Couple-Type Identification and Gender-Role Adherence

Often, the terms sex difference and gender difference are used interchangeably. This collapsing of terms is somewhat in error. Specifically, sex differences refer to biological differences between men and women. Gender differences, on the other hand, refer to social expectations and stereotypes attributed to men and women by virtue of the biological sex. Similarly, the terms man and woman should be used when referring to sex differences and masculine and feminine are the applicable terms when referring to gender differences. Finally, although the concepts of sex and gender are different, gender is implicitly influenced by sex (Canary and Emmers-Sommer 1997).

Gender Differences and Similarities in Couple Communication

Much of the literature in popular culture leads one to believe that men and women are truly quite different in terms of their emotional experiences and their communication of those experiences. According to John Gray (1992), author of *Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus*, men and women differ in their experience of emotions and their communication of them. Gray, however, is not an academic, and his work is not based on empirical research.

Indeed, much of the empirical scholarship on sex and gender differences indicates quite the opposite. Studies on sex and gender differences indicate that men and women are more similar than they are different in terms of communicating in their close, personal relationships. PAUL BARTON/CORBIS opposite. Specifically, it shows that men and women are more similar than they are different in terms of communicating in their close, personal relationships (Canary and Emmers-Sommer 1997). Although some differences do exist, they are not substantial enough to declare that the sexes or genders are significantly different. Many of the so-called differences in the sex and gender literature are related more to flaws in the studies themselves, such as errors in recollection in self-report studies, or individuals' reports that are affected by social desirability. Specifically, social desirability refers to an individual reporting what he or she thinks others would find acceptable, rather than what actually may be the truth. Within the context of gender differences, this would account for men and women reporting what they stereotypically believe men and women should do from a social expectation standpoint versus what they actually do.

Research on communication in close, personal relationships suggests that men and women are more similar than they are different. Nevertheless, some differences do exist between men and women. Many of the differences surface within the contexts of conflict or household chores. For example, in their extensive examination of the sex and gender literature, Dan Canary and Tara Emmers-Sommer (1997) offered the following conclusions regarding sex and gender differences. First, women, compared to men, express a greater range of emotions, such as sadness, fear, love, happiness, and anger. Women are also more inclined than men to disclose personal information, such as their personal opinion or details of their personal history. Compared to men, women are more likely to use touch to convey feelings of closeness; these feelings could be sexual in nature, but not necessarily. Interestingly, women are more likely to exercise power strategies than men. Compared to men, women are more likely to engage in manipulative behaviors and to exercise negative and confrontational conflict behaviors. Finally, women are more likely than men to enact self-disclosure behaviors, engage in loyalty toward their partner and relationship, and enact task-sharing in an effort to maintain their relationship. The authors also found that women, even in dual-career couples, tend to do the lion's share of the household chores and childrearing duties. Thus, some differences do exist between men and women; however, the extensive literature on sex and gender differences indicates that the differences are far outweighed by the similarities.

Interestingly, however, some of the subtle differences that do exist contribute in a noteworthy fashion to how men and women manage their relationships, particularly issues of contention and conflict. According to John Gottman (1994), both sex (physiological) and gender (sociological) differences are exhibited in couple conflict. Similarly, men's and women's adherence to particular gender role and relational ideologies relates to their responses during conflict.
Couple-Types

The distinction between sex and gender differences is important in communication research. For example, gender differences, rather than sex differences, play an important role in defining couple-types. Mary Anne Fitzpatrick (1988) argued that a variety of couple-types exist and that each couple-type's attitudes and beliefs toward their partner and relationship hold particular implications for their responses to conflict. It is important to consider the variety of couple-types that exist for several reasons. First, embedded within the couple-types are demonstrations of adherence to gender roles. Second, couple-type relates to how spouses respond in conflict situations, which, third, holds implications for couple communication patterns and for the satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the relationship.

Traditional couple-types. Men and women who are traditionalists are highly interdependent and emphasize doing things together versus autonomously. Traditionalists hold traditional gender role beliefs (e.g., the woman takes the husband's last name when married) and hold the stability of the relationship in high esteem. Traditionalists use positive communication behaviors during conflict (e.g., discuss issues keeping the relationship in mind, not using threats), tend not to argue over petty issues, but do openly engage about salient issues (Fitzpatrick 1988).

Independent couple-types. Independents value both connection and personal autonomy. They actively discuss many aspects of their relationship and hold nontraditional beliefs about relationships (i.e., do not espouse the belief that the "man is in charge") (Fitzpatrick 1988). Independents actively engage in conflict over minor and major issues, argue for personal positions, and offer reasons for accepting their positions rather than rely on a one-up/one-down solution by virtue of gender (Witteman and Fitzpatrick 1986).

Separate couple-types. Separates, unlike independents or traditionalists, are not interdependent and avoid interaction, particularly conflict. Separates are likely to withdraw or give in during early stages of conflict because active engagement in conflict involves interaction and a degree of interdependence. However, when separates do engage in conflict, the interaction can be quite hostile (Fitzpatrick 1988).

Mixed couple-types. Approximately half of couple-types do not neatly fall into a specific category such that both husband and wife are traditionalists, independents, or separates. Rather, many couples represent a meshing of two different types. The most common mixed couple-type is the separate husband and the traditional wife (Fitzpatrick 1988). Several implications for this couple-type exist in terms of gender role adherence, engagement in conflict, and effects on the satisfaction of the relationship.

The research suggests that certain communication patterns can be constructive to a relationship's preservation, whereas other communication patterns can be destructive to a relationship's maintenance.

