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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, research findings on family problem solving have been based on observational data from vignettes provided by the researcher. To examine problem solving in couple relationships from a participatory perspective, 27 married couples discussed a mutually relevant domestic problem, while being videotaped. Subsequently, each partner completed a questionnaire about his or her experience of the process and outcomes. Then each partner separately viewed the videotape and gave a free-flowing commentary about the interaction. An analysis of the results showed significant positive correlations between partners' satisfaction with the discussion of a specific problem and general satisfaction with "who does what," marital satisfaction, and low depression scores. The data also highlighted the remote connections, both in time and in partners' conceptions, between problem talk and finding or implementing problem solutions. The extent to which the partners felt able to express their point of view and felt understood by their spouse during the discussion were both significantly correlated with higher satisfaction and greater optimism. These findings suggest that working on day-to-day problems takes time, and the form the discussions take may affect partners' feelings about themselves and their marriage. (BL)

UNDERSTANDING PROBLEM SOLVING IN COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

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The research that I will discuss today was an off-shoot of the Becoming A Family Project, a longitudinal study of couple relationships during family formation (Cowan & Cowan, Note 1). The investigation was concerned with how we, as outsiders of the couple relationships we study, can develop an understanding of marital problem solving, grounded in the perspectives of marital partners themselves. Most research on marital and family problem solving has relied almost exclusively on the perspectives of so-called impartial observers of interaction samples or on questionnaires tapping dimensions thought to be important on the basis of logically deduced theories or models of problem solving in non-family groups. As a result, dimensions of problem solving which are salient and meaningful to family members themselves have remained obscure.

The study which I conducted differed from previous research in that it made essential use of the accounts provided by research participants about their experiences of working on problems in their marriage. The present study also differed from previous research in that participants were asked to work on a current problem in their own relationship, rather than being provided with a task or vignette defined as problematic or conflict-engendering by the investigator. Finally, while research and theory in this area has seemed obsessively preoccupied with the outcomes of marital and family problem solving, the present investigation focused on the processes involved when couples confront problems.

Using this participatory research strategy, one substantive objective of the study was to uncover central features of how couples experience their problem solving efforts. Another objective was to see if the ways that different couples work on problems are related to partners' overall satisfaction with the process and outcomes of problem-focused discussions. A further, methodological objective was to demonstrate an approach to studying couple relationships which brings the perspectives and ordinary language concepts of marital partners sharply into focus in theory and research.

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METHOD

Participants. Twenty-seven heterosexual, married couples were recruited for this investigation from the Cowans' longitudinal study sample. The couples resided in 10 different communities in the San Francisco Bay Area and were considered to be middle class with respect to income, occupation, and education. One-sixth of the sample was Black, Asian, or Latino and the remainder was Caucasian. The lengths of the couple relationships ranged from 3 to 11 years, with a mean relationship length of 7 years. One-third (n=9) of the couples had no children and two-thirds (n=18) had one or two children under two years of age. The partners ranged in age from 25 to 45 years: the mean age of the participants was 31 years.

Procedures. Each couple was seen by me and a male co-interviewer. First, the partners were asked to select for discussion a current, mutually relevant problem in their relationship concerning their division of domestic tasks, or "who does what" towards maintaining the household or caring for children. Previous analyses of a Conflict and Disagreement Inventory used in the Becoming A Family project showed that, overall, partners reported significantly more marital conflict about the division of household tasks than about any of nine other areas widely reported to be problematic in couple relationships, such as communication, sexual relationship, or relationships with in-laws.

After the couple had selected the problem they wanted to work on, each partner described on a questionnaire some history of the problem, any previous attempts to work on it, and any hopes or expectations for the ensuing discussion. The couple then worked on the problem together for 10 minutes while being video-taped. Subsequently, each partner completed a questionnaire about his or her experience of the process and outcomes of the discussion. Then each partner separately viewed a playback of the video-tape in the presence of me and my co-interviewer. During the playback, the video-tape was stopped frequently while the partner gave a free-flowing commentary about what was going on in the interaction with his or her mate, what aspects were important, satisfying or dissatifying, why the discussion went the way it did, and so forth.

