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The Effectiveness of Communication Skills Training With Married Couples: Does the Issue Discussed Matter?

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This study experimentally examines the speaker-listener technique on marital satisfaction and communication behaviors when couples (N = 30) were instructed to either discuss an issue within or outside the marriage on marital satisfaction and communication behaviors. This study was based the Gottman et al. hypothesis that the speaker-listener technique would lead to improved marital satisfaction when the couple is discussing a third-party issue, but discussing an issue about each other would weaken the marital relationship. A series of analyses of covariance were conducted on these data, and no differences were found between the two groups on their self-reported marital satisfaction or communication skills behaviors, which were not support the Gottman et al. hypothesis. Possible interpretations of these data and areas for further investigation are suggested.

Keywords: *marital communication; communication skills training; speaker-listener technique; quantitative research*

With the proliferation of research and methodologies in marital therapies, some structured marital therapies, and particularly communication skills training in the context of such interventions, have come under fire. Examination of efficacy and effectiveness research on marital programs suggests that these interventions are often unsuccessful in altering marital satisfaction in clinically significant ways. A comprehensive meta-analysis of published and unpublished couples therapy outcome studies concluded that

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approximately one third of marital treatment couples showed no improvement, and even among those couples who did improve, many still remained within the distressed range on marital satisfaction scales (Shadish et al., 1993). Jacobson and Addis (1993) noted that up to 50% of couples who participated in marital therapies remained in the distressed range, and others have questioned the utility of marital therapies in promoting marital stability and satisfaction beyond a few months (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Dauito, & Stickle, 1998; Christensen & Heavey, 1999). Therefore, further evaluation of the core components of marital programs may help determine factors related to its limited efficacy.

Communication skills training is paramount to most treatment protocols used in both primary and secondary prevention of marital distress and dissolution. In a review of the literature on marital therapies, Bray and Jouriles (1995) noted that most marital programs promote active listening and validation of each spouses' position, which is believed to encourage less defensive discussions. However, despite its wide use and general acceptance as a technique, studies have rarely examined communication skills training in isolation, and some, notably Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998), contend that this technique in particular may be contributing to the limited effectiveness of marital interventions. Recent researchers have also noted an urgent need for dismantling research that examines the individual treatment components of marital programs rather than evaluations of treatment protocols in their entirety (Christensen & Baucom, 2005). Consistent with this recommendation, this study experimentally examined the use of the speaker-listener technique, foundational to many marital therapy and enrichment programs, under differing conditions defined by the nature of the emotional issue under discussion.

Most couple communication skills programs now employ some variation on the speaker-listener technique (e.g.,

Gottman, Notarius, Gonso, & Markman, 1976; Guerney, 1977; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1972). For example, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman et al., 1994) provides a particularly succinct and structured version of the speaker-listener technique, and most behavioral marital therapy programs use some form of this communication training module. The speaker-listener technique involves teaching couples a set of procedures and skills with which to approach conflict discussions. It is a structured communication method in which partners alternate between speaker and listener, wherein the speaker articulates his or her thoughts assertively and using "I statements," and the listener paraphrases such statements to encourage accurate listening. The speaker-listener technique emphasizes active listening rather than problem solving; the goal is to facilitate mutual understanding of the issue prior to making efforts to solve the point of disagreement, so that each partner feels heard and respected in the discussion.

Researchers have examined the efficacy of the speaker-listener technique within the context of treatment packages designed to prevent marital distress and divorce. In a classic study on this topic, Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, and Clements (1993) examined the longitudinal effectiveness of PREP in preventing marital dissatisfaction and divorce. A key component of this treatment package is the use of the speaker-listener technique. Four- and 5-year follow-up data evaluating the long-term effects of PREP on marital distress suggested that at 4 years follow-up, couples who volunteered to participate in the program showed comparably more positive affect, increased communication and problem-solving behavior, and more support and validation than did control group couples. Additionally, the intervention couples were less likely to dissolve their relationships than the control couples or those couples who declined to participate in PREP. A more recent study examined the effect of a weekend version of PREP specifically on communication skills as predictive of later marital outcomes (Schilling, Baucom, Burnett, Allen, & Ragland, 2003). This study was designed to determine if communication skills training, a presumed "active ingredient" in the success of PREP, resulted in the expected communication skill acquisition during the PREP program and whether this was predictive of future marital satisfaction. This study revealed that couples participating in the PREP weekend program altered their communication behavior in the expected directions (i.e., increased positive communication, decreased negative communication), although these skills as predictive of later distress were less clear and varied across gender. Whereas these studies suggest that PREP may improve marital satisfaction, communication behaviors, and possibly prevent future marital dissolution and distress, it is important to note that this research demonstrated the efficacy of the PREP program as a whole, and as such, the efficacy of the speaker-listener technique cannot be unequivocally demonstrated by examining the effectiveness of the entire PREP treatment package.

