

DOES THE BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS  
COURSE ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF COUPLES?:  
COUPLES TALK ABOUT THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNICATION

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study was designed to evaluate the appropriateness of the Building Healthy Relationships course, which is a communication skills acquisition program for couples. Although skills training has been considered the standard intervention for some time, there is recent controversy in the literature regarding the adequacy of a skills based approach. In addition, there is a scant amount of qualitative program evaluation literature in the field of couples' communication. This project used an adapted focus group methodology in interviewing ten couples regarding their experiences of marital communication, with specific emphasis on the impact of hope and gender on communication. Detailed analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in fifteen shared themes. These themes suggest that while communication skills are important to marital communication, there are several other processes that must be considered, including the role of virtue, intimacy and companionship, and gender differences in communication. In addition, the role of the individual in the relationship and various environmental factors play a significant part in couples' communication. The shared themes in this project, in addition to being significant in and of themselves, also share a complex relationship with one another. As well as a consideration of the content of the participants' contributions, transcripts were also coded with respect to the couple interactions that occurred throughout the interviews. Implications of the results for the Building Healthy Relationships course as discussed, along with suggestions for further research. Requests to access interview transcripts can be directed to the Counselling Psychology Program at Trinity Western University (604-888-7511).

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Never before have marriage preparation and enrichment programs been so accessible and utilized by the general public. As proponents of family life education, churches, workplaces, therapists, and community centers are among the many services and resources that have responded to an overwhelming need for stronger and more stable marriages. Over the last thirty years, several programs have been developed to assist couples in strengthening their marriage, with skill building having been recognized as the standard approach. Recently, there has been a call to re-evaluate some of the long-standing assumptions that have shaped the practice of marriage enrichment (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998).

## Brief Building Healthy Relationships Course Description

*Building Healthy Relationships* (BHR) (Lees, Groenhof, & Klaassen, 1999) is a program currently being offered in the lower mainland of British Columbia. It has been adapted from the Couple Communication Program (Miller, Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1992). The primary goal of the BHR program is to assist couples in developing effective communication and conflict resolution skills, which will in turn lead to a number of related benefits. Some expected benefits include increased awareness of personal and partner communication styles, clarified levels of hope for the relationship, and an understanding of the connections between communication and gender. (For a more detailed description of the BHR course, see Appendix A.)

## Purpose of the Study

Although over 160 couples have participated in the BHR program, until very recently, there has been no formal evaluation of the course. In 2002, Westerop completed a quantitative study, finding that perception of communication skill, and of

hope for the relationship improved following participation in the program, but that these improvements were not long-lasting. The purpose of this current study is to complement Westerop's exploration of the effectiveness of the BHR course, using qualitative methodology.

Westerop's 2002 study is reflective of the majority of current program evaluation, relying on quantifiable measures, and self-report regarding specific variables. This method of research is valuable, and often culminates in results which shape and improve interventions. This study seeks to broaden the perspective of program evaluation of the BHR course by speaking to couples about their experience of marital communication. For the purposes of this project, communication is defined in a broad sense, including not only verbal exchanges, but also a broad range of non-verbal behaviours that comprise the interactions of a couple. It is the hope of this researcher that through their interviews, couples will paint a descriptive picture of the communication in their relationships, outlining what is important to them, roadblocks they contend with, and the means by which they overcome them. A comparison of the picture painted by these couples with the goals and objectives of the BHR program should serve to illuminate strengths of the program, as well as areas that might be underrepresented or ignored.

As in Westerop's 2002 research, this study will seek to better understand the implications of gender in marital communication, as well as the role of hope. Ultimately, it is this researcher's hope that this study, complemented by the research already conducted, will make a meaningful connection between the insights and experiences of the 'everyday experts' of marital communication to the clinical implications of the BHR program in particular. In striving to make this connection,

the current research also aims to question some of the assumptions regarding skills-based intervention for couples.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Marital relationships have been a main focus of family life education, whether it addresses marital satisfaction, parenting, or the promotion of marital stability, to name a few. In response to the divorce rates and negative effects of divorce on children, family life research was spurred on and educational and therapeutic programs were set into motion. As a result of years of research and practice in this area, a number of angles at promoting and strengthening families have emerged. One of the more common angles is that of strengthening communication in the marital relationship. Churches and other religious institutions played a significant role in the initiation and maintenance of such programs, as a way of investing in healthy family functioning (Johnson, 1995).

## Marital Satisfaction Research

A great deal of the research addressing issues related to marriage seeks to better understand how different variables impact the level of satisfaction with the marital relationship. Although many of these studies may not directly explore the link between communication and marital satisfaction, a brief overview is relevant, as communication is often impacted by these variables.

With regard to demographics such as age, level of education, race, and religion, research tends to indicate that homogeneity in these areas is associated with increased levels of marital satisfaction (Heaton, 2002). Simply put, the more alike partners are with respect to background, the more likely it is that they will have a satisfying marriage. For example, Call and Heaton (1997) note that religious orientation is associated with increased marital stability, particularly when the husband and wife share common attitudes and behaviours regarding the role of

religion in their marriage. Despite the association between homogeneity and marital satisfaction, Amato, Johnson, Booth, and Rogers (2003) note that over the last twenty years, the rates of marital heterogamy have increased.

