

Mental Self-Government and Marital Communication

by

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ABSTRACT

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The current study was designed to investigate a multi-level model of marital communication and cognitive styles. One hundred and thirty-four married dyads, ranging in age (38-63 years) and length of marriage (16-35 years) participated in the current study. The relationship between cognitive style, (ie., mental self-government) and marital communication, including models of marital satisfaction, demand-withdraw behavior, and relational dimensions were assessed. Dyadic analysis, including the application of the actor-partner interdependence model revealed that mental self-government significantly influenced each level of marital communication uniquely. In addition, these findings demonstrate the complex and dynamic nature of marital relationships and the employment of advanced statistical techniques to adequately capture this dynamic complexity. Future research includes refining the proposed model of marital communication and cognitive style, as well as, broadening the scope of theoretical models and populations studied.

PREVIEW

PREFACE

The current study was designed to investigate a multi-level model of marital communication and cognitive styles. One hundred and thirty-four married dyads, ranging in age (38-63 years) and length of marriage (16-35 years) participated in the current study. The relationship between cognitive style, (ie., mental self-government) and marital communication, including models of marital satisfaction, demand-withdraw behavior, and relational dimensions were assessed. Dyadic analysis, including the application of the actor-partner interdependence model revealed that mental self-government significantly influenced each level of marital communication uniquely. In addition, these findings demonstrate the complex and dynamic nature of marital relationships and the employment of advanced statistical techniques to adequately capture this dynamic complexity. Future research includes refining the proposed model of marital communication and cognitive style, as well as, broadening the scope of theoretical models and populations studied.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

Mental Self-Government and Marital Communication

Participation in marriage holds several advantages (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Not surprisingly, rates of marriage in the U.S. are extremely high; almost all adults will experience marriage at some point in their lifetime (Fitzpatrick 1988; Schoen & Standish, 2001). Unfortunately, just under half of these marriages will end in divorce (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006; Young & Long, 1998). It has been suggested that to truly understand a marital relationship's successes and failures, one must identify the unique interaction patterns between individuals (McClintock, 1983). Understanding patterns of marriage requires an understanding of the communication that goes on between members of marital relationships (Thomas, 1977). No social or demographic factor of marital relationships is considered more important than communication in marriage (Avriette, 1988; Fitzpatrick, 1988). An important question to address, in this area of research, is how can we begin to understand what causes individual differences in marital communication? One potential cause of differences in marital communication may be cognitive styles, which influence how each individual thinks, feels, and subsequently interacts. The purpose of the current study is to understand how cognitive styles impact the communication patterns within a marital relationship. Cognitive styles may help elucidate causes of individual differences, yet there is a lack of research applying cognitive style differences to a marital relationship.

Although cognitive style theories proliferated between the 1950's and 1970's, a more recent addition to the concept of cognitive styles is Sternberg's (1997) theory of mental self-government, which attempts to improve upon the empirical and conceptual

limitations of previous cognitive style research. Compared to other theories, which are limited in their narrow approach to cognitive styles (e.g., focus only on maximal ability versus typical ability or interaction with environment), mental self-government provides a comprehensive theory of cognitive styles. This wide-ranging theory will allow for a unique evaluation of cognitive styles and marital communication. Therefore, the current study will evaluate mental self-government and its role in marital communication.

In order to evaluate the current state of research evaluating thinking styles and their role in marital communication, the current study will first identify the importance of marital communication, methodological considerations in marital communication research, and models of marital communication as they have been classified in past research. A discussion of how cognitive style theories have been classified in past research and the conceptual relationships between these marital communication and cognitive style approaches will follow. Next, a discussion of the limitations of past cognitive style theories and attempts to improve upon these limitations will lead to the introduction of Sternberg's theory of mental self government. Further, a demonstration of the utility of mental self-government as a comprehensive theory of cognitive styles will be completed through the comparison of mental self-government to other current cognitive style approaches. After a brief review of previous research using the mental self-government approach, a literature review of past research evaluating marital communication and both cognitive style and cognitive processes will be presented. Considering the past research evaluating these two concepts, specific models of marital communication will be selected and conceptually related to the theory of mental self-government; a multi-level framework to examine the relationship between marital

communication and cognitive style will be generated from this evaluation. Next, a discussion of specific methods for the current study, including the sample and measurement tools will be addressed. After considering the unique analytical considerations required to evaluate dyadic data, specific analyses to assess hypothesized relationships proposed in the current study will be identified, analyzed, and interpreted. These results culminate in the generation of a model relating marital communication and cognitive style.