One study that was targeted at isolating the effects of communication skills training, although not explicitly the speaker-listener technique, was conducted by Hahlweg, Schindler, Revenstorf, and Brengelmann (1984). This study directly compared the efficacy of active listening skills training with a behavioral treatment protocol with distressed individuals. Couples were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: active listening group therapy, active listening conjoint treatment, behavioral group therapy, or behavioral conjoint treatment. The active listening groups were trained in a communication skills training protocol, and the behavioral treatment group received a combination of behavior exchange and problem-solving skills training. Results indicated that in the short term, couples in the active listening group showed decreases in negative interaction but no increases in positive interaction. In contrast, couples in the behavioral intervention group showed both decreases in negativity and increases in positive interactions. Additionally, in the long term, couples in the active listening condition returned to pretreatment levels of quarreling behavior, and their communication skills were not maintained, as compared to improved levels in both of these areas for the individuals in the behavioral intervention. Finally, the results revealed that 1 year after the intervention, several couples in the active listening group scored within the "unhappy" range for marital quality, whereas the typical couple in the behavioral intervention groups scored within the "happy" range on the same measure (Hahlweg et al., 1984). Thus, this study suggests that active listening skills training, when examined in isolation, may not be effective in helping couples communicate better and minimizing marital distress.

In examining the above research regarding the efficacy of marital therapy and specifically the speaker-listener technique that is foundational for most of these interventions, the evidence is only partially convincing, particularly for secondary prevention programs. A leading researcher in the field of marital therapy, John Gottman, contends that the speaker-listener technique may actually be contributing to the deleterious outcomes of those who participate in marital therapy interventions. The problem arises, he speculated, because the field of marital therapy has extended methods from general psychotherapy, like the speaker-listener technique, into marital therapy. The speaker-listener model grew out of Rogerian individual psychotherapy in which the therapist is instructed to provide unconditional positive regard and empathy. This was then extended to the arena of marital therapy by Guerney (1977), Gottman et al. (1976), and Miller et al. (1972). In the Rogerian tradition of client-centered therapy, the client is usually complaining about a third person, and the therapist is empathizing as the client complains about that third party. However, in the context of marital therapy, the spouse, even though the target of these complaints, is expected to empathize while the partner complains about him or her (Gottman, 1999). As Gottman et al. (1998) pointed out, this speaker-listener model may be expecting a form of "emotional gymnastics" for people who are listening to their

partner complain about themselves. Particularly with distressed couples, the speaker-listener model, although it may be effective in individual psychotherapy, may not be an appropriate tool to be teaching couples and may even be a contributing factor to the limited efficacy of some marital therapy intervention programs.

Gottman (1999) suggested that instead of building marital therapy techniques based on data about how happily married couples naturally behave, we instead are applying techniques in marital therapy based on what appears to be effective only in individual psychotherapy. Gottman et al. (1998) examined 130 newlywed couples to determine what was predictive of divorce and how maritally satisfied and unsatisfied couples differed along various dimensions. With regard to the speaker-listener technique, he found that even couples in stable, happy marriages usually did not naturally use such communication tactics. Although teaching couples "how to communicate better" is probably important in terms of improving or maintaining marital satisfaction, it may be that the speaker-listener model is not the best approach.

Gottman et al. (1998), however, hypothesized that the speaker-listener skills training technique may be effective and lead to improved levels of marital satisfaction when the couple is complaining about a third party, whereas complaining about each other may become divisive and weaken the marital relationship. Given the ambiguity in the research on the efficacy of the speaker-listener model in particular and marital therapy in general, research is needed to determine if, and under what conditions, speaker-listener skills training is effective for married couples.