Numerous researchers have addressed the relationship between companionship and intimacy and level of marital satisfaction. In a recent study by Appleton and Bohm (2002), companionship was found to be one of the primary themes associated with enduring marriages. Similarly, Harper and Schaalje (2000) found that intimacy is a mediating factor in the relationship between stress and marital satisfaction. With regard to sexual intimacy, Scott and Sprecher in their 2000 review, note that sexual satisfaction is highly correlated with general relationship satisfaction. Weiss (2002) also speaks to the role of intimacy and positive use of humour in increased marital satisfaction. In order to maintain intimacy, Stafford and Canary (1991) address the importance of using marital maintenance behaviours, which are associated with a greater sense of liking as well as increased marital satisfaction. Although the connection with communication may not be explicit in these cases, establishing and maintaining intimacy within a relationship would also be suggestive of a healthy capacity for communication.

The family life cycle is also an area that has been heavily researched with regard to marital satisfaction. A number of studies (Orbuch, House, Mero, & Webster, 1996; Peterson, 1990) describe the pattern of marital satisfaction as “U” shaped, with marital satisfaction declining in the early years of marriage (often corresponding with the arrival of children), and then rising again in the later years of marriage (often corresponding with the departure of children from the home). The task of parenting, according to Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) is associated with

increased marital conflict. Recently, VanLaningham, Johnson, and Amato (2001) found that marital satisfaction tends to decrease throughout the duration of the relationship, painting a rather discouraging picture for couples. Other research indicates that issues of the family life cycle and marital satisfaction does not begin with the nuclear family, but with the family of origin, noting that experiences with the family of origin have an impact of the level of satisfaction within the marriage (Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003).

Issues that impact the life of the individual may also have significant impact on the quality of the relationship. Not surprisingly, Leonard and Roberts (1996) found that excessive drinking is negatively correlated with marital satisfaction. Other issues, such as mental health concerns are also likely to have some bearing on levels of marital satisfaction, as Sandberg, Miller, and Harper found in their 2002 study of older adults with depression. Additionally, increased job stress is associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000), and with lower levels of family interaction (Repetti, 1994).

The research reviewed above is indicative of the complexity that is associated with not only the lived experience of marriage, but also the search to understand it through scientific means. Undoubtedly, many of the variables discussed above have a very real impact not only on marital satisfaction in general, but on the way couples communicate with one another about these issues. With this contextual background, it is now possible to look in greater detail at the specific topic of marital communication.

## Communication in Marriage

Dismal statistics with regard to the quality and stability of marriages in North America and beyond have been troubling researchers, clinicians, and couples themselves for generations. According to the *Vital Statistics Compendium* (1996) the divorce rate in Canada ranges from 24% in Prince Edward Island to 56% in the Yukon. The divorce rate for British Columbia is among the highest in Canada, at 45%. These troubling numbers have prompted a wide response in an attempt to better understand both pitfalls and strengths of marital relationships. One particular area that has attracted a great deal of attention is communication within the marital relationship (Burlison & Denton, 1997). As research and practice in this field has been refined, more precise questions are raised and the complex nature of communication within the marriage relationship is underscored.

So what does the research have to say about communication within marriage success or discord? The answer with regard to the 'big picture' would suggest that there is a clear link between the two (Holmes & Boon, 1989; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Generally speaking, research indicates that increased levels of communication are associated with greater marital satisfaction, while communication deficits are associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction. For example, communication was identified as a major contributing factor to marital satisfaction in a study that examined marital strengths in enduring marriages (Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Positive communication processes have also been identified as premarital factors that predict later marital quality (Larson & Holman, 1994; Markman, 1979, 1981). Conversely, Hahlweg, Revenstorf, and Schindler (1984) indicate that communication problems are the most frequent complaint of couples entering therapy.



It appears that few researchers or clinicians would dispute the merits of positive communication in a marital relationship; however, the terms “communication” and “marital quality” are broad constructs and open to interpretation. Consequently, researchers have sought to narrow these definitions, and look for more specific descriptions (Larson & Holman, 1994; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Sillars & Weisberg, 1990).

### Communication Skills and Marital Satisfaction

A large percentage of the research on marital communication has been dedicated to the relationship between communication skills and marital satisfaction. Earlier studies in the 1970s and 1980s were based on theories of social learning and behaviour exchange, and were descriptive of the relationship between communication skills and marital satisfaction (see Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Gottman, Notarius, Markman, Bank, & Yoppi, 1976). Studies throughout the later 1980s moved away from pure description, and sought to uncover some of the mediating factors between communication skills and marital satisfaction (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Research throughout the 1990s has continued to identify factors mediating the relationship between these two variables and has also paid closer attention to matters such as gender-based differences (Benjamin & Sullivan, 1999), and individual cognitive and affective processes (Burlison & Denton, 1997). Gottman and Notarius (2000) do note that the majority of research conducted in the field of marital communication has been focused on a relatively young population, which has implications regarding generalizability of results.

While examining the ‘big picture’ is useful, it would be a vast oversimplification to ignore the significant amount of literature that addresses the

complexity of the relationship between communication skills and marital satisfaction. For instance, Sillars and Weisberg (1990) note that the type of issue a couple is discussing has significant bearing on the communication process. In their article, they distinguish between “instrumental” and “companionate” topics, pointing out that conversations of an instrumental nature tend to be specific and concrete, while companionate discussions focus on relational issues and tend to be much more ambiguous. Sillars and Weisberg also suggest that episodic communication aids in the understanding of instrumental issues, while sheer quantity of conversation relates more to an understanding of companionate issues. Similar distinctions could be reflected in a couple’s experience in the Building Healthy Relationships Course, depending on the nature of the issue the couple chooses to deal with.

