												

Appendix E: Institutional Review Board Protocol Approval



UNIVERSITY OF
MARYLAND
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

To: Principal Investigator, Dr. Norman Epstein, Family Science
Student, Adam G. Lowe, Family Science

From: James M. Hagberg
IRB Co-Chair
University of Maryland College Park

Re: IRB Protocol: 11-0475 - The Contributions of General
Communication Styles and Specific Conflict Topics to Couples'
Communication Behaviors

Approval Date: August 15, 2011

Expiration Date: August 15, 2012

Application: Initial

Review Path: Exempt

The University of Maryland, College Park Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office approved your Initial IRB Application. This transaction was approved in accordance with the University's IRB policies and procedures and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. Please reference the above-cited IRB Protocol number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

Recruitment/Consent: For research requiring written informed consent, the IRB-approved and stamped informed consent document will be sent via mail. The IRB approval expiration date has been stamped on the informed consent document. Please note that research participants must sign a stamped version of the informed consent form and receive a copy.

Continuing Review: If you intend to continue to collect data from human subjects or to analyze private, identifiable data collected from human subjects, beyond the expiration date of this protocol, you must submit a Renewal Application to the IRB Office 45 days prior to the expiration date. If IRB Approval of your protocol expires, all human subject research activities including enrollment of new subjects, data collection and analysis of

identifiable, private information must cease until the Renewal Application is approved. If work on the human subject portion of your project is complete and you wish to close the protocol, please submit a Closure Report to irb@umd.edu.

Modifications: Any changes to the approved protocol must be approved by the IRB before the change is implemented, except when a change is necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the subjects. If you would like to modify an approved protocol, please submit an Addendum request to the IRB Office.

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks: You must promptly report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others to the IRB Manager at 301-405-0678 or jsmith@umresearch.umd.edu

Additional Information: Please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 if you have any IRB-related questions or concerns. Email: @irb@umd.edu

The UMCP IRB is organized and operated according to guidelines of the United States Office for Human Research Protections and the United States Code of Federal Regulations and operates under Federal Wide Assurance No. FWA00005856.

1204 Marie Mount Hall
College Park, MD 20742-5125
TEL 301.405.4212
FAX 301.314.1475
irb@umd.edu
<http://www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB>

Appendix F: Glossary of Terms

behavior coding - Trained coders rate on a Likert scale of 0-5 the degrees to which each member of a couple exhibits each of the following six forms of communication: problem solving, facilitation, validation, invalidation, conflict, and withdrawal.

communication behavior – the behaviors that are directly observable by both behavior coders and members of the couple while members of the couple are communicating with each other.

conflict - the existence of differences between two partners' preferences, desires, goals, or needs, which the two individuals attempt to resolve through behavioral interactions

content – in our study, the different areas of conflict in a couple relationship

context-specific behavior – how a couple or member of the couple acts during an argument about a specific topic. The behavior may be different depending on the topic the couple is discussing.

context-general behavior (general communication patterns) – how a couple or member of the couple acts during most arguments about any topic. This behavior is generally the same regardless of the topic the couple is discussing.

demand-withdraw behavior – one partner pursues the other in an attempt to influence him or her and the other partner withdraws from interaction

distal topic difficulty - difficult issues overall - A distal influence occurs when a global variable pertaining to the couple's relationship as a whole has a generalized influence on communication behavior across several contexts

or situations .

negative cascades – (Gottman, 1994) - negative patterns of communication, such as

criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling or withdrawal

proximal topic difficulty - the difficulty level of specific topics that couples discussed in

particular interactions. A proximal influence occurs when some aspect of a

couple's current, specific situation has an immediate and direct influence

on their communication behavior in a specific conversation.

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