In light of the Gottman et al. (1998) hypothesis, the purpose of the present study was to experimentally examine the effects of the speaker-listener technique when couples were instructed to either (a) discuss an issue within the marriage or (b) discuss an issue outside the marriage on couples' levels of marital satisfaction and communication behaviors. Because a true experimental comparison of these two topic conditions using the speaker-listener technique has yet to be conducted, this study yielded potentially important information about the impact of this specific training technique and topics in the context of marital interventions. We hypothesized that when discussing an issue within the marriage, couples would evidence increased levels of marital distress and decreased communication immediately and at follow-up sessions, whereas couples discussing a topic outside of the relationship would not evidence increased distress or impaired communication.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty married couples were recruited for this study from a large, public, Midwestern university community. Participants qualified for the study if they were currently married and living with their spouse and both partners were willing to engage in the intervention and the follow-up sessions.

Qualifying couples were randomly assigned to either Group A or Group B. Couples assigned to Group A discussed an emotionally charged issue within their marriage and couples assigned to Group B discussed an emotionally charged issue outside their marriage.

Materials

Materials used in this study included the communication training portion of the manual for the PREP intervention (Markman et al., 1994) and a script developed from this manual for the purpose of this study, which therapists used to implement the communication skills training. The script specified the exact procedures for training in the technique to ensure standardization of implementation of training across different therapists. The dependent variables in this study were marital satisfaction and communication skills, which were assessed with a series of self-report measures.

The Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) was used to assess the couples' level of marital satisfaction. The MAT is a measure of overall marital satisfaction commonly used in marital research (Gottman, 1999). The reliability and validity of the MAT has been well documented (Locke & Wallace, 1959), and split-half reliability analyses of this measure generally yield .90 or better coefficients (Gottman, 1999; Locke & Wallace, 1959). Additionally, scores on this instrument correlate with clinical judgments of marital discord and dissatisfaction (Crowther, 1985; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977).

Five short self-report measures (Gottman, 1999) were used to assess several component communication skills. Specifically, the questionnaires assessed compromise, repair attempts, flooding, gridlock, and the four horsemen. These five measures were chosen because they were of theoretical and clinical interest to the authors, incorporated both adaptive and maladaptive communication behaviors, and included those aspects of couple communication considered by many to be most toxic, including withdrawal and contempt (Gottman, 1999; Gottman et al., 1998; Johnson, 2003). Each inventory used a true-false format in which the partners indicated whether various behaviors were characteristic of their marital interactions. Compromise (20 items) assessed the tendency for partners to concede their position and take the perspective of the other partner. Repair attempts (20 items) assesses the tendency of partners to minimize negative statements, use humor, and take breaks during marital conflict episodes. Gridlock (20 items) measured unreasonable demands, unwillingness to compromise, and withdrawing, either physically or emotionally, from the conversation. Flooding (15 items) measured a set of negative communication behaviors, including feeling overwhelmed, both emotionally and physiologically, which results in an inability to process information and/or actively participate in problem-solving discussions. The Four Horsemen questionnaire (30 items) assessed an iterative, cascading sequence of responses in which Partner A expresses criticism, Partner B responds with defensiveness, Partner A reacts to defensive-

ness with contempt, sarcasm, and/or hostility, with Partner B eventually withdrawing from, or stonewalling, the conversation. This cascading negative sequence, which occurs as a repetitive, interlocking pattern, is believed to signify a critical end-stage process of marital dissolution, representing a final common causal pathway to divorce (cf., Gottman, 1994). Gottman (1994) reports that these scales have been found to be reliable measures in his laboratory (Gottman, personal communication, May 6, 2000), and research by the current authors suggest test-retest reliability as well (Cornelius & Alessi, 2006). For each measure, the individual items on each scale were summed to generate a total score for each of the five behavior constructs. High scores on each measure indicate higher degrees of that particular communication tactic area, and low scores characterize lesser degrees of that communication tactic.