Another complex variable within marital communication revolves around gender differences in the process of communication. In general terms, Levenson and Gottman (1983) note that communication in distressed couples is marked by emotional involvement by the female and emotional withdrawal by the male. They describe females as the “caretakers” of the emotional relationship, communicating more negative and positive emotions, perhaps in an attempt to engage their husbands.

An additional factor that complicates the relationship between communication and marital satisfaction relates to individual perceptions of communication within the marriage. A 1994 study by Houck and Daniel found that wives tended to report less communication or to rate the communication lower than did their husbands. As early as 1964, Virginia Satir commented on the importance of perceptions in marital communication by claiming that the wider the discrepancy between husbands’ and wives’ perceptions of communication within the relationship, the greater the

likelihood that the marriage would be an unsatisfactory one. Sillars and Weisberg (1990) also speak to the impact of perceptions when stating that “Individual level perceptions are shaped and modified by interaction at the relationship level but some individual perceptions are stubbornly autonomous” (p. 501).

The preceding variables are among some of the many that have been explored in an effort to better understand the intricacies of marital communication. The breadth of the research serves to illustrate the complexities of the exchange between individuals in an intimate relationship. Much like a puzzle, the larger picture of the communication process is represented by a complex pattern of intertwined factors.

#### Communication Skills Questioned

For the past decade, the process of communication within marriage had been viewed from a skills building or deficit approach. In other words, couples that possess skills associated with communication such as empathy, active listening, and conflict resolution are generally assumed to have greater marital stability and satisfaction (Kurdek, 2002; Larson & Holman, 1994). Conversely, couples with deficits in the same areas are generally assumed to experience greater instability and less satisfaction in their relationships. This has been the dominant conceptual framework echoed in the most common interventions of the last decade. O'Donahue and Crouch (1996) write that communication training “as an attempt to remediate problematic communication, has become an important component in many approaches to marital therapy” (p. 87).

In recent years, there has been a growing trend toward questioning the relationship between communication skills and marital satisfaction, as well as the emphasis on skills training. Burlison and Denton (1997) illustrate some common

areas of confusion. First, they indicate that studies of communication skills and marital satisfaction tend to focus on distressed couples. They point out that in these troubled relationships couples may be motivated by frustrated desires, which may or may not reflect an actual deficit of communication skills (see also Gottman, 1979; Sullivan, Pasch, Eldridge, & Bradbury, 1998). Secondly, they suggest that distressed couples may actually be choosing to communicate in a negative manner, which speaks more to intention than level of skill. Burleson and Denton (1997) have also noted that an emphasis on a skills-deficit approach tends not to distinguish between motivations, skills, and actual behavior in the process of communication, therefore, assuming that an assessment of communication skills can be based solely on observed behaviors is problematic.

Perhaps some of the most vocal criticisms against communication skills training have been based in the extensive research of John Gottman (see Gottman, Coan, Carrere & Swanson, 1998; Gottman, 1999). In this well publicized 1998 article, Gottman and his associates called for the abandonment of interventions based on active listening, which is descriptive of many of the marriage preparation and enrichment interventions currently available, including the BHR course. Gottman and his colleagues write, "The active listening model, which is the most common component of current models of marital therapy, occurred infrequently in the resolution of marital conflict and was not predictive of differential marital outcomes" (p. 17). This was a surprising statement coming from Gottman, because he had previously been a proponent of the active listening model (Gottman, 1979; Gottman, 1994). Rather than interventions based on communication skills building, Gottman suggests an alternative focused on gentleness, soothing, and de-escalation of

negativity. His suggestions emerged from his Seattle "Love Lab" research (see Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Gottman, 1999).

Not surprisingly, there has been a quick response to Gottman's (1994) call to abandon active listening-based interventions. Among the first to respond have been Stanley, Bradbury, and Markman (2000). They offer criticism of Gottman's research both on methodological and conceptual levels. With regard to methodological concerns, the authors mention non-random selection, failure to control for other factors, and ambiguity about statistical procedures, among others. Conceptually, Stanley, Bradbury, and Markman take issue with the meaning Gottman attaches to labels given to different phenomena, suggesting that he may be taking some liberties in this regard. For example, his term "soft start-ups" may easily be understood as active listening, a concept frequently used in communications literature.

In addition to the criticisms of a purely skills based approach being addressed in the current literature, there are also some novel research projects that are suggestive of a shift from the dominant skills based approach. For example, Worthington Jr. (2002) addresses the role of forgiveness in marriage, while Jeffries (2000) explores the role of virtue in the process of conflict resolution. A recent conceptual paper by Leary (2002) seeks to better define the role that the 'self' plays in marital relationships. While the research described above is not representative of the majority of the literature in couples' communication, it does illustrate the fact that some new areas of focus are on the horizon.

Researchers tend to agree that communication is an important component of marriage, but often differ sharply as to what actually represents the practice of good communication (Gottman, 1994; Stanley, 2001). As research in marital

communication has evolved, longstanding conceptual frameworks have come into question, as have the interventions based upon them. The BHR course is an example of such an intervention, driven by a skills-building perspective. An ethical response to the questions and criticisms raised will require an examination of the effectiveness of the BHR course, starting with a review of current related research on communication in marriage, gender, and skills acquisition.

