

Experimental Study of Couples' Problem Solving Skills: are we striving in the right direction?

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ABSTRACT *Problem Solving Skills (PSS) deficits have been reported to be one of the main presenting problems in maladjusted couples, and to constitute one of the important differences between them and happy couples. Videorecordings of PSS of 10 happy and 10 unhappy couples were compared employing the KPI (Kategoriensystem fuer Partnerschaftliche Interaktion. Hahlweg & Jacobson, 1984) coding system to analyze verbal and non-verbal communication. The sample was chosen at random from all couples who sought treatment, either for a sexual or marital problem, from a Spanish Family Planning clinic and covered criteria to be eligible: DAS (Spanier, 1976) score, number of years married (>2 yrs).*

They all discussed meaningful problems for the couple, and our analysis revealed that, although there exist important differences, particularly in on-verbal communication, sequences followed through the discussion and reciprocity of affect, these differences are less marked than what has been published so far. They were minimal between unhappy couples who eventually separated and those who, in spite of acknowledging relationship problems, remained together 3 years after having completed the recording of PSS task.

It is argued that perhaps we are presenting a far too idealistic goal to couples under PSS training, and that other aspects of the relationship, such as the wearing off of attraction, should be investigated further.

Introduction

Humans and primates have developed a social lifestyle in which male-female relationships and their offspring, have become the cell of social organization. In non-humans, the style and adjustment of such organization (monogamous, patriarchal, matriarchal...) apparently depends primarily on relative size of the body (Wilson, 1981). In humans the determinant elements seem to be something else.

Although marital partnership continues being the social institution that most individuals opt for voluntarily, the rate of dissolution has increased too. (In Spain, the rate of separation and divorce has increased from 26,543 cases in 1981 to 68,617

in 1983– (Consejo Superior del Poder Judicial, 1985)). Scientists from different disciplines have aimed to study the elements that contribute to these changes.

When studying the differences encountered between happy and unhappy couples within an experimental framework, problem solving skills have turned out to be one of the most important discriminant elements, and similar results have been obtained by different researchers, in different laboratories, in different parts of the world (Wills *et al.*, 1974; Hahlweg & Jacobson, 1984; Jacobson & Gurman, 1986).

After studying couples' PSS, they are report more adaptive strategies among happy than in maladjusted couples.

There is still some debate, however, as to whether verbal codes discriminate better than affect (non-verbal) (e.g. Gottman *et al.*, 1977; Hahlweg & Jacobson, 1984), or the way sequences found in the discussion distinguish both type of couples, and if they both reciprocate positive and negative affective (e.g. Margolin and Whampold, 1981; Schaap, 1984).

When these studies are reviewed, however, one is struck by some important methodological shortcomings. One of these difficulties relates to *sampling problems*: most studies include unhappy couples who have contacted the researcher requesting some sort of counselling/treatment for their difficulties, whereas the happy or harmonious sample is made up either by acquaintances of the experimenter or people whose co-operation has been actively sought by him/her, (e.g. through Press: Biglan *et al.*, 1985; Gottman *et al.*, 1977; Hahlweg *et al.*, 1984; Margolin *et al.*, 1985; Schaap, 1984), and, on several occasions, been paid for (e.g. Robin & Canter, 1984; Vincent *et al.*, 1975). This, no doubt, would produce some bias in the results obtained.

The other difficulty has to do with the *type of problem* discussed, and the method used to generate this discussion. Vincent *et al.* (1975) have shown that we all can be more positive with strangers than with our own partner (presumably because topics involved are far less personal and problem centered) but Gottman *et al.* (1977) indicates that the severity of the problem discussed is related to the adaptiveness-unadaptiveness of the process used in the discussion. Few researchers have controlled for this variable, and again, this issue is bound to bias the results.

The aim of the present study is to investigate if reported differences in the way happy and unhappy couples discuss personal problems hold when an attempt is made to have similar problems discussed and when the recruiting strategies are kept constant.