Procedure

Initial session. All sessions were conducted by advanced doctoral students in clinical psychology, all of whom had been trained in the speaker-listener technique. On arriving for the initial session, participants signed the consent document and completed a packet of questionnaires, including a demographic questionnaire, the MAT, and the five communication tactics measures. Couples were instructed to complete the measures based on their own feelings and perceptions and not to discuss their answers with their partner. Additionally, each partner was asked to generate a list of current conflicts that related to issues within the marriage or issues outside the marriage, depending on their experimental assignment. Examples of possible topics were provided to the participants, including finances, sex, annoyances of your partner (within the marriage), or difficulties with a mutual friend, work, or family members (outside of the marriage). Partners were also asked to rate the severity or emotional tension surrounding that issue on a scale from 1 to 10. Finally, the couple chose one of the issues identified on the questionnaire that was rated as a 6 or higher in terms of emotional tension and engaged in one 10-min conversation about that issue. The average delay between the initial session and the first training session was 11 days ($SD = 8.30$), which was scheduled based on availability of the couple and the therapist.

Training sessions. To ensure mastery of the technique, two sessions were conducted to train couples in the speaker-listener technique. The average delay between the two training sessions was 10 days ($SD = 8.36$). During the training sessions and prior to implementing the speaker-listener training, both partners completed the self-report measures. After completing the measures, couples were trained in the speaker-listener technique, using the script developed from the PREP communication manual. Throughout the training, the training script was tailored to reflect the couples' experimental assignment. Training in the technique included an explanation of the basic

rationale for the communication skills training, instruction in the specific procedures of the technique, and two practice sessions with a neutral topic. During the neutral topic practices, the therapist gave them specific constructive feedback regarding whether they were following the appropriate ground rules. Following training and practice, the couples were instructed to discuss an issue from their list of issues identified in the initial session. Different instructions were read to the couples, depending on their experimental assignment to either Group A or Group B. Couples assigned to Group A were instructed to use the method to discuss a current problem within their marriage rated as a 6 or higher in emotional tension from their list of issues. Couples assigned to Group B were instructed to use the speaker-listener technique to discuss a current problem outside their marriage rated as a 6 or higher in emotional tension. When couples signaled that they were finished discussing the issue, they completed the same questionnaires that had been administered at the beginning of the session.

Follow-Up Sessions

Brief follow-up sessions were conducted at 3 and 6 months following the training to determine durability of skill acquisition and determine if any changes in communication behavior were maintained during a short period of time. During these sessions, couples completed the self-report measures and engaged in a discussion using the speaker-listener technique. No training in the technique was provided at the follow-up sessions.

RESULTS

Basic demographic and outcome measure data are shown in Table 1. The average length of marriage for the 30 couples was 18.25 years ($SD = 14.08$). Participants ranged in age from 23 to 71, with a mean of 44.88 ($SD = 13.63$). The average annual family income level for participants was between \$60,000 and \$70,000, and the majority of participants were Caucasian ($n = 58, 97%$). Most of the participants in the study reported that this was their first marriage ($n = 50; 83.3%$), although the range was from first to more than four marital relationships. The modal number of children reported by this sample was 2, with a range of 0 to 4. The majority of participants reported some religious affiliation, with the most common self-reported affiliation being Catholic ($n = 18; 30%$). Although the reliability data for the measures are reported in a separate article (Cornelius & Alessi, 2006), test-retest reliability coefficients for all communication scales ranged from .705 to .904, reaching statistical significance at the $\alpha = .01$ level and at the $\alpha = .05$ level after applying the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests. The MAT reliability coefficient obtained with this sample ($r = .933$) is comparable to that found in previous literature (cf., Gottman, 1999).

TABLE 1
Demographic Variables, Marital Satisfaction, and Communication Skills Scores
for the Two Groups at Session 1