### Gender and Communication

Gender and communication tend to have a broad appeal with regard to research. Several branches of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and communications have devoted attention to better understanding the complexities of cross-gender discourse. Two of the main tasks of these areas of study have been as follows: first, to describe the process of communication between men and women and to assess how it differs from same-sex communication; and second, to postulate as to the explanations for these differences. In simpler terms, researchers want to know how things work, and why they work the way they do.

Whether through variables such as word choice, conversational style, or even the use of silence, it has been well established that men and women go about this process of communicating with one another in different ways. One fundamental difference is that of the content of men and women's speech. For instance, Goldschmidt and Weller (2000) analyzed the content of conversations in 11 different settings and found that in each setting, the emotional content of speech was significantly higher for women than for men. Gottman and Levenson (1992) also note that the speech of wives tends to have more emotional content than that of husbands. Researchers have also found sex differences in conversational content between

mothers and their children. For example, Fivush (1989) found that with daughters, mothers tend to focus on emotions, while with sons the conversational content is geared toward behaviors associated with emotions.

Another significant difference in communication between men and women relates to varying purposes for the conversations themselves. Research has indicated that the very framework upon which communication is built is often driven by different goals associated with each gender (Tannen, 1982). Typically, the function of women's communication is to connect with others in building relationships, foster intimacy, and offer support. Conversely, functions of communication for men are more closely related to carrying out tasks, and tend to focus on status as an individual, rather than as a part of a social network (Woodward, Rosenfeld, & May, 1996). Deborah Tannen, a key author in the area of gender and communication notes that men are more likely to view relationships as hierarchical, and as such, use conversation in a largely factual way to assert their position in the hierarchy. Women, who view relationships in a more egalitarian manner, tend toward using conversation to build connections and identify themselves as part of a larger group.

Convention of speech (or conversational style) is an additional area where men and women demonstrate considerable differences in communication. For instance, Mulac et al. (1998) have found that women tend to use more conversational backchannels (such as 'uh-huh' and 'yeah') than men. Additionally, women more frequently make use of questions during the course of conversation. Hannah and Murachver (1999) concur with the majority of the research in noting that in general, women tend to be more considerate listeners than men in that they interrupt less often

and offer more compliments and encouragement to continue, than do their male counterparts.

An additional communication pattern that appears to be related to gender is what Christensen and Heavey (1993) refer to as “demand–withdrawal” interaction. In this pattern, one member of the couple attempts to initiate conversation regarding a specific topic, while the other takes action to avoid the conversation by changing the subject, withdrawing, or even leaving the room. Christensen and Heavey indicate that in approximately 60% of couples, wives tend to demand, while husbands withdraw, while in 30% of couples the opposite is true. The remaining 10% tend to demand and withdraw equally. Christensen and Heavey (1990) do point out that men are likely to act as pursuers when addressing issues of importance to them. Perhaps these figures are not overly surprising when one takes into account that women are frequently described as the “caretakers” of the relationship, and whose conversation is characterized by efforts to elicit and encourage further discussion (Goldschmidt & Weller, 2000; Heaton & Blake, 1999; Klinetob & Smith, 1996). With regard to seeking clinical intervention, Bringle and Byers (1997) note that it is women who tend to be the initiators in seeking marital therapy.

#### Models of Gender Differences in Communication

With a topic as complex as gender differences in communication, it is understandable that there are several explanations for these observed differences. Perhaps the two most hotly debated explanations for gender-based communication differences are the two cultures theory (Maltz & Borker, 1982) and the dominance theory (Lakof, 1975).



The two cultures theory (Maltz & Borker, 1982) posits that children and youth grow in male and female subcultures. Between the ages of 5 and 15, boys and girls are for the most part socially isolated from one another, and that it is in these peer gender groups that communication norms are learned. Consequently, males and females speak the same words, but the language takes on different meanings and communication often transforms into miscommunication. To illustrate, Maltz and Borker note that females learn that the use of questions implies interest, whereas males learn that questions are used to control the conversation. By the time that gender isolated settings is no longer the norm, communication patterns and attachment of meaning to conventions of speech have become quite entrenched.

In contrast to the two cultures theory (Maltz & Borker, 1982), the dominance theory (Lakof, 1975) holds that there is a fundamental difference in power between men and women. According to this feminist perspective, men's use of language serves to keep women in a subordinate position. For instance, where a man might say, "Let's go out for dinner," a woman would be more likely to ask, "Should we go out for dinner tonight?" Lakof states that women's non-assertive style of speech further goes to supporting male dominance. Henley and Kramarae (1991) expand on Lakof's writings by suggesting that because of the power differential between the genders, women are required to learn both of the "male and female languages," while men have no reason to alter the status quo by familiarizing themselves with a female perspective of communication.

A criticism of both of these explanations of gender-based communication differences is that while both are well developed conceptually, claims are sometimes made without the support of significant empirical research (Hannah & Murachver,

1999; Mulac et al., 1998). This criticism is more often directed at the two-cultures theory. While Mulac and colleagues offer some empirical support, more research is needed in this area. Others have suggested that placing the two cultures and dominance theories in direct opposition to each other serves to create an artificial dichotomy (Franzwa & Lockhart, 1998; Hannah & Murachver, 1999). Researchers such as Tannen (1994) and Crawford (1995) appear hesitant to associate themselves with one theory at the exclusion of the other, as singular explanations tend to be overly simplistic when it comes to an issue as complex as gender and communication.