Marriage

Importance of Marriage and Marital Communication

It has been demonstrated that participation in a marital relationship holds several advantages over those who are not married (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Married individuals report higher levels of mental and physical health and a larger amount of assets (e.g., home ownership) when compared to their single counterparts. In addition, children of married couples report more success in academic and occupational settings than their single parent counterparts. Considering the empirically demonstrated benefits of marriage, it is understandable that an estimated 82 to 87% of all individuals in the United States attempt marriage at least once in their lifetime (Schoen & Standish, 2001). However, despite the advantages of a marital relationship, of those that are married, approximately 14% consider themselves unhappy in the relationship (Young & Long, 1998). Although divorce rates have subtly declined over the last decade, these rates have risen from 11% in 1900 to 42% today (Avriette, 1988; Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006; Singh, Mathews, Clarke, Yannicos, & Smith, 1995; Young & Long, 1998). When considering mental health, unhappy marriages are

cited as precipitating factors in approximately 50% of all psychiatric intakes (Young & Long, 1998). Considering the prevalence, as well as, the obstacles married couples face with respect to happiness, developing an understanding of marriage can be considered a relevant and important aspect of social research.

Understanding the communication that goes on between members of a marital relationship is an important step to understand the marital relationship (Thomas, 1977). Communication is defined as the exchange of information, ideas, emotion, and skills (Trenholm, & Jensen, 1996). In a marital relationship, this includes both verbal and nonverbal interaction but should not be limited to the physical exchange. Marital communication must also address the characteristics each individual brings to an exchange, as well as, the perception each individual takes from an exchange. Marital communication is considered the most important social or demographic (e.g., socioeconomic status) factor in a marriage (Avriette, 1988; Fitzpatrick, 1988). For example, it is not the financial problems, but the negotiation of how to rectify these problems that is important in maintaining a successful marriage. Just as marital communication is often reported as significant in satisfying relationships, deficits in the utilization of communication skills are demonstrated in unhappily married couples (Young & Long, 1998). In addition to its relevance to marital satisfaction, communication is necessary for intimacy, commitment, understanding of power, conflict negotiation, and gaining compliance within a marriage (Feeney & Noller, 2002; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Sillars, Leonard, Roberts, & Dun, 2002; Young & Long, 1998). In fact, difficulty in marital communication is the most common complaint presented for couple's therapy (e.g., Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Considering its importance, marital

communication can be regarded as the root of other aspects of marriage, which makes it a good starting point in research that seeks to identify causes of relationship and interaction patterns.