Variable	Within (<i>n</i> = 30)			Outside (<i>n</i> = 30)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Years married	19.34	15.99	2.83 to 48.00	17.29	12.12	1.58 to 42.0
Age						
Husbands	45.87	14.91	24 to 71	45.33	12.41	23 to 67
Wives	45.07	14.29	24 to 69	43.27	12.92	23 to 64
Family income	\$60,000 to 70,000	19,900	\$30,000 to 90,000+	\$60,000 to \$70,000	20,000	\$20,000 to \$90,000+
Marital Adjustment Test						
Husbands	97.20	27.28	51 to 145	108.53	30.16	42 to 144
Wives	97.73	32.11	28 to 145	101.80	33.5	31 to 144
Repair attempts						
Husbands	12.80	4.90	6 to 20	13.27	4.88	4 to 20
Wives	12.40	4.69	3 to 19	11.63	4.84	5 to 20
Compromise						
Husbands	13.40	4.08	4 to 20	13.43	2.47	9 to 19
Wives	14.53	3.20	9 to 19	12.67	3.31	4.5 to 19
Gridlock						
Husbands	6.90	4.86	0 to 17	7.37	6.27	0 to 18
Wives	7.37	5.06	0 to 19	7.43	5.98	0 to 18
Flooding						
Husbands	6.10	3.59	0 to 12	6.10	4.68	0 to 13
Wives	7.80	4.13	1 to 14	6.27	4.29	0 to 14
Four horsemen						
Husbands	13.17	7.00	1 to 24	11.40	8.18	0 to 26
Wives	10.73	7.80	1 to 27	12.73	8.12	0 to 29

NOTE: *n* = 30 for each group denotes individuals, not couples.

Experimental Equivalence Prior to the Intervention

To determine whether the two experimental groups were equivalent prior to the intervention, a series of *t* tests were conducted on the dependent measures and other demographic variables that might be related to the outcome measures. No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups on initial MAT scores, any of the communication measures, length of marriage, family income, or age.

Group Comparisons

A few analytic considerations are worth noting at this time. The use of partial correlations and ANCOVA analyses is widely accepted in the marital research as an appropriate and powerful means of examining changes over time within couples (Gill, Christensen, & Fincham, 1999; Gottman & Krokoff, 1990; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Woody & Constanzo, 1990). Some other researchers in the field of marital interventions have examined difference scores to assess changes between Time 1 and Time 2 (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). However, this method has been criticized in that such difference scores could reflect regression toward the mean, resulting in misleading results (Caughlin, 2002; Woody & Constanzo, 1990). In this study, ANCOVA analy-

ses with initial marital satisfaction as the covariate were conducted to remedy this potential problem. Because baseline levels of marital satisfaction are conceptually and empirically related to outcomes of marital interventions, statistically controlling for this should result in increased power to detect differences between groups. Additionally, analyses were conducted separately for each gender, because research has shown that changes in wives' behavior are not necessarily parallel to changes in the husbands' (Jacobson, 1983). Most researchers studying differences in gender across couples examine men and women separately, despite the resulting loss in statistical power (Barnett, Brennan, Raudenbush, & Marshall, 1993; Caughlin, 2002).

Therefore, a series of separate ANCOVA analyses with initial marital satisfaction as the covariate and each of the self-report communication measures at session 3 as the outcome variable were conducted on these data. Although the authors recognize that conducting a series of analyses on the same data set significantly increases the probability of committing a Type 1 error above the stated alpha level, separate analyses were deemed to be more clinically informative. Although a composite communication score encompassing all aspects of communication behavior measured could have been calculated, this aggregate score would not have the same clinical utility as testing each communication construct separately.

Because ANCOVA assumes homogeneity of regression, homogeneity and linearity of slope tests were conducted and all revealed nonsignificant results, suggesting that ANCOVA analyses were appropriate. The results of all of the ANCOVA comparisons for each outcome measure revealed nonsignificant results at the experiment-wise .05 level, so they certainly would not be significant were alpha adjusted to the Bonferroni per comparison rate that is needed, given the multiple analyses. The closest analysis approaching significance was wives' compromise scores, although the p value was still in the nonsignificant range, $F(1, 27) = 2.170$, $p = .152$. However, initial marital satisfaction, the covariate, accounted for a large proportion of variation in each of the analyses. All of the comparisons for each gender revealed statistical significance of the covariate at the corrected Bonferroni alpha level. Every comparison conducted for both women and men revealed that initial marital satisfaction accounted for at least 30% of the variance in the scores (women: η^2 ranging from .392 to .679; men: η^2 ranging from .314 to .574), suggesting that predicting outcomes in communication skills training, regardless of the type of issue discussed by the couple, is a function of marital satisfaction prior to the intervention.