A third model of gender differences that has been gaining attention in recent years is based on a description of biological differences that exist between men and women. A 2000 review authored by Booth, Carver and Granger notes that research in the behavioural endocrinology, behaviour genetics, as well as evolutionary psychology have had an increased focus on family functioning of late, emphasizing reciprocity among social, behavioural and biological processes. Considerable research has been conducted recently concerning the role of biochemistry in gender-based behaviour, with emphasis on the function of the hormone oxytocin. Oxytocin is produced in both males and females, and has been associated with cognitive, sexual, reproductive, maternal and affiliative behaviours (Francis, Young, Meaney & Insel, 2002). Much of the research concerning oxytocin has addressed gender-based differences in response to stress. Taylor and her colleagues (2000) note that while under stress, estrogen tends to moderate the affiliative functioning of oxytocin in women, while the production of androgens suppresses the release of oxytocin in men. Consequently, the 'fight or flight' response to stress is more common to males,

while Taylor and her colleagues use the term 'tend and befriend' to describe a typical reaction of females to stressful situations. While researchers such as Taylor do not argue that biochemical or evolutionary theories provide a complete explanation of gender differences, they do posit that factors such as these are instrumental in shaping certain gender-based behaviours.

The prevalence of gender differences is well represented in both popular culture as well as scholarly research. In the realm of popular culture, John Gray's bestseller 1992 book Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus has been instrumental in bringing the issue of gender differences to the forefront of everyday conversation about relationships. To ignore the impact of these differences on marital communication would render an analysis incomplete. Conversely, researchers, practitioners, and couples themselves would benefit from an awareness of stereotypes generated by an over-emphasis on gender-based differences. Maintaining a mindfulness of the multi-faceted nature of communication in marriage should contribute to a balanced perspective.

While the literature largely supports the gender differences in communication, it appears that our culture is moving in a direction that attempts to erase such stereotypical gender distinctions. As a result, researchers continually need to test this assumption when studying related topics to insure that their results are understood in an appropriately up to date framework.

### Hope

While hope is a relatively familiar concept in everyday life, in counselling, and in existential psychology, researchers' fine-tuned definitions and models of hope are a more recent development. Writers such as Sophocles and Nietzsche have been

quoted by hope theorists as representing the stance that hope is an illusion that has no basis in reality (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990; Snyder et al., 1991). Others acknowledge the existence of hope but view it as dangerous, a set-up for disappointment. A few researchers in the area of social science have been devoting attention to the apparent importance of hope, taking into account historically developed perspectives (Snyder, 1994). They have sought to understand the development of hope, its purpose, its relationship to other facets of life, and its measurement. One such researcher is Snyder (1995), who has developed perhaps the most prominent model of hope.

#### Snyder's Model of Hope

Snyder (1995) has developed a theory, definition, and measure of hope. He defines hope as “the process of thinking about one’s goals, along with the motivation to move toward, (agency) and the ways to achieve (pathways) those goals” (p. 355). In simpler terms, he views hope as being comprised of two main components: willpower and “waypower.” These two components of hope are “reciprocal, additive, and positively related, although they are not synonymous” (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 575). Levels of hope and its development are influenced by a variety of factors, including attachment and social learning. In other words, from Snyder’s perspective, hope can be nurtured. He argues that even in adulthood, strategies can be employed to increase willpower and waypower, and to develop stronger goals. Such strategies include prioritizing, taking care of distractions, and authoring one’s own decisions (Snyder, 1994). To Snyder, the idea that hope is an illusion pertains only to when it is not connected to a concrete goal.

Snyder and colleagues (1991) found that those who exhibit higher hope tend to create goals in many arenas of life, and set more difficult goals. They also embrace their goals. Snyder notes that hope is not correlated with native intelligence, and also points out that unless methods are implemented to raise hope, it tends to stay fairly consistent over time. Although societal norms might suggest that men would report higher hope, given their greater opportunities, no differences were found between genders on overall hope scores, nor willpower or waypower sub-scores.

### Alternative Theories of Hope

In a review written by Snyder (1995), he notes that there are only two alternative theories of hope: Averill et al.'s (1990) theory, which proposes that hope is an emotion with cognitions governing it; and Stotland's (1969) model, which suggests that hope is cognitive, and exists when there is any level of expectation of achieving a goal. Snyder considers Averill's theory as less conceptually complex than his hope theory, but recognizes its ecological validity. He also notes that it does not lend itself to measurement as easily as his own theory. The measurements taken within Stotland's framework are done via behavioral observations rather than through a psychometrically sound and valid scale.

### Hope in Relationships

The literature provides support for the idea that shared goals in an intimate relationship is an important factor in holding that relationship together (Huston, 2000). Furthermore, without the hope that these shared goals might be accomplished, it would follow that the relationship is not likely to stay intact, or at the least, one would expect marital satisfaction levels to decrease. As Snyder (1994) illustrates, when two people begin to date they are looking for differences and similarities,

hoping to find a connection that might last, and seeking to understand the other's goals and how they might merge with their own. If those two people decide to commit long-term, there is likely a belief that the goals are compatible and that both members are going to actively pursue these goals. This does not always turn out to be the case, as Snyder writes, "Whether a couple has moved to differing goals, or realizes they never had the same goals, the key is that common goals are lacking" (p. 262).