The transcribed audio-tapes of participants' accounts constituted the primary data in the investigation. Over an 18 month period, a research group discussed and analyzed these accounts. The purpose of our study of the accounts was to cull out embedded concepts, descriptions of regularities in partners' descriptions of their problem solving experiences, and propositional statements about what seems to determine the forms and outcomes of the partners' problem solving attempts. Ratings of the accounts and of the video-taped interactions were also made. Hypotheses which emerged from the analysis of accounts were then used to inform analyses of questionnaire data from this study and from the Cowans' longitudinal study. Measures from the longitudinal study which will be reported in today's discussion of preliminary findings included: the Locke-Wallace Short Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959); the Who Does What Inventory (Cowan & Cowan, Note 2); and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977).

RESULTS

Colleagues who have watched the video-tapes of couples' discussions have frequently remarked with horrified surprise: "You mean this couple has been together for 9 years and is still at this stage? If they can't even work out who does the dishes, how can they possibly deal with important issues about their relationship or about parenting!" However, the participants' accounts and questionnaires underscored the importance of these seemingly trivial "who does what" issues. As one participant reluctantly admitted: "I remember a couple of years ago saying to a woman-friend that if I ever get divorced, it'll probably be because of the housework. I couldn't believe I heard myself say that, but that is just a real important factor for both of us." Another participant explained: "The house stuff just didn't seem as important as all the other things we had to deal with in those first few years. And it took time to dawn on us that the ways each of use had of doing things around the house were pretty firmly entrenched - that there was a pattern there that neither of us liked and neither of us was just going through a phase."

For many participants, who was doing what on the homefront had major implications for their sense of being respected, belonging and sharing in the couple relationship. For example, one woman explained: "I had alotta heat on this issue because when he leaves his cups and things around, that says to me that he expects me to do it. How dare he expect me to pick up after him! I wasn't hired to be a house-maid." One of the men, in his account of a discussion about why his wife wouldn't pick up his clothes, explained: "When she doesn't include me in the simple mundane tasks of being in the family, it doesn't appear that I matter. I feel like a boarder." And another woman said: "It's a problem for me to feel I'm really contributing something important to the family when I'm locked into being a chauffeur for him and [our son]." Analyses of the questionnaire data showed significant positive correlations between partners' satisfaction with the discussion of a specific problem and general satisfaction with Who Does What ($r = .32$, $df=53$, $p < .01$), marital satisfaction ($r = .34$, $df = 53$, $p < .01$), and low depression scores ($r = .32$, $df = 53$, $p < .01$).

The data highlighted the remote connections, both in time and in partners' conceptions, between problem talk and finding or implementing problem solutions. In their accounts, most partners viewed as unrealistic the possibility of solving the problem in a 10 minute discussion or even in the near future. Echoed throughout the accounts were comments like: "We don't usually resolve our conflicts with one discussion. We find it's usually better to continue at different times, when we've had time to think about it or take in what the other has said." And: "There's always a delay between the time we discuss a problem with the housework and deciding who will do it or how it'll get done."

Two-thirds of the partners reported having worked together on the "who does what" problem selected for discussion at least half a dozen times over several years. However, neither the historical duration of the problem nor the number of previous attempts to solve it were significantly correlated with ratings of the partners' overall satisfaction and optimism about working productively together on problems. Nor was the persistence of the problem significantly correlated with partners' satisfaction with the discussion or with Who Does What in the relationship. Further, while only 11% of the

participants reported that their discussion resulted in a problem solution, 69% reported positive outcomes and only 7% reported negative outcomes of the discussion. These findings point to a clear distinction in partners' evaluations between a satisfying outcome and solving the problem.

All but a few participants explained that the bulk of the problem solving effort involved working toward mutual understanding about how each partner perceived or felt about the situation at issue, their individual needs and preferences in relation to it, and the personal or interpersonal signficance of the problem. This process, which one husband aptly referred to as "the big front end" in problem solving, was summed up by one of the women as follows: "The hard part for us is getting the issue on the table where we can both see it and what issues tie into it, and then hearing each other out about it without either of us getting our egos bruised or locked into a position. Once we can do that, agreeing on a course of action is eeeaazzy sailing!"