From a clinical point of view, it would be helpful to have early predictors of those couples who are more likely to separate eventually. We intend, therefore, to analyze, in addition whether there are differences in these problem solving strategies in those couples that, although acknowledging relationship difficulties, remain together and those that eventually separate because of these difficulties.

Method

Subjects

Twenty couples who approached a Spanish Family Planning Clinic requesting treatment for sexual and/or marital problems were included in this study.

The unhappy sample was composed of 10 couples who sought treatment for marital problems and who had been screened out for other psychological problems. Five of these couples had separated at the time of analyzing the videotapes of their discussion (recorded 3 years before, when they first requested help) and constitute the unhappy-separated sample. The remaining five couples continued together and constitute the unhappy-not-separated sample.

The happy sample was composed of 10 couples who approached the clinic requesting treatment for sexual problems, but acknowledged a sound marital relationship otherwise. Initially, we planned to include in this subsample only couples with sexual problems which involved little relationship issues (e.g. vaginismus developed prior to any attempt to sexual intercourse with present partner. Eventually other sexual problems were included as well (mainly difficulties in reaching orgasm) because, although we gathered a fairly large sample of women with vaginismus, we could only find a few who had had a child born by Cesarean delivery. It was felt that the presence of children was an important variable to control for (Schaap, 1984).

TABLE I. Study sample ($n=20$)

	Happy (sexual')		Unhappy (marital')		<i>t</i>
	M	F	M	F	
<i>X</i> age	33.30	29.90	36.30	33.20	$p < 0.5$
<i>X</i> yrs married	5.60		9.20		$p < 0.01$
children	1.30		2.10		$p < 0.5$
social class	3		3		

As can be seen from Table I we did not manage to gather an absolutely comparable sample: the happy sample is younger, has been married shorter time, and, although they have children, the number is lower. How this might have affected our results is taken up later.

Measures

Measures used were those routinely employed in our clinic for the assessment of marital and sexual problems, along five and three sessions respectively.

Marital problems assessment included Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Spanier, 1976) Areas of Change Questionnaire (ACQ, Weiss & Birchler, 1975), Marital Status Inventory (MSI, Weis & Cerreto, 1980), Marital Precounselling Inventory

(MPI, Stuart, 1973—revised edition), Sexual Interaction Inventory (SII, LoPiccolo & Steger, 1974), plus interviews with each spouse of each couple individually.

Sexual Problems assessment involved Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), Sexual Interaction Inventory (LoPiccolo & Steger, 1974), plus individualized sexual history taking.

The cut-off point for the DAS, with Baucon & Lester (1986) was 98. Unfortunately, we were not able to obtain data for the rest of the questionnaires used with the marital sample from all the sexual sample (we tried to interfere as little as possible with the normal assessment procedure routinely followed in the clinic, and some of the couples in the sexual sample expressed the view that some of the marital questionnaires were irrelevant to their problems). Data for the marital sample are reported, then, as a descriptive element, not as a means of comparison for both groups.

As can be seen in Table II, there are marked differences in both subsamples in DAS, but non-significant differences in the SII.

TABLE II. Questionnaires' mean scores

Inventory	Happy (‘sexual’)		Unhappy (‘marital’)		<i>t</i>
	M	F	M	F	
\bar{X} DAS	109.00	111.60	68.60	62.80	$p < 0.001$
\bar{X} MSI	—	—	5.5	7.5	
ACQ					
\bar{X} (AG+DG)	—	—	14.8	16.1	
\bar{X} MPI					
(discrepancy index)	—	—	12.2	12.6	
\bar{X} SII	124.28		140.60		NS

Discussions of a preselected problem were videotaped and the recordings were analyzed using KPI Coding System (*Kategoriensystem fuer Partnerschaftliche Interaktion* Hahlweg *et al.*, 1984) which involves coding speaker and listener verbal and nonverbal skills. Verbal codes, derived from MICS (Hops *et al.*, 1972) and CISS (Gottman, 1979), are Self-Disclosure (SD), Positive Solution (PS), Acceptance of other (AC), Agreement (AG), Problem Description (PD), Meta-Communication (MC), Rest Category (RC), Listening (LI), Criticism (CR), Negative Solution (NS), Justification (JU) and Disagreement (DG).