Measurement of Marital Communication

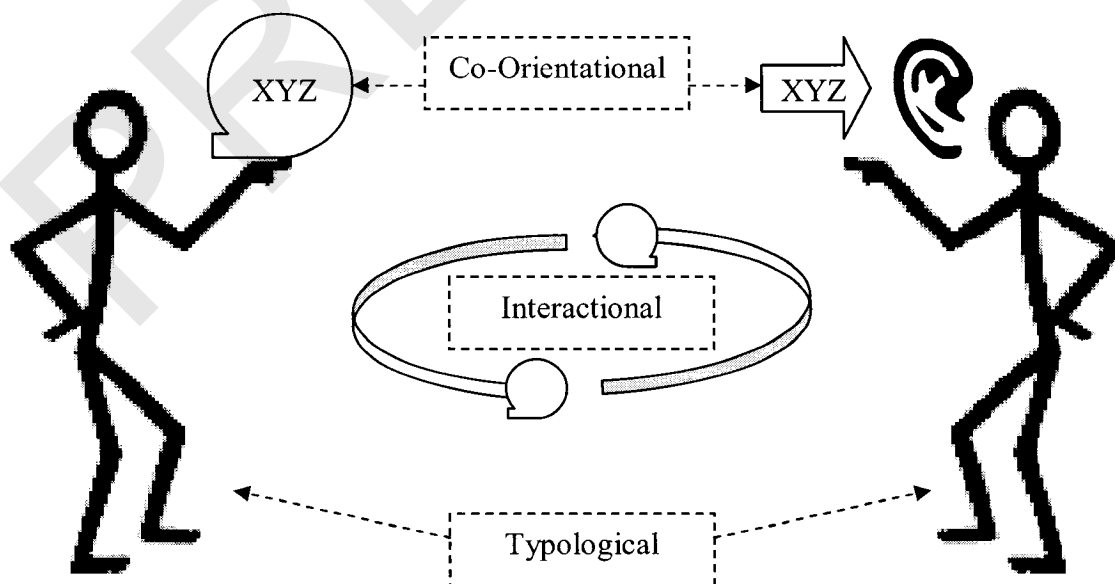
Models of marital communication can be derived from both objective and subjective measurements, can be obtained from both inside and outside the marriage, and can be unidimensional or multidimensional (Fitzpatrick, 1988). Subjective data includes information that requires judgment or opinion when gathered. Objective data includes data that can be systematically measured (Guay, Boisvert, & Freeston, 2003). If attitudes or reactions to an argument represent subjective measurement, the actual length of the argument represents an objective measurement. The insider perspective includes what individuals within a dyad report about marriage (Fitzpatrick, 1988). For example, estimates of marital satisfaction reported directly from a husband or wife constitute an insider perspective. The outsider perspective includes reports or information gathered from individuals outside the marital relationship (Fitzpatrick, 1988). A therapist's evaluation of adaptive communication techniques would serve as a measure from an outsider perspective. Unidimensional instruments measure one aspect or dimension of marriage, whereas, multidimensional instruments consider many dimensions or aspects of marriage. While unidimensional instruments are advantageous in exploratory designs, they negate the contribution or interaction other dimensions may provide (Babbie, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 1988). Models of marital communication can include any combination of the above considerations. Not surprisingly, marital communication research has produced a substantial number of diverse theories and models of communication within a marriage.

Variation in Theories of Marital Communication

Considering the wealth of literature regarding theories of marital communication (e.g., Gottman, 1979; Harvey & Wenzel, 2001; Markman, 1984; Sillars, Leonard, Roberts, & Dun, 2002), it is useful to classify these communication models to understand the similarities and differences among them. By organizing existing theories of marital communication, one can provide a rational system for selecting which model(s) of marital communication to study. One way to differentiate among the plethora of marital communication models is to identify models as being co-orientational, interactional, or typological (see Figure 1) (Fitzpatrick, 1988; Sillars, Leonard, Roberts, & Dun, 2002). Although the interactional model is most closely associated with how one defines communication (ie., interaction or exchange between two individuals), the co-orientational and typological models must also be considered important components or contributors to the process of communication.

Figure 1

Models of Marital Communication



Co-orientational. Co-orientational models of marital communication focus on the input and the output of a verbal exchange. Input in these models refers to any verbal or nonverbal communication from one spouse to another spouse (Harvey & Wenzel, 2001). Output in a co-orientational model focuses on an individual's accuracy in predicting their spouse's opinion (ie., co-orientational accuracy) or interpreting their spouse's verbal messages (ie., communication accuracy) (Fitzpatrick, 1988). These models measure whether individuals agree (ie., input believed to match output) and are accurate in agreement (ie., input actually matches output). In addition, these theories assess the degree to which a dyad knows that they are accurate or inaccurate about marital communication issues (Fitzpatrick, 1988). A co-orientational model is concerned with explaining how intersubjectivity is developed in communication between people. Since agreement and accuracy of interpreting others' messages are demonstrated to be linked to happiness (e.g., Avriette, 1988; Markman, 1991; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Noller, 1984), measures of marital communication within a co-orientational model focus on perceived satisfaction (e.g., Spanier, 1976; Harvey & Wenzel, 2001) or adjustment in the marriage. Considering the empirical relationship, measures of marital satisfaction or marital adjustment levels are often used to assess the perceived congruence and accuracy in marital communication. Higher reported levels of satisfaction or adjustment are assumed to be related to more agreement and accuracy (Harvey & Wenzel, 2001).