The relationship between one's dispositional hope and their hope for the relationship is portrayed by Veroff, Douvan, Orbach, & Acitelli (1998, as cited in Huston et al., 2001) who state that "Spouses that take a zestful, positive attitude toward life are more likely to maintain satisfying marriages" (p. 245). Although this positive attitude may more specifically reflect the willpower component of hope, the argument could also be made for waypower. Conceivably, one's abilities to create and follow pathways could lead to a higher likelihood of being satisfied with the marital journey. Perhaps couples with less hope for their relationship will remain in the marriage, but view the marriage as a backdrop rather than a focal point in their lives. More time and energy is then distributed to friendships, work, children, and outside activities. Is being married the same as having an active marital relationship? It is difficult to imagine actively working on the relationship without hope that it might last or improve.

Having high hope is not suggestive of experiencing the process as easy, but of having the ability to overcome hurdles and obstacles. Presumably, increasing one's abilities to overcome obstacles should contribute to higher hope. As noted earlier, high-hope people find satisfaction in the journey. It would follow that people with

high dispositional hope would relate more easily to the concept of marital satisfaction as a process rather than an unchanging state established in the first year of marriage.

In some cases of research and clinical intervention, the relationship of hope and marital satisfaction is in fact greater than the reader would first suspect. For instance, Vaughan (2001) found that those who participated in the HOPE program (*Hope-Focused Marital Enrichment*) showed an “increase in marital satisfaction over time, whereas the control group remained roughly constant” (p. 1124). It cannot, however, be concluded from this that marital satisfaction and hope are the same construct, but rather, that they are related in some way.

Snyder (1994) describes willpower as the mental energy that moves us from one point to the next, “a reservoir of determination and commitment” (p. 6). Commitment is frequently mentioned in the literature as being an important factor in marital success. The scope of the commitment literature is too broad to review here, but one particular article that serves as an example is that of Clements and Swensen (2000), who studied couples over the age of 50 and discovered that of the five variables studied, commitment to one's spouse was the most consistent predictor of the quality of their marital relationships. They also found that commitment was negatively correlated to marriage problem variables such as problem solving, a scale of marital problems, among others. Commitment was positively related to expression of love, including moral support and verbal expression. Like most researchers in the area of marriage and communication, they did not look at hope.

### Hope and Communication

Communication is key to developing shared goals (Snyder, 1994). Snyder urges couples to maintain a willingness to talk about these shared goals, whether it brings

about the awareness that the shared goals do not exist, or opens up the discussion to finding ways to pursue the shared goals that are discovered. This communicating usually begins during the dating phase, but sadly often fades over time if not maintained or fine-tuned. Both listening and speaking are important, and if the process of communication is not feeling successful, Snyder suggests that couples might benefit from seeking professional guidance, either to receive education or mediation.

How would prevention and enrichment programs in particular aid in the enhancement of hope? Based on the objectives of such programs, couples' ability to resolve conflicts should increase if they are able to find more ways than one to resolve it. This is reflected in waypower, having the ability to find alternative routes to the goal when roadblocks occur. Communication skills can help individuals clarify relationship goals throughout their marital journey. After all, it is much easier to plan effectively if the destination is clear and well defined. Communication skills aid couples in identifying the core issues. Once these issues are explicit and better understood by the couple, the identified conflict should theoretically be easier to resolve and be experienced as less overwhelming. For example, it may be difficult to know specifically how to 'improve couple relationships' but easier to 'spend more one on one time with your spouse in the evenings,' which could theoretically facilitate improved couple relations. Prevention and enrichment programs usually provide opportunities for couples to practice their skills with a facilitator, and according to Williams (1992), practicing the art of planning is helpful. As Perry and Hutson (1996) put it, "Hope must be made practical, pulled out of the realm of wishes and feelings into the world of experience and action" (p. 8).



Without speculating too broadly, there appear to be several connections between hope and communication. Given what is already known about these connections, the development of communication and conflict resolution skills should contribute to the enhancement of hope.

#### Marital Program Evaluation

In reviewing the literature regarding program evaluation for couples' interventions, it quickly becomes apparent that qualitative studies are not well represented in the field. With few exceptions (Durana, 1997; Lees, 1986) related studies are almost exclusively quantitative, and studies that do make use of qualitative methodologies usually do so in concert with quantitative approaches. Because a review of qualitative program evaluation in this particular area would be extremely sparse, the review will be expanded to consider program evaluation in general.

Marriage prevention and enrichment literature reveals a variety of findings in regard to the evaluation of related programs. The foci of preparation and enrichment materials have followed the evolution of the research, with some of the more recent programs demonstrating more of a theoretical base (Stanley, 2001). The research has become more specific over the years, addressing previous findings and refining research designs. An important division of evaluative research has focused on communication skills programming for couples.

One of the studies that has made use of some qualitative measures was conducted by Lees (1986) at the University of British Columbia. Using quasi-experimental design, Lees compared three marriage preparation programs, including The Marriage Project, Roman Catholic, and The Couples' Workshop. A recurrent institutional cycle design with 96 subjects in each of three courses was used, with

results indicating that the subjects who took The Couples' Workshop showed a significant change on Willingness to Seek Help with Marriage, and Relationship Beliefs Inventories. Those changes were not found in the Roman Catholic or The Marriage Project samples. On these two measures, however, there was a significant difference between those who participated in the Couples' Workshop and the other two courses. Thirty qualitative reports were done after participants had completed the course. The qualitative results indicated the importance of experiential and skill-training methods in explaining the difference between courses.

The goal of the courses Lees (1986) studied was to increase the likelihood of seeking further assistance if needed by changing attitudes about marital myths. The courses were meant to disrupt myths that conflict is destructive, skills are not needed, partners cannot change, and that understanding partners' thoughts without speaking is important in love relationship. Communication skills are helpful and one step towards awareness in a marriage, but studies show that these gains do not last (Giblin, 1986; Sullivan et al., 1998).