These categories can be collapsed into five summary codes: Direct Expression (DE), Acceptance and Agreement (AA), Critique (CR), Refusal (RF) and Neutral Information (NI).

Procedure

The initial assessment interview was held with the couple to enquire about the nature of their problems and to outline assessment procedures (similar in format to

that proposed in Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Both partners had agreed to be involved in the assessment of their difficulties and had filled out DAS and ACQ and selected the main problem they wanted to discuss. (Responses to DAS and to ACQ were used to prompt couples who could not readily agree to bring out a meaningful relationship problem). The couple was then taken to a sound attenuated room where the recording equipment was set up.

They were instructed to try to Problem Solve on the particular topic chosen as they would normally do at home. Should there be any 'blank' in the conversation, they were encouraged to reproduce what happened on the last occasion they had discussed about that particular problem (who said what...). They were not told how much time they had available, but were interrupted approximately 14-15 min after they had started.

TABLE III. Problems discussed

Happy ('Sexual')	Unhappy ('Marital')
1 Her 'flirting', his jealousy	Extramarital relations
2 His 'domineeringness'	Her 'domineeringness'
3 His lack of dedication to the family	Home finances
4 Extramarital relations	Extramarital relations
5 Extramarital relations	Extramarital relations
6 Sexual problems	Her non-acceptance of his masturbation
7 Mutual dependency/Independency	Mutual dependency/Independency
8 Sexual problems	Extramarital relations
9 Children's religious education	Extramarital relations mutual independency
10 Contraception of choice	Sexual problems

As can be seen from Table III, Problems discussed are very similar, although, of course, it would be difficult to determine if the emotional meaning of each of these problems to each couple was comparable.

They were asked to what degree what had happened in the recording room resembled what usually happened at home. All couples agreed that it had been a good sample, and, if anything, more positive, because, at least they had talked about that topic! (with the unhappy sample we learned to carry out this recording only after both had agreed not to raise the same topic, at least until they came next to the clinic, after having watched many couples continue the discussion initiated in the recording room, by the door of the clinic).

Videotapes were coded by four teams of coders who had been previously trained for this study following Gottman's advice (unpublished): learn codes by heart, practise with an easy script, and, afterwards, with more complex scripts, reason out why one code and not other was appropriate. The same procedure was

followed for nonverbal codes training. Coding as such did not start until agreement >0.85 was obtained.

All coders received a tape with the discussion of six couples, five for the study and one, the same for all, used as a control for agreement among the different coders. Each of them coded happy, unhappy, separated and not separated couples.

Coding of the first 10 min of each discussion was made directly from the tape in which a blip had been introduced every 30 seconds to check for reliability. (Hahlweg & Jacobson 1984).

Agreement in the control tape between the different teams of coders and an external coder ranged from: kappa = 0.75 to 0.85 (0.85, 0.83, 0.75, 0.90) for content, and from: kappa = 0.73 to 0.85 (0.83, 0.80, 0.73, 0.85), for content + affect.

(The somewhat lower agreements reached with the third team was accounted for mainly by discrepancies in the thought-dividing units, rather than by discrepancies in attaching a code to a given thought unit. For this reason, it was felt that for further studies, coding should be made preferably from scripts and not directly from videotape.)

Results

Happy couples generated 1543 different codes, whereas unhappy generated 1599 (789 separated and 810 not separated).

Surprisingly enough, in spite of having chosen a coding system that could account for all the alleged subtleties of human communication, it was found that only four codes (CR, DG, PD and LI) accounted for most of the variance in the different subgroups (85, 75% in happy couples; 89, 30% unhappy couples; 90, 74% separated couples and 88, 90% not separated couples.)

Results will be presented in three sections: base rates, sequences and reciprocity.

1 Base Rates

Content Codes

Contrary to Revenstorff *et al.* (1984), no content code discriminated happy from unhappy couples. As for separated versus not separated couples SD and LI discriminated (Mann-Whitney U-test 8 and 7.5 respectively, $p < 0.10$).*

It is only when comparing happy versus separated couples that these differences in SD and LI are marked ($p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.02$ respectively).