Interactional. The actual input and output of marital communication is not always as important as the likelihood that one input will trigger another. Interactional models measure both nonverbal and verbal sequences and patterns within an actual interaction (Fitzpatrick, 1988). These models focus on both the actual message (ie., an

outsider perspective) and each members' feelings of satisfaction during the interaction (ie., insider perspective). Interactional models often require the use of a coding scheme, which determines the success or failure in a specific marital interaction. In other words, these theories measure how adaptive or maladaptive interactions are between the dyad. Examples of interactional models of marital communication include Markman's (1984) behavior competency model and Gottman's (1979) structural model of marital interaction.

Markman (1984) posits that negative marital communication may result in the inability to adequately express feelings or argue constructively. This theoretical approach views marital communication as a skill that can be assessed within an interaction and learned for use in future interactions. A successful marital communication interaction includes successfully negotiating conflict and expresses feelings to one another. Gottman (1979) suggests that unsuccessful marital communication is rigid and inflexible, includes large amounts of negativity, an increased likelihood for negative communication to be reciprocated, and domination of communication by one spouse over the other. Therefore, high levels of rigidity, negativity, and power difference in a dyad result in poor marital communication interactions.

Typological. Typologies are often created and employed to examine a multidimensional concept (Babbie, 2005). These models of are considered methodologically substandard to others since measurement can be confounded by the multidimensional nature of a typology (e.g., lower internal consistency values) (Babbie, 2005). However, since typological models consider the complexity and context of the marital communication within each unique relationship, rather than mere output or

focusing on a specific interaction, typological models are essential to fully understand marital communication (Fitzpatrick, 1988). Regarding the study of marriage, typological models posit a few basic marital communication types. Examples of typological models applied to marital communication include Myers and Briggs' (1962) reflection of Jungian personality typologies and Snyder and Smith's (1986) types of marital satisfaction.

Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, and Hammer (1998) posit 16 personality types as the pattern of preferences across four dimensions (Introverted versus Extraverted; Sensing versus Intuition; Thinking versus Feeling; Judging versus Perceiving). Although this theory was historically utilized in academic and occupational settings, it has also been applied to studying marital relationships (Young & Long, 1998). By understanding the similarities and differences in the typological profile of a dyad, this model provides a frame of reference for understanding the negotiation of conflict and increasing the effectiveness of marital communication. Snyder & Smith (1986) posit five types of marital satisfaction types (Types I-V). These typologies reflect the interaction between reported distress within a marital relationships and familial responsibilities and roles. By understanding these familial responsibilities and roles (e.g., high levels of distress surrounding child-rearing), a more complex understanding of the type and function of marital communication is revealed (e.g., communication surrounding child-rearing strategies versus intimacy among partners).

Limitations of Marital Communication Models. Although co-orientational and typological models appear more as peripheral elements of communication when compared to interactional models, each approach does possess its own strengths and weaknesses. Co-orientational models are ideal for measuring the input and output of

verbal exchanges within a married couple. However, these models ignore the complexity and patterns found in the actual interaction. The interactional model focuses on the actual interaction (ie., how one input engenders another). Taking an outsider perspective, this model looks beyond the end product (ie., output) of an interaction and considers the path and pattern of conversation en route to the final output. While this model does focus on the complexities of the actual interaction, interactional models do not consider the context of the interaction (ie., the relationship). Typological models do take into consideration the entire marital relationship and types of communication. However, in doing so, these models do not focus on the communication process and outcome.

