Amount of Communication as a Symptom of Distressed Marriages Based on Reports of Divorced Individuals

Megan Lyons
West Virginia University,

Melissa Bekelja Wanzer
Canisius College

Virginia P. Richmond
West Virginia University

Recent research on married couples has indicated that dramatically reduced communication between married partners may be an indication of a marriage under stress and may indicate an increased likelihood of divorce. The present study compared amount of communication in marriage reported by divorced individuals with that reported by married individuals who reported low to moderate levels of marital satisfaction. The results indicate these reports are highly similar. It is recommended that reduced communication be considered as a marker variable for marriages under stress and future research seek to identify the cause(s) of the observed relationships.

It is generally acknowledged by communication theorists and researchers that there is no necessary relationship between the quantity and quality of communication in a relationship. People who have lived together for a long time may have less need for communication with each other than people with shorter relationships simply because they know each other so well. In other relationships, people who can't stand one another may have less desire for communication because they know that communication would be unpleasant. Knowing only that people in a relationship have less communication, therefore,

Megan Lyons (M.A., West Virginia University, 1998) is employed by the Buffalo (NY) News. Melissa Bekelja Wanzer (Ed. D., West Virginia University, 1995) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Canisius College, Buffalo, NY 14208-1098. Virginia P. Richmond (Ph.D., University of Nebraska, 1977) is a Professor in the Department Communication Studies at West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, 26506-6293.

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH REPORTS, Volume 15, Number 3, pages 327-330
does not necessarily tell us that the relationship is stressed.

Recent research, however, does indicate that a greatly reduced quantity of communication in a marital relationship is associated with lowered marital satisfaction (Richmond, 1995). Whether reduced communication causes lower satisfaction, lower satisfaction causes reduced communication, or another variable or variables produce both of these phenomena is unknown. While this is an area that deserves future research, it was not the focus of either the Richmond (1995) study or the current research. Rather, this research is concerned with whether reduced communication is a marker variable which can be reliably used to identify marriages which are in trouble.

In the previous research by Richmond (1995) the 272 participants were currently married couples. No participants were divorced. Of the 136 couples involved, 123 reported moderate to very high levels of satisfaction. Only 13 couples were identified as reporting low to moderate levels of satisfaction. The results indicated that those couples reporting lower satisfaction also reported greatly reduced communication, as compared to the couples reporting more marital satisfaction. As a result, Richmond (1995) indicates that amount of communication between marital partners, particularly on some topics (notably not on the topics of children or politics), is strongly associated with satisfaction in the marriage.

Since the Richmond study was based entirely on reports from married couples (each partner responding separately), there is nothing in the study which speaks to the issue of whether reduced communication is associated with divorce. However, that is the implication of the results. The purpose of the current study was to extend this line of research to include divorced individuals. The research question posed was:

RQ: To what extent do divorced individuals differ from married individuals who are low-to-moderate in marital satisfaction in terms of the amount of their self-reported communication with their marital partner?

METHOD

Participants

Two groups of participants were involved in this study. The first group consisted of the 26 individuals who participated in the Richmond (1995) study and reported low to moderate marital satisfaction on the instrument developed by Wheeless, Powers, and McVetta (1979). The actual data from the Richmond study was used. The participants were not contacted to provide more data.

The second group of participants consisted of 93 divorced individuals. Approximately half of these individuals were contacted by undergraduate students enrolled in communication studies courses who distributed the questionnaire to their divorced relatives, friends, coworkers, and classmates. The participants were requested not to identify themselves or their ex-partner on the questionnaire to insure confidentiality. No demographic data was collected for the same reason. The other half of this group were recruited at a regional campus of a large mid-Atlantic university. Divorced non-traditional students were asked to participate. Those who volunteered completed the same questionnaire as the other members of this group. Although gender data was not collected directly (as noted above), data collectors indicated approximately equal female and male
participation.

Measure

The only measure employed in this study was the measure of amount and topic of communication developed for the previous Richmond (1995) study. This instrument involves ten communication topics/items. Each item provides a seven-step response continuum associated with a different communication topic. The total amount of communication score is produced by summing across the ten items. The instructions for the two groups were identical, except that the married individuals were asked to report the communication within their marriage, while the divorced individuals were asked to report the communication in their former marriage.

Alpha reliability of the total score in the previous study was .80. In the current study for the new participants it was .79. While the reputation of single-item scores is that they are quite unreliable, their reliability is normally not subject to estimate. In the original study, however, scores on each topic were provided by both marital partners. Correlating these scores provided what essentially were validity estimates. These correlations were of such magnitude as to indicate that most of the single-item scores had to have at least a minimum of .60 reliability to permit the validity estimates obtained.

RESULTS

The mean total amount of communication scores for the two groups were subjected to a t-test. The result indicated no significant difference in the means, although the divorced participants' score was approximately 3 points lower than the low-to-moderate satisfaction married group (Table 1). With a larger sample, of course, this would likely be a statistically significant difference. However, since this difference represents less that one-third of a standard deviation of the mean on the instrument, it is socially inconsequential.

The t-tests on the individual topic scores yielded only two statistically significant differences, one on the "children" topic and the other on the "politics" topics (Table 1). In both cases, the divorced group reported less communication on the topic than the married group.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present investigation provide more support for considering greatly reduced communication as an indicator of a marriage under stress. Data from divorced individuals is very similar to that of married individuals who are less satisfied with their marriages. The only notable differences between the two groups is that divorced individuals reported less communication on the children and politics topics than the less satisfied married individuals did. Oddly, these are the precise topics on which the less and more satisfied married groups did not differ in the Richmond (1995) study. While we probably should not make too much of this, it does seem to be at least an odd coincidence. It is tempting to explain reduced communication about children as being a function of the stress in the parental relationship. However, the strong similarity of the finding on the politics topic makes that explanation suspect.

This study sought to extend the results of the Richmond (1995) study on marital satisfaction and amount of communication to include divorced individuals. The results suggest that less satisfied married individuals' and divorced individuals' reports with
TABLE 1

Amount of Communication for Divorced Individuals and Low to Moderately Satisfied Married Individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Divorced Ind. N=93</th>
<th>Low to Moderately Satisfied Married Ind. (Richmond, 1995) N=26</th>
<th>Diff</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Comm.</td>
<td>35.2 11.2</td>
<td>38.1 9.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>4.2 1.9</td>
<td>4.7 1.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>4.0 2.1</td>
<td>5.0 1.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>3.9 1.8</td>
<td>4.0 1.6</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>3.8 1.8</td>
<td>3.3 1.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>3.4 1.7</td>
<td>4.0 1.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacations</td>
<td>3.3 1.9</td>
<td>3.0 1.8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>3.6 1.7</td>
<td>3.8 1.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>2.7 1.9</td>
<td>3.1 1.9</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>2.4 1.7</td>
<td>3.3 1.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Life in General</td>
<td>3.5 1.7</td>
<td>3.7 1.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p > .0001

regard to total communication and communication on most topics with the marriage are very similar. Given these results, reduced communication in a marriage should be considered a probable marker variable indicating a marriage under stress. This, of course, does not address the issue of causation. This should be a major concern in future research.

REFERENCES