Guerney's (1977) *Relationship Enhancement Program* was evaluated by comparing its outcome with a lecture/discussion control group. Both groups were involved in 24 hours of training, and couples were randomly assigned. Twenty-seven couples were in the experimental group, and 30 couples in the control group. None of the demographic differences were significant. The researchers examined changes in need for inclusion, control, and affection. The results showed an increase in "wanted control" for the control group and an increase in "expressed affection" from pretest to posttest in the experimental group. Further research was recommended to determine which programs are most effective, for whom, when, and why (Ridley & Sladeczek,

1992). This study did not include follow-up research, important for establishing long-term benefits.

Hawley (1991) compared three enrichment programs involving 99 newlywed couples, some of which were assigned to a treatment group, and others to the control group. The interventions included *Growing Together*, TIME, and *Learning to Live Together*. The ENRICH instrument (Olson, Fournier & Druckman, 1986) was used as a pretest-posttest measure. On individual measures, significant differences were found between the experimental groups and the control group. Gains in marital satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, and family and friends were among them.

Durana (1997) evaluated the PAIRS program, a group designed to enhance and help maintain intimacy with married couples via a psycho educational approach. A total of 137 subjects participated. Measures of intimacy and marital adjustments as well as an open-ended questionnaire were used. Of the participants, 76% perceived significant gains in intimacy through the follow-up period, gender differences were reduced, and intimacy appeared to be a learnable skill. Included in the measure of intimacy are the skills of conflict resolution and expressiveness. He points out that the research is lacking on the common themes of listening, self-expression, conflict resolution, and gender issues. This is another study that made use of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Kaiser, Hahlweg, Fehm-Wolfsdorf, and Groth (1998) investigated a cognitive-behavioral psycho educational weekend group. Four couples participate in each group. A randomly assigned, wait-list control group was used. The intervention addressed communication and problem-solving skills, provided opportunities to

discuss relationship expectations, and exercises were included to enhance their sexual relationship. The results showed that the intervention couples used more positive verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors than the control group. The control group reported significantly more relationship problem areas and more negative communication behaviors than the intervention group. From pre-assessment to a one-year follow-up, the intervention couples reported fewer problem areas at follow-up.

Based on the humanistic perspective, the *Relationship Enhancement* (Guerney, 1977) program teaches disclosure and empathy skills. According to Silliman and Schumm (2000), evaluations of this model found short-term improvement in empathy, problem solving, self-disclosure, and overall communication skills. Participants at the high school level who attended an 8-hour training program showed “improved listening, expression, and problem solving abilities relative to control group peers” (p. 136).

Among the more empirically examined programs is the *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program* (PREP); (Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992). It has undergone numerous revisions and is currently available in two formats. In the first version, 4-8 couples attend 6 weekly 2.5 hr. sessions where mini-lectures are presented on communication skills and relationship issues; a coach is able to guide the couples in practicing those skills. In the second version, 20-40 couples attend a weekend workshop where the same lectures and practice opportunities are offered in a more intensive and focused way. The areas covered include effective listening and speaking skills, increasing awareness of relationship issues, the role of fun in maintaining and stabilizing a relationship, problem solving, ways to increase

intimacy and commitment in their relationship, exploring spiritual beliefs, and ways to improve physical communication (Silliman & Schumm, 2000).

In longitudinal studies on the PREP (Renick et al., 1992), short-term effects (pre-posttest) are shown on communication skills, and long-term effects (1.5 year follow-up) include maintained or improved relationship satisfaction and impact of communication skills. After three years, differences between control group couples and couples who attended the PREP increased, and negative communication was used less by intervention couples than by control couples. In addition, intervention couples showed a decrease in problem intensity and control couples showed an increase. When compared to the *Engaged Encounter* (EE) program, PREP showed greater increases in overall communication, problems solving, and support-validation (Renick et al., 1992). According to Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, and Clements (1993), a five-year follow-up of the PREP showed the intervention group as having increased levels of positive communication and lower levels of negative communication and lower levels of violence.

Russell and Lyster (1992) examined factors associated with consumer satisfaction in terms of a marriage preparation course, similar to PREP. The course focuses on communication skill development and relational issues. Ratings from 196 couples that attended *The Marriage Project*, demonstrated high overall satisfaction with the training.

Older couples reported significantly higher rates of improved communication than did younger couples after the course. In addition, there was evidence of an increase in the understanding and utilization of communication and conflict resolution. There was no control group in this study.

Miller (see Nunnally, Miller, & Wackman, 1975) developed the popular *Minnesota Couple Communication Program* based on 10 years of research supporting the idea that couple communication is vital to effective marital interaction. Initial informal evaluations by Nunnally et al. (1975) showed the program was generally favorable, but these researchers failed to look at the program's long-term effects.

Miller's (1975) course was later developed into the *Couple Communication Program* (CCP), a 12-hour program that provides awareness and skill training. When evaluated, it has shown enhanced positive interaction and short-term gains in communication quality in treatment group couples (Wampler & Sprenkle, 1980). Before its 1991 revision, Wampler (1990) reviewed the research to date on this systems-based program, including 70 different groups, totaling 500 participants. She found that most studies were well designed and used control groups and follow-up procedures. According to a design evaluation scoring (Gurman & Kniskern, 1978), Wampler reports that several studies on the CCP rated Very Good, including Russell, Bagarozzi, Atilano, & Morris (1984), Brock and Joanning (1983), Davis (1980), Joanning (1982), Miller (1971), Nunnally (1971), Russell, Wampler and Sprenkle (1980), Schaffer (1981), and Schwartz (1981); (all cited in Wampler, 1990).