Considering the unique contribution of the co-orientational, interactional, and typological models in understanding marital communication, a comprehensive evaluation of individual differences in marital communication must include a multi-level approach (ie., consideration of marital communication models from each level of marital communication). Further, although conceptually, the interactional model is more central to the study of marital communication, it is important to consider multiple approaches. Therefore, although the co-orientational and typological approaches appear more peripheral to the concept of marital communication, they make an important contribution to the understanding of marital communication. Although a comprehensive review of the literature evaluating the link between marital communication and specific cognitive style theories will be presented later in this study, in short, this area is lacking in research. Further, even fewer studies measure marital communication in a multi-level approach. Considering both the lack of research and narrow scope on the role of cognitive styles on marital communication, the inclusion of a co-orientational, interactional, and typological

model in this evaluation is warranted. However, before addressing both specific models of marital communication and research on marital communication and cognitive style, it is necessary to discuss cognitive styles and how cognitive style theories have been approached in past research.

Cognitive Style

Cognitive styles are considered an individual's way of processing information and represent the bridge between cognition and personality (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995). Interest in cognitive styles as a measure of individual differences can be identified as early as the 1920's with Jung. However, between the 1950's and 1970's, a great proliferation of cognitive style typologies developed, in part, as a result of difficulties in utilizing IQ as a construct to elucidate individual differences (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997). In order to organize the plethora of cognitive style typologies, these theories have been divided into three approaches: cognition-centered, personality-centered, and activities-centered (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995).

Cognitive Style Approaches

Cognition-centered. Most closely associated with the cognitive style boom, these cognitive styles were constructed as a method to differentiate individuals without using IQ. Cognitive styles from this approach are extremely diverse, both in how they are measured, as well as, by the level of empirical attention. A cognition-centered approach dictates that the perceptual system is a window into a person's cognitions and intellectual ability. Cognitive styles in this approach are most closely associated with abilities, and as such, are measured through tests of maximal performance (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997). Examples of style typologies in the cognition-centered approach include category

width, which assesses one's perceived range of differences in the environment (e.g., number of legs on a table) (Pettigrew, 1958), reflection-impulsivity, which assesses one's consideration of the validity of alternative hypotheses (Kagan, 1966), and scanning, which assesses the extent one attempts to verify judgments (Gardner & Moriarty, 1968).

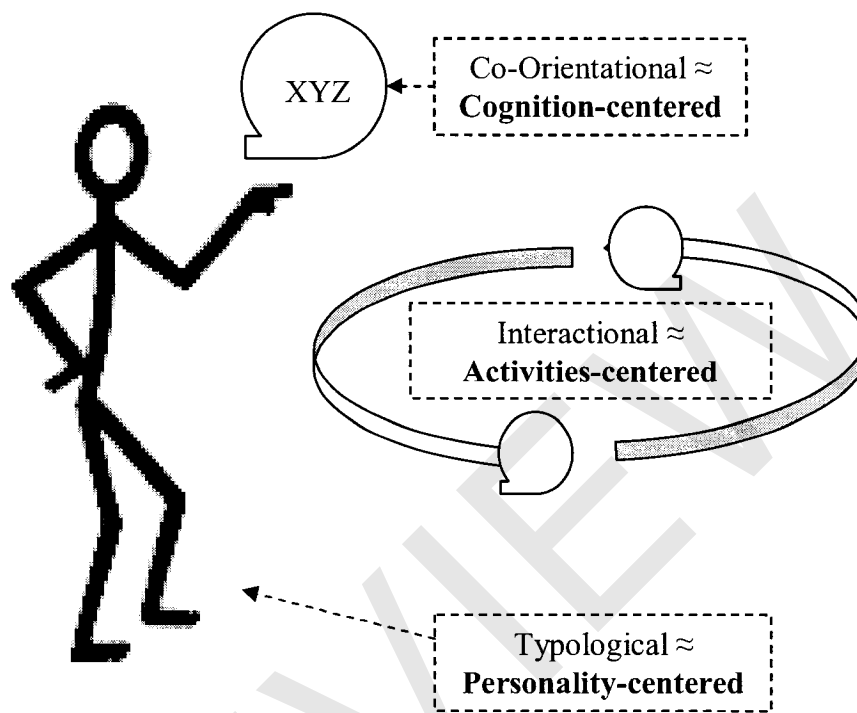
Personality-centered. Typologies within the personality-centered approach measure individual differences in one's competence and command over variables typically considered as personality. In other words, a personality-centered approach dictates cognitive styles not as personality traits, but as individual differences in level of control over the domains of cognitive functioning, interests, values, and personality development (e.g., level religiosity dictates typical behaviors) (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995). Since cognitive styles in this approach are most closely associated with personality traits, they are generally measured by typical performance (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997). Examples of style typologies in the personality-centered approach include Myers' theory, which yields 16 styles generated from a matrix distinguishing among perceiving (sensing versus intuition), judging (thinking versus feeling), dealing with others (introversion versus extraversion), and dealing with the outer world (judgment versus perception) (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) and Gregorc's energetic model of styles, which yields four styles generated from a matrix distinguishing between space (concrete versus abstract) and time (sequentially versus random) (Gregorc, 1984).