Examination of the follow-up data was conducted in a similar manner using ANCOVA with those couples that completed the follow-up sessions. Some attrition occurred in the sample, and follow-up data were collected on 21 couples (70% of the original sample). Attrition did not differ significantly across the two experimental groups, although comparisons of those couples who did not attrite with those who did revealed higher marital satisfaction, positive communication behaviors, and lower rates of negative behavior for nonattriters, both initially (session 1) and at the last training session (session 3). Thus, these analyses are hedged both because of the smaller sample size, and the fact that those couples included in the follow-up sessions were generally more satisfied and engaging in more adaptive communication skills. Results of the ANCOVA analyses on the follow-up data, again conducted separately for each gender, revealed a pattern consistent with the analyses above: nonsignificant results at the experiment-wise .05 level, with initial marital satisfaction accounting for the majority of variance in scores.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study did not support the Gottman et al. (1998) hypotheses that differential topics would affect in-session communication tactics and that such effects would be moderated by the initial level of marital distress. Group assignment did not produce significantly different outcomes on any of the communication tactics dependent measures. However, the initial level of marital satisfaction or distress, the MAT covariate, was significantly related to the outcome on all the measures for all analyses.

When null results such as these are found, it is first necessary to rule out methodological problems and other possible threats to internal validity that may have led to such results. It is not probable that the independent variable manipulation was contaminated across groups and that this led to null results. Protections were in place to ensure the integrity of the independent variable, including exposing couples only to their assigned experimental group and tailoring the script to that group. Additionally, therapists redirected couples to their assigned group if they began discussing a topic that was inconsistent with their experimental assignment. Thus, the integrity of the independent variable was maintained in a systematic fashion, and it is more likely that the null results found in this study reflect an absence of difference between the two experimental groups.

In attempting to make sense of the results in this study, an important finding emerged related to initial marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction prior to the intervention accounted for significant variance in self-reported communication skills use and marital satisfaction after communication skills training. This finding is consistent with recent outcome data that suggested that the best predictor of success in behavioral marital therapy was initial level of marital distress (Johnson, 2003). The data in this study are also consistent with the concept of sentiment override, initially described by Weiss (1980) as a global dimension of affection or disaffection for the partner and the marriage. This facet of marital relationships apparently is more important than the specific behaviors that are displayed in the various contexts of such a relationship. Positive sentiment override, or the degree to which a partner makes "trait" attributions for positive partner behaviors and "state" interpretations for negative partner behaviors, may be a fundamental foundation of the marital relationship that is more important than the specific behaviors or self-selected topics themselves.

Rausch, Barry, Hertel, and Swain (1974) noted that spouses may develop rigid, comprehensive interpretations for marital conflict that reduce the partner's search for new information or in-depth processing of new information. This process may have been operating in the current study in that even when a partner's behavior was changing because of the communication training, the pre-established interpretive framework remained unaltered. Recent research has demonstrated that, particularly for wives, sentiment override is a perceptual filter through which to evaluate their partner's low-intensity negative and positive behaviors and affective responses and that this perceptual framework may be important in marital stability and satisfaction (Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002). As the results of the current study demonstrate, the degree to which a partner engages in positive or negative sentiment override, as represented in their initial marital satisfaction, may be far more predictive of outcome following an intervention than would be the topic during communication skills training.

Clinical Implications

Although the sample size limits the generality of the findings, some important clinical implications emerge from the present data. The results of this study suggest that sentiment override is more important than the specific behaviors that are displayed in the contexts of such a relationship. This interpretive framework regarding the nature of the partner's behavior may be resistant to change, particularly on self-report measures, even in the face of new and appropriate communication behavior. Taken as a whole, the results of this study provide a cautionary message to treatments that focus on immediate behavior change, as such change may not be sufficient to improve marital satisfaction. Other researchers have found that spouses in unhappy marriages perceive their partner's behavior in a more negative light, accentuate negative events, and minimize positive events more than happy couples, even in the face of behavior change (Fincham, 1985; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). Clinicians should be aware of this interpretive framework and either target interventions first at this cognitive filter or frame behavioral interventions in terms of these pervasive beliefs about one's partner. For example, it may be useful to delay directly targeting behavioral change until couples are using more realistic or optimistic interpretations of their partner's behavior.