Communication Patterns and Couple (Dis)satisfaction

Gottman and colleagues (Gottman 1994; Gottman and Levenson 1988) have offered specific couple communication patterns that contribute to both satisfactory and dissatisfactory couple relationships, with a specific focus on the close, personal relationship of marriage. (It is important to note that most or all of this research has been conducted in the United States.) In fact, Gottman is able to predict divorce accurately 94 percent of the time. Gottman has found that the behaviors of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and withdrawal hold the most impact in influencing a close relationship negatively. Although men and women can exercise all of these behaviors, it is of particular harm when the man in the relationship withdraws from conversation about important issues of contention. This particular behavioral pattern is indicative, for example, of a mixed couple-type in which the husband is a separate and the wife is a traditional.

Overall, Gottman (1994) offered several observations regarding what delineated a satisfied relationship from a dissatisfied one. First, dissatisfied couples more often engage in destructive communication patterns than satisfied couples. Specifically, dissatisfied couples are more likely to engage in criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and withdrawal. Many of these behaviors can also be conveyed nonverbally.
For example, a partner stiffening up to convey defensiveness, rolling his or her eyes to convey contempt, or withdrawing and staring off into space to convey withdrawal. Of the four behaviors, Gottman (1994) argued that the behaviors of contempt and defensiveness are the most corrosive and that the man's withdrawal from conflict is the strongest predictor of divorce. In addition to emotional harm, these behaviors can also contribute to physiological distress. Second, husbands are more likely to withdraw from conflict in dissatisfied marriages and less likely to do so in satisfied marriages. That is, husbands are more likely to self-disclose their feelings to their wives in happy marriages. This suggests that one cannot assume that men are emotionally distant from everyone, as the common stereotype would indicate, and nondisclosive. Indeed, the mediating factor might be the state of the relationship. Research also suggests that women have a greater repertoire of individuals to disclose to than men do and are more inclined to disclose regardless of marital satisfaction, whereas some men only disclose to their wife. For those men in unhappy marriages, their feelings are often revealed to no one. Overall, much of the research suggests these aforementioned patterns (Canary and Emmers-Sommer 1997; Gottman 1994; House 1981). Third, men and women function differently in the face of negative affect. Specifically, the research suggests that women function more aptly in high conflict situations than men. Within the context of satisfied marriages, both husbands and wives engage in deescalation behaviors (i.e., reducing the conflict) during low-level conflict. Women engage in deescalation behaviors during high conflict as well, whereas men find it difficult regardless of their marital satisfaction. Within dissatisfied marriages, neither the husband nor wife engages in conflict de-escalation behaviors (Gottman 1979, 1994). Fourth, research suggests that destructive communication during conflict affects men more adversely from a physiological standpoint than women. Gottman (1994) concluded that men and women may differ in their responses to negative communication such that men react more quickly to negative affect and that their recovery from the episode is slower than that of women. These reactions to negative communication are evidenced through means such as elevated adrenal excretions and blood pressure. Interestingly, Gottman (1994) noted that while women's health appears to be superior to men's within these contexts, men seem to benefit from marriage more than women do. Fifth, Gottman (1994) argued that a five-to-one ratio is necessary for a stable relationship; specifically, that five positive communications are necessary to balance one negative communication. Further, negative communications that involve the four destructive behaviors mentioned earlier (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and withdrawal) are particularly harmful to the relationship. In response to these destructive behaviors, Gottman (1994) suggests that partners engage in the behaviors of soothing, nondefensive listening, and validating. Sixth, in addition to certain communication behaviors and patterns, dissatisfied or distressed couples are often distinguished from satisfied or nondistressed couples in terms of how their conflict behaviors collectively produce cycles. Specifically, dissatisfied couples often find themselves in what Gottman (1994) termed "negativity cycles." Such cycles involve one partner offering a complaint and that complaint is met with the partner's countercomplaint, which is met with another countercomplaint, and so forth. Gottman found that satisfied and dissatisfied couples were distinguished, in part, by the couples' ability to remove themselves from the complaint/countercomplaint pattern. Whereas a satisfied couple might take only a few passes at the destructive complaint/countercomplaint cycle, dissatisfied couples kept hashing out the complaints, forcing themselves into a deeper and deeper negativity spiral. Finally, distressed couples are more inclined to form negative attributions toward the partner during conflict and attribute behavior to internal factors, whereas nondistressed couples were more likely to attribute behavior to external factors. For example, if John and Jane are a distressed couple, they are more likely to attribute blame to one another, whereas if they are a nondistressed couple, they are more likely to attribute behaviors to the situation at hand.

Conclusion

Numerous conclusions can be gleaned from the aforementioned findings. First, it is important to note that the findings reviewed here are not exhaustive. Second, it is important to emphasize that the majority of the research presented here focuses on marital couples. Third, and as noted earlier, it must be kept in mind that some of the past gender and sex research might be somewhat in error as reliability and validity issues exist. Fourth, it is necessary to note that the majority of the research presented here was conducted in the United States. Surely, some cultural differences exist in relational ideologies and communication patterns. Nevertheless, certain noteworthy patterns do exist in the research findings that speak to sex and gender differences and similarities as well as what couple communication patterns contribute to satisfied and dissatisfied relationships.
What is particularly salient about work done on couple communication patterns is that awareness is being increased about demonstrable patterns that work and do not work in close, personal relationships. Indeed, how individuals communicate in their close personal relationships holds direct implications for individuals' personal and relational well-being. Of value in the extant research on couple communication patterns and relational satisfaction is that noticeable learned patterns can be unlearned by partners in dissatisfied and distressed relationships if the desire exists to better the relationship.

**Bibliography**


**Other Resources**