If we take into consideration Reduction I, AA (Acceptance and Agreement) codes discriminated ($p < 0.02$) between happy and unhappy couples, the former showing more AG and AC. As for separated versus not separated, DE (Direct expression) discriminated ($p < 0.10$) not separated being more direct, and, again,

*In spite of Gottman's advice to use analysis of variance of the arcsines, we preferred non parametric statistics given the non-homogeneity of variance in our data.

when comparing happy versus separated these differences become larger, happy couples showing much more Acceptance and Agreement ($p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.002$ respectively, Fig. 1).

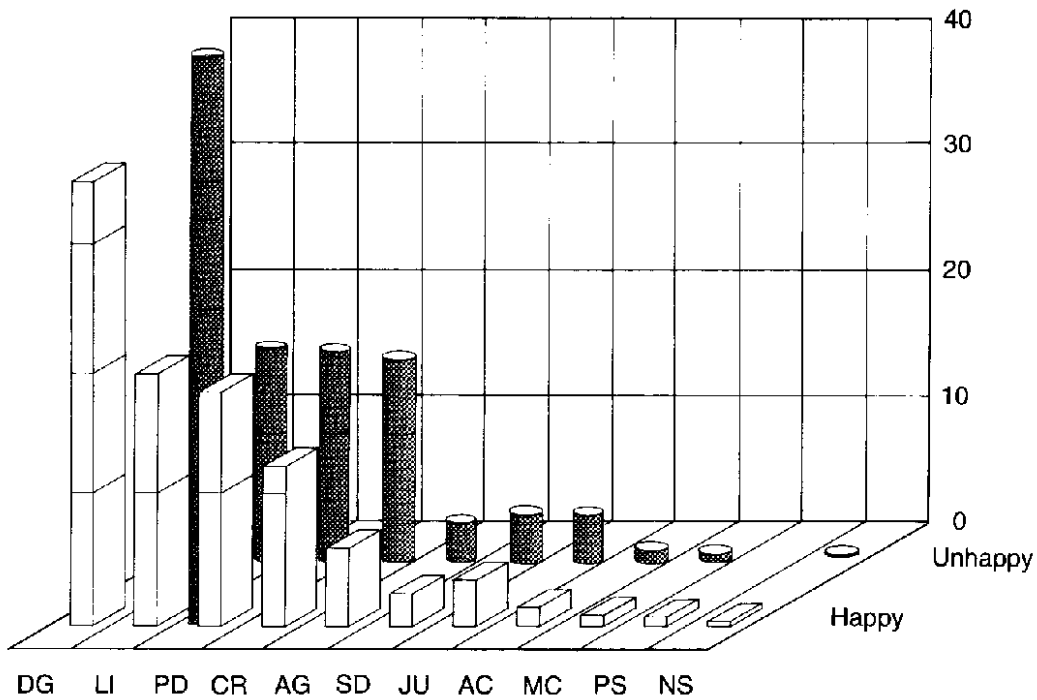


FIG. 1. Content: happy versus unhappy couples.

Affect

It is affect codes that discriminated best between the different subgroups (Fig. 2).