An important lesson for marital therapy may be that clinicians should ensure that the couple is making positive attributions about their partner prior to training in communication skills, as such skills are unlikely to affect marital satisfaction or positive communication behaviors in the presence of negative attributions. Given that many couples presenting for marital interventions state that they "want" communication skills training or feel that the root of their problems as a couple stems from "communication problems," it would be useful for clinicians to be thoughtful about whether communication skills training is indicated for that couple at that time. If the couple is not yet ready for communication skills training, it may be that, even in the face of behavior change, the partner may fail to detect such change, given their positive or negative sentiment override histories. Particularly when using self-report measures, which are often the mode of assessment in clinical practice, change may be difficult to assess, as reports on such measures are a product of the couples' perceptual filters.

It is possible that the current study failed to find an improvement in marital satisfaction using the speaker-listener technique, regardless of the topic, because even in the face of changes in communication behavior, couples failed to alter their emotional acceptance or rigid interpretations of their partner. Recent researchers have suggested that emotional acceptance within the marital relationship may be more important in evoking lasting change in marital satisfaction during the course of treatment and beyond (Doss, Thum, Atkins, & Christensen, 2005). This study demonstrated that although behavioral couples therapy resulted in

strong behavioral changes and improvements in relationship satisfaction initially, by the end of treatment, there was a significant decrease in target therapeutic behaviors and an increase in negative behaviors. In contrast, couples assigned to the integrative couples therapy, designed to increase emotional acceptance of the partner in the absence of behavior change, showed an increase in marital satisfaction even in the face of behavioral relapse, suggesting that emotional acceptance of one's partner may be an important mechanism of change in successful marital interventions (Doss et al., 2005). This has clinical implications for marital therapists using behavioral interventions because, given that couples are unlikely to maintain behavioral changes and without a shift in their cognitive and emotional framework, relationship satisfaction is likely to relapse along with the relapse in behavior. Other researchers have noted that when couples altered their appraisals of their partner and the relationship, communication behavior also changed (Sanford, 2006). Taken together, these data in addition to the null findings in the present study suggest that it would perhaps be more useful to target emotional acceptance and cognitive change prior to or in concert with behavior change to affect lasting change in relationship satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study did not support the hypothesis that communication skills training may differentially affect marital satisfaction and communication behaviors depending on the topic discussed. However, these data should be considered preliminary and tentative given the fact that this is the first experimental investigation examining this relationship. Additionally, several limitations of this investigation are notable, and as such, these results should be interpreted and integrated into clinical settings with caution. The sample size for this study was relatively small ($N = 30$ couples), composed of volunteers drawn from a small, Midwestern community, which limits the power of the study. Additionally, although the initial MAT scores indicated a wide range of marital satisfaction prior to the intervention, the overall mean of the total sample was 101.37, suggesting a sample that was, on the average, within normal limits of marital satisfaction. Therefore, the results of this study may not be representative of distressed couples that present for marital therapy in a clinical setting.

The exclusive reliance on global self-report data of communication skills and marital satisfaction is a significant limitation of this study. Given the relative malleability of these types of dependent measures, these results should be considered preliminary. Specifically, behavioral data based on couples' interactions following communication skills training could be used to examine more subtle but clinically significant changes in marital communication. Future studies using observational techniques for the dependent measures could be better equipped to detect these contextual facets of marital relationships and attributional variables.

Additionally, because a secondary goal of this study was to collect reliability data on new measures, a notable limitation of this study is the reliance on self-report measures of unknown reliability and validity. Although data in the current study suggest that the measures evidenced at least test-retest reliability (Cornelius & Alessi, 2006), replication with standardized measures, such as the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Christensen, 1988), is necessary.

This study experimentally examined the effect of different topics discussed on marital satisfaction and self-reported communicative behaviors within the speaker-listener format. However, it is important to note that this is only one facet of most marital and premarital interventions. Research has suggested that delivering isolated components of a full treatment approach generally yields smaller treatment gains (Wood, Crane, Schaalje, & Law, 2005). Thus, the results of this intervention may not necessarily apply to marital interventions that incorporate other techniques and skills training. However, given that this technique is foundational to most protocols and may be implemented in isolation because of the practical constraints of clinical practice, this study provides potentially important information regarding the likelihood of clinical changes resulting from communication skills training and possible mechanisms preventing such change.

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