Activities-centered. The activities-centered approach developed in the late 1960's and early 1970's, when cognitive styles were becoming popular in the field of education (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995). This approach dictates that cognitive styles are mediators of activities generated from cognition or personality aspects. In other words,

aspects of an individual's personality and the way an individual perceives the environment can mediate how they interact and respond to different learning environments. Styles in this approach are further divided into learning styles and teaching styles. Learning styles attempt to identify indicators or educational conditions from which an individual will most likely learn. For example, Kolb (1974) identified patterns of strengths and weaknesses in learning abilities of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation and different learning environments. Teaching styles attempt to identify specific preferences for teaching that are consistent across different methods of instruction. For example, Henson & Borthwick (1984) identified several types of teaching styles (e.g., subject-centered; emotionally exciting) that a teacher may use in a classroom environment.

Relationship with Marital Communication Models. Although the approaches to models of marital communication and cognitive styles are not completely isomorphic, theoretical relationships between the three cognitive style approaches and three levels of marital communication previously addressed can be made (see Figure 2). For example, the cognition-centered cognitive style approach yields similarity with the co-orientational level of marital communication. Measurement in a co-orientational model often requires an individual's perception (e.g., perceived satisfaction). The framework to adequately develop and utilize this perceptual system is best captured by a cognition-centered approach, which measures maximum cognitive ability (ie., the ability to accurately interpret input from another).

Figure 2.

Marital Communication Models and Cognitive Style Approaches.

The personality-centered cognitive style approach is most similar to a typological level of marital communication. This similarity stems from the close association of these approaches to typical performance driven by personality traits of the individual and the relationship. In fact, Myers' interpretation of Jungian personality theory (Myers & McCaulley, 1985; Myers, McCalley, Quenk, and Hammer, 1998) is considered an exemplar for both a personality-centered cognitive style approach and a typological model of marital communication.

Finally, the activities-centered cognitive style approach is most similar to an interactional level of marital communication. To review, in the activities-centered approach to cognitive styles, perception of the environment can mediate how an

individual responds and interacts with it. Applied to marital communication, these models focus on how an individual's perceptions of the environment (ie., another individual) can mediate activity (e.g., patterns of interaction) between individuals.

Considering the similarities between cognitive style approaches and levels of marital communication models, it will be important to consider cognitive style models that embrace aspects from each cognitive style approach. In other words, a comprehensive cognitive style theory would provide a unique opportunity to understand the relationship between cognitive style and marital communication as a broad, multi-faceted concept.

Limitations of Cognitive Style Approaches. While a plethora of styles were introduced, current research on cognitive styles is almost nonexistent (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997; Zhang 2000a). This dearth of research may best be understood as a function of the limitations of previous cognitive style theories. For example, cognitive styles within a cognition-centered approach tended to be more empirically driven than theory driven and, therefore, were dependent on the validity of the measure used to evaluate the theory (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995). As a result of the emphasis on a more inductive approach, the cognition-centered approach tended to lack internal validity within a theory, convergent validity among other cognitive styles within this approach, and external validity of each theory within the environment (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997). Cognitive styles within a personality-centered approach tended to produce empirical results incongruent with the associated theoretical model (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995), which may be due to a lack of clarity in defining each cognitive style. The lack of clarity often yielded theories within a personality centered approach that were