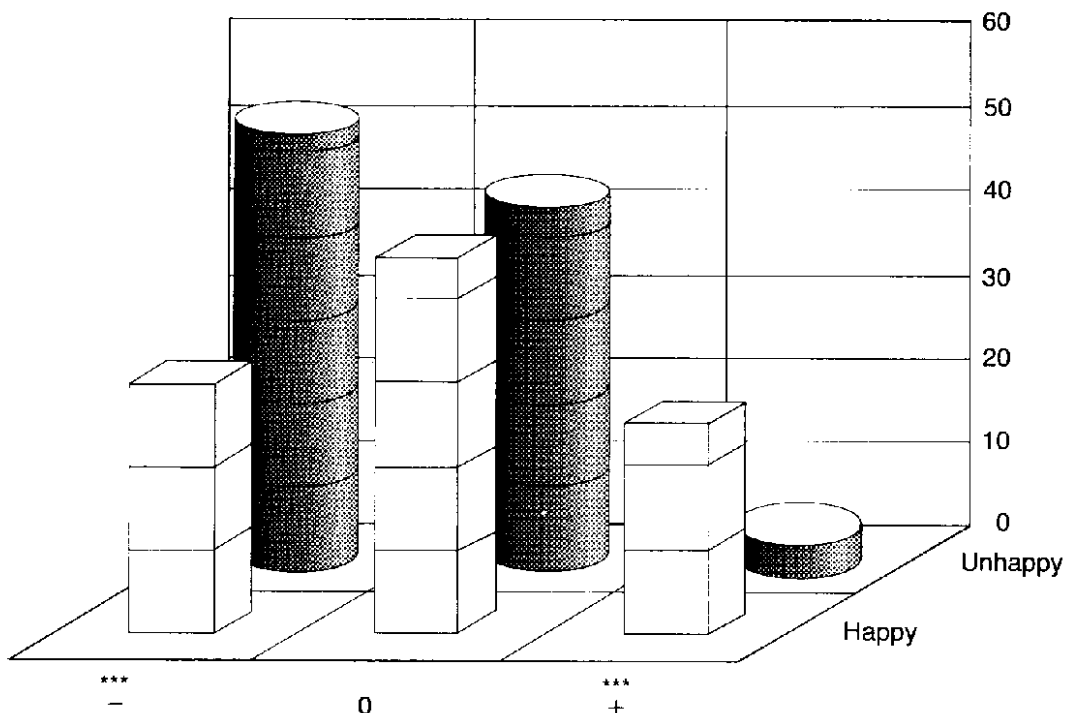


FIG. 2. Affect: happy versus unhappy couples $***p < 0.02$.

When comparing happy versus unhappy the first are more positive ($p < 0.02$) and less negative ($p < 0.02$). Separated were far more negative than not separated ($p < 0.05$) and more neutral ($p < 0.02$). Once more, the largest differences were found when comparing happy versus separated, the former being more positive, less negative and more neutral ($p < 0.002$, $p < 0.002$ and $p < 0.10$ respectively).

Content plus Affect

When combining content with affect, several codes discriminated happy versus unhappy (SD+, AC+, DG+, DG-, PD+, PD-, LI+ and JU-) as for separated versus not separated, only AG- and JU- discriminated ($p < 0.05$). Once again, these differences became larger when comparing happy versus separated couples (SD-, SDo, AG-, DG+, JU+, JU- ($p < 0.002$ / and NS $p < 0.02$) (Fig. 3).