The initial step of raising an issue with one's mate was experienced by many partners as walking on thin ice, risking offending the other and provoking a storm of abuse, being seen as a "nag" or a "troublemaker", or violating one's own or the spouse's gender role expectations. Zeroing in on precisely what aspects of a situation are problematic, to whom, and why, was frequently portrayed as circuitous and frustrating. Some participants likened this process to "hide and seek", "ring-around-the-rosies", and "Bingo!"

Another theme which recurred in the accounts was the partner's need for explicit reassurance about the spouse's continued commitment to the basic principles, priorities, or goals of the couple's relationship before considering the immediate instance of who's going to do what. This theme is reflected in the following comment: "The fact that she was going to operate on the premise that the family still comes first - to me that was key. Just hearing it and knowing that made it easier to discuss how much time we're each going to spend looking after [our daughter]."

Partners who were dissatisfied with the discussion overall most frequently pointed to: (1) a lack of consensus about the import or parameters of the problem situation; (2) an inability or lack of opportunity to express one's own point of view (this was more common among the women); and (3) their spouse's premature reach for a concrete solution (this was more common among the men). As an instance of the latter, one husband said: "Obviously one of us has to pick up the clothes and we can make an agreement in one minute: 'Well, O.K., you pick up, or I pick up.' But that, to me, isn't at all what we're trying to get agreement about. What you see here on the tape was her pushing for closure and I'm just giving her this blank look because I just didn't feel completed."

One of the hypotheses we derived from studying the participants' accounts was that the way the process of working on a problem goes is of greater consequence to partners' satisfaction about problem solving in their relationship than whether a solution is achieved. Correlational analyses of questionnaire data and ratings of the accounts supported this emergent hypothesis. For example, participants' reports of how close they came to a solution by the end of the discussion were not significantly correlated with satisfaction and optimism indices. However, the extent to which the partner felt able to express his or her point of view and felt understood by the

spouse during the discussion were both significantly correlated with higher satisfaction ($r = .29$, $df = 53$, $p < .01$; $r = .34$, $df = 53$, $p < .01$, respectively) and greater optimism ($r = .24$, $df=53$, $p < .05$; $r = .25$, $df = 53$, $p < .05$, respectively).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The methods and findings of this study stand in sharp contrast to most previous research on marital and family problem solving (see Klein & Hill, 1979; Weick, 1971). Investigations that have used a pre-structured task or role-play situation have missed "the big front end" of marital problem solving where, according to our participants, most of the action is. The results highlight the primacy of mutual understanding over concrete solutions when partners' evaluate the success of their own problem solving efforts.

Given the couples' eye view of problem solving, it should be clear why satisfaction with the family division of labor is a consistent correlate of marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood (Boles, Note 3; Curtis-Boles, Note 4). Moving from couple to family life means that many new tasks must be negotiated and many old agreements renegotiated. While TV situation comedies poke fun at couples who can't agree about taking out the garbage or picking up the clothes, couples themselves are telling us that solving these problems is a serious, and messy, business.

It seems that researchers and clinicians might benefit from what men and women describe: working on day-to-day problems in couple life takes time and the <u>form</u> the discussions take may affect partners' feelings about themselves and their marriage. The present research illustrates how participants' own accounts can enrich our understanding of what goes on when couples confront problems and help to close the gaps between outsiders' and insiders' views of marital problem solving.

Notes.

1. Cowan, P.A., Cowan, C. Pape, et al., Individual and couple satisfaction during family formation: A longitudinal study. Symposium held at the American Psychological Association Meeting, Anaheim, California, August 26, 1983.

2. Cowan, C. Pape & Cowan, P.A. Who Does What? Unpublished questionnaire, University of California, Berkeley, 1979.

3. Boles, A. Marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Meeting, Anaheim, California, August 26, 1983.

4. Curtis-Boles, H. Self changes in the early stages of parenting. Paper presented at the American Psychological Assocation Meeting, Anaheim, California, August 26, 1983.

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