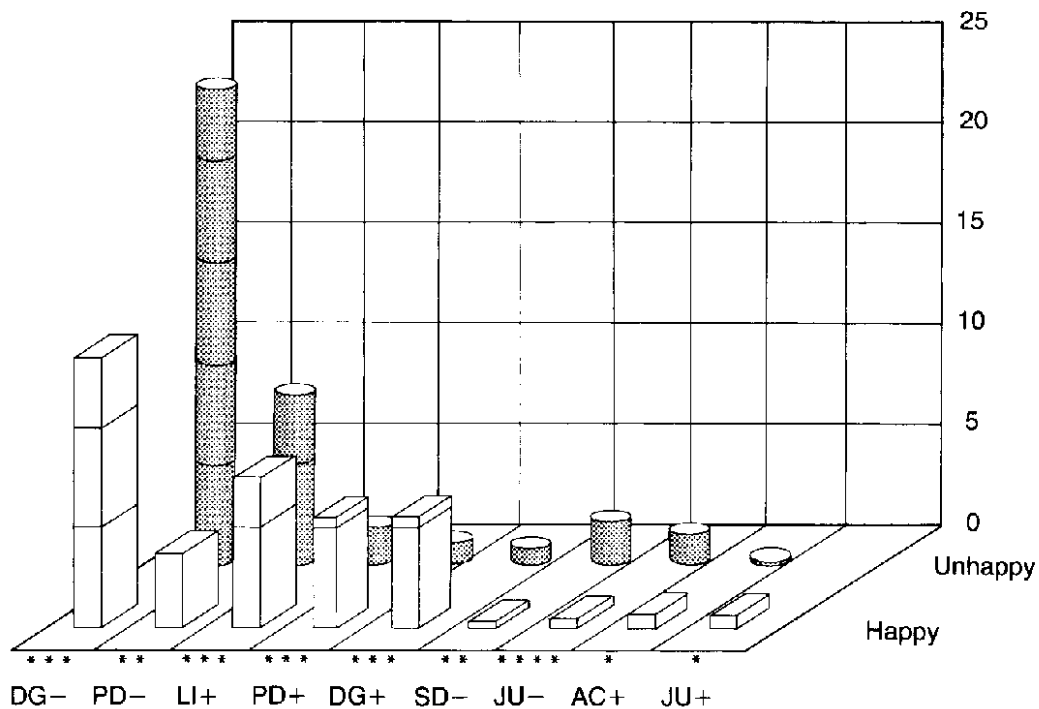


FIG. 3. *Content + Affect*: happy versus unhappy couples * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.02$; **** $p < 0.002$.

2 Sequences

To study sequences we followed Gottman's advice (1979, p. 113). Conditioned probabilities are printed over the arrows and z scores below the arrow.

Analysing these sequences visually, we discover some that exist only in happy couples, sequences that are very similar in happy and unhappy, and a few sequences that are different:

Sequences that exist only in Happy couples:

Criterion	Lags									
	1	2	3	4	5					
[PD+] 85	$\frac{0.24}{6.23} >$	LI+	$\frac{0.27}{8.96} >$	PD+	$\frac{0.17}{3.74} >$	LI+	$\frac{0.21}{6.65} >$	PD+	$\frac{0.14}{3.68} >$	LI+

That is, when a problem is described with positive affect, the partner listens throughout the different lags. But no problem was described with positive affect by unhappy couples.

Similar Sequences

Criterion	Lags									
	1	2	3	4	5					
[DG-] 207	$\frac{0.38}{11.34} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.39}{11.68} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.38}{11.07} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.40}{12.18} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.31}{8.06} >$	DG-

Happy Couples

Criterion	Lags									
	1	2	3	4	5					
[DG-] 373	$\frac{0.38}{8.08} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.39}{8.04} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.32}{4.85} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.33}{5.39} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.32}{4.62} >$	DG-

Unhappy Couples

Disagreements with negative affect generate disagreement in the other, both in happy and unhappy couples.

Non Similar Sequences

Criterion	Lags									
	1	2	3	4	5					
[PD] 284	$\frac{0.32}{5.57} >$	LI	$\frac{0.31}{6.05} >$	PD	$\frac{0.26}{2.87} >$	LI	$\frac{0.28}{4.68} >$	PD	$\frac{0.23}{2.38} >$	PD

Happy Couples

Criterion		Lags								
		1	2	3	4	5				
[PD]	$\frac{0.07}{5.11} >$	DG	$\frac{0.28}{5.69} >$	PD	$\frac{0.21}{2.34} >$	PD	$\frac{0.27}{5.09} >$	PD	$\frac{0.21}{2.14} >$	PD
268										

Unhappy Couples

After describing a problem, happy couples listen during two consecutive lags, and come out with a problem of his/her own only in the fifth lag (Gottman's 'countercomplaint'), whereas in unhappy couples, a PD is followed by disagreement and countercomplaints.

Criterion		Lags								
		1	2	3	4	5				
[PD-]	$\frac{0.31}{7.07} >$	LI+	$\frac{0.24}{7.09} >$	PD-	$\frac{0.33}{7.69} >$	LI+	$\frac{0.27}{9.35} >$	PD-	$\frac{0.25}{5.27} >$	LI+
58										

Happy Couples

Criterion		Lags								
		1	2	3	4	5				
[PD-]	$\frac{0.31}{2.15} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.20}{5.21} >$	PD-	$\frac{0.31}{2.21} >$	DG-	$\frac{0.21}{5.94} >$	PD-	$\frac{0.17}{3.91} >$	PD-
130										

Unhappy Couples

When one of the partners describes a problem with negative affect, this is followed by empathic listening by the other, only in happy couples.

Criterion		Lags								
		1	2	3	4	5				
[CR]	$\frac{0.51}{5.26} >$	DG	$\frac{0.24}{5.25} >$	CR	$\frac{0.22}{4.43} >$	CR	$\frac{0.25}{5.66} >$	CR	$\frac{0.26}{2.60} >$	LI
191										

Happy Couples

Criterion		Lags								
		1	2	3	4	5				
[CR]	$\frac{0.54}{5.16} >$	DG	$\frac{0.25}{4.29} >$	CR	$\frac{0.07}{3.88} >$	JU	$\frac{0.20}{2.17} >$	CR		
256										

Unhappy Couples

After a criticism the other ends up listening eventually only in happy couples. In unhappy couples, the partner tends to justify his/her behaviour.

No different patterns were observed between separated and non-separated couples.

3 Reciprocity

Reciprocity of affect in our sample was as follows:

Reciprocity of Positive affect

Criterion	Lags					
	1	2	3	4	5	
[+]	$\frac{0.53}{15.14} >$	+ $\frac{0.63}{20} >$	+ $\frac{0.48}{12} >$	+ $\frac{0.55}{15} >$	+ $\frac{0.46}{11} >$	+ ...

*And Continues Along the 20 Lags Analysed
Happy Couples*

Criterion	Lags				
	1	2	3	4	5
[+]	$\frac{0.12}{3.75} >$	+ $\frac{0.19}{6.4} >$	+ <i>The Sequence ends Here</i>		

*Unhappy Couples
Reciprocity of Negative Affect*

Criterion	Lags					
	1	2	3	4	5	
[-]	$\frac{0.52}{12} >$	[-] $\frac{0.65}{19} >$	[-] $\frac{0.52}{12} >$	[-] $\frac{0.62}{18} >$	[-] $\frac{0.53}{12} >$	[-] ...

*And Continues Along the 20 Lags Analysed
Happy Couples*

Criterion	Lags					
	1	2	3	4	5	
[-]	$\frac{0.63}{9} >$	[-] $\frac{0.70}{14} >$	[-] $\frac{0.63}{9} >$	[-] $\frac{0.66}{11} >$	[-] $\frac{0.61}{7} >$	[-] ...

*And Continues Along the 20 Lags Analysed
Unhappy Couples*

Happy couples reciprocate long cycles of positive affect, whereas unhappy couples do so only in short cycles. (Supporting Schaap, 1984). Negative affect is reciprocated strongly by both types of couples.

Discussion

Our results suggest that, although there are some differences in the way happy and unhappy couples solve their personal problems, these are far less marked than demonstrated in other published work so far.

The first surprising data to emerge is that, apparently, when discussing a problem that is relevant and important to the couple, we all tend to recourse to automatic patterns, no matter what the status. We fail to use all the different and creative possibilities that complex and sophisticated human communication offers us.

Content does not seem to be very different between the different subgroups. Affect is, however, and happy couples tend to recourse also to maladaptive patterns when discussing an important problem, and engage in long cycles of negative reciprocity.

Differences between those couples that remain together in spite of acknowledging difficulties and those that eventually separate are slight (mainly in affect) and, presumably, are not responsible for the couples' present status. Other elements not investigated in this study (Finance, Social Pressure, Subjective perception of children well being...) might account better than communication skills for their present status.

Our results have important implications both at a clinical and theoretical level. Clinically, although these data support us in our attempts to train unhappy couples to change some of their maladaptive patterns: (use positive affect, describe problems, start with positive comments towards the other, do not criticize... Jacobson & Margolin, 1979, Cáceres, 1986), we might be proposing a too idealistic model.

Theoretically, it would appear that although there are some differences in the way happy couples solve their problems with respect to unhappy couples, these differences are not as marked as to account for all the differences found in both subgroups of couples. Furthermore, although some studies show that couples can be trained to change their patterns to problem solve in a more adaptive way (Hahlweg *et al.*, 1984), some of us still question if by doing so we are making them happier or only 'more adjusted' (We should remember that DAS has big loading on 'agreement'). It might very well be, then, that other aspects of marital relationship, such as power and attempts to control the relationship (Escudero *et al.*, 1988), cognitions (Weiss, 1984), or the process of reduced attraction, (Margolin, 1983) should be investigated more.

Of course, our pessimistic results could be due to other reasons than those reported here: first, they might be due to the sociodemographic differences of our sample. The unhappy couples were older, married longer and had more children.

But we feel that although some of the differences reach statistical significance, we would doubt if 3-5 years of difference in age, and a few more years married would make all that difference, particularly when, as Markman has shown, (1979, 1981) we can find poor communication skills in all ages and stages of development of partnership. On the other hand, our study is not concerned with the causes of marital unhappiness, but with distinguishing the communications patterns employed by maladjusted couples from those employed by happy couples and, although one might argue that, on the lights of these sociodemographic differences, our maladjusted couples could have evolved unhappy strategies for marital survival, it is doubtful whether the passage of time *'per se'* makes one develop maladaptive patterns. It is acknowledged, however, that the process of development of these destructive patterns should be investigated further.

TABLE IV. Comparison of some of the results of our study with those of Raush *et al.* (1974); Gottman *et al.* (1977) and Baucom & Lester (1986)

Code	Happy	Unhappy	Happy	Unhappy	Happy	Unhappy
<i>Study:</i>	Raush <i>et al.</i> (1974)		Gottman <i>et al.</i> (1977)		Cáceres (1986)	
AG/ AG + DG	0.38	0.26	0.71	0.43	0.33	0.07
neutral affect	0.74	0.69	0.85	0.65	0.45	0.44
positive affect	0.11	0.04	0.12	0.10	0.25	0.04
negative affect	0.15	0.27	0.03	0.13	0.30	0.52
<i>Study:</i>	Baucom & Lester (1986)			Cáceres (1986)		
	Unhappy		Happy		Unhappy	
Questionnaire	M	F	M	F	M	F
\bar{X} DAS	95.25	94.75	109.00	111.60	68.60	62.80
\bar{X} ACQ	15.50	25.88	—	—	13.80	16.10

Perhaps DAS is not as a good measure of adjustment in Europe as it is in the States, and our happy sample just happens to be a rather maladjusted sample. (But our trained coders, unaware initially of couples' condition, were quite able to discriminate them as happy or unhappy, basing their judgements mainly on affect, $r_{bp}=0.85$). As can be seen from Table IV, when we compare the scores obtained by our sample with those of others, (e.g. Raush *et al.* 1974, Gottman *et al.* 1977, Baucom & Lester, 1986), we find they compare poorly and that our happy sample comes closer in some aspects, to their unhappy sample (e.g. the rate of AG/AG + DG of our happy sample [0.33], comes closer to Raush *et al.*'s (1974) and to Gottman's (1977) unhappy sample [0.26 and 0.43 respectively] than to their

happy sample [0.38 and 0.71]. The proportion of negative affect in our happy sample [0.30] is higher than the equivalent proportion of negative affect in Raush *et al.*'s (1974) and Gottman's (1977) unhappy samples [0.27 and 0.13 respectively]).

Perhaps well controlled intercultural comparative studies, in which coders from different countries code happy and unhappy couples from different sociocultural background, might clarify this issue. This might mean, that, in Spain, the situation of even adjusted couples is precarious, or it might be that we just happened to end up with a fairly extreme sample.

Indeed, some might like to argue the wisdom of using couples with sexual problems as a harmonious sample. Besides their results on DAS there are reports (Hartman, 1980a, b; Hartman *et al.* 1983) that show that sexual problems can run separated from marital problems, in certain cases. Others, looking at the nature of problems discussed, might want to attribute the discrepancies in our results to the fair amount of extra-marital relationships encountered in both groups. Again, when reviewing studies which investigate causes of extramarital relationships, Thompson, (1983) concludes that 'affairs' can be accounted better by some personal attitudes than by dissatisfaction with the primary relationship.

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