Wampler's (1990) review revealed several trends. In terms of self-reported impact of CCP, there were mixed results, some showing positive effects, some no effects, but no negative effects. The ratio of studies finding positive to no effect was 42:29 at short-term effects, and 15:20 at long-term. A study that used the FACES (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985) measure reported positive effects only, although limited to the cohesion dimension and did not do follow-up (Biderman, 1983). The

behaviorally measured studies showed a greater ratio of positive to no effect than the self-report research, at 14:2 studies for short-term effect and 2:6 for long-term.

More recently, Butler and Wampler (1999) did a meta-analysis of 16 studies of the CCP. They found positive outcomes on all the measures, an increase in communication skills with moderate couple-perceived changes, and an overall effect of the course between pretest and posttest with a slow deterioration over time as seen at follow-up. Oliver and Miller (1994) uphold that, "Caring and skilled communication processes are prerequisites to effective problem solving, conflict resolution, and the ability to communicate affection effectively" (p. 151).

Despite the failure to use control groups, randomly assign subjects, and control for a plethora of potential confounds, the cumulative picture has helped clinicians and researchers advance understanding of couple courses. Dependent variables in related research tend to include intimacy, positive and negative communication behaviors, conflict resolution skills, marital adjustment, and gender differences. Among the most common research recommendations are the employment of follow-up measures, examining other related factors to communication in marriage, and doing sound evaluation (Wampler, 1990).

Although there are a variety of other widely used programs, few of them have reported effects in research journals. It is expected that once a program is developed, its effectiveness must be evaluated. Supportive evidence of a course's effectiveness provides a context of accountability, productivity, and an opportunity to move one step forward in the research of communication programming.

From varying methods to measuring different factors and variables, program evaluation literature has had endless possibilities in terms of studying the

effectiveness of relationship prevention and enrichment programs. Recognizing and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of previous research encourage replication, search for new and related ideas, and specify current understandings, through program evaluation.



## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

One of the defining characteristics of program evaluation of communication skills training for couples is the use of quantitative methods. In fact, this researcher found a very limited number of articles evaluating such programs from a qualitative framework. Reasons for choosing a qualitative approach for this study are two-fold. First, the research in the field of marital communication and program evaluation has become increasingly complex over the past ten to fifteen years. While this has provided for a more thorough and precise understanding of couples' communication, it has also contributed to further complexity, confusion, and debate. The aim of qualitative research in this milieu is to take a step back from microanalysis, and facilitate clarification and re-evaluation of some of the broader issues.

Second, qualitative methods highlight the views of the 'everyday experts' on marital communication, whereas quantitative analysis is not designed to capture the meaning associated with lived experience. It is the hope of this researcher that the qualitative data gathered in this study will offer some important insights into the relevance and appropriateness of training programs such as the Building Healthy Relationships course, with recognition of the importance of couples' voices.

#### Rationale for Use of Focus Group Methodology

The methodology for this project is based on a focus group approach, which has been adapted for use with a couple, as opposed to larger groups. The initial use of focus groups is generally credited to Robert Merton, (Merton, & Kendall, 1946) who in 1941 assembled groups of people to gather feedback regarding radio programming. Since that time, focus groups have been most frequently used in marketing research, and more recently, have been represented in family studies and marriage and family

therapy research (Piercy & Nickerson, 1996). Piercy and Nickerson identify several uses of focus group research, including questionnaire development, verifying previous findings, generating theories and explanations, identifying degree of consensus, and perhaps most commonly, program evaluation. Focus groups are useful when a researcher wants to better understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have lived experience of it.

Regarding focus groups, Morgan and Spanish (1984) contend that focus groups tend to “compromise between strengths found in other qualitative methods” (p. 260). For instance, focus groups allow for the observation of dialogue between peers (a foundation of naturalistic observation), while also allowing the researcher to direct the conversation to some degree (a component of direct interviewing). Focus groups are also beneficial in that the conversations that take place among peers tend to build upon one another, stimulating further discussion. Kitzinger (1995) reports that focus groups encourage participants to engage with one another and formulate ideas which might not otherwise have been articulated.

With regard to focus group size, researchers have differing opinions as to what is most appropriate. For instance, Piercy and Nickerson (1996) claim that the ideal number of participants is eight, while other qualitative researchers such as Suter (2000) prefer smaller groups, averaging about four in number. For the purposes of this study, group size was restricted to two individuals. Although a group size of two is a major deviation from traditional focus group methodology, it is still considered an appropriate choice for this research. This is primarily due to the fact that a key element of focus group interviews is the interaction that occurs amongst group members. As Gibbs (1997) states, in comparison with individual interviews, which

tap into beliefs, attitudes and feelings of the individual, "Focus groups elicit a multiplicity of view and emotional processes within a group context" (p. 3). Because couples' communication is in and of itself rich in process and interaction, couple-based focus groups appears to be a natural approach to exploration of the same.

### Recruitment Procedures

The original intent of this study was to recruit couples that had participated in the BHR course. Letters were sent to participants who had agreed to be contacted, informing them of this research opportunity (see Appendix B). These letters were followed up by phone calls. Only two couples from this subject pool responded with a willingness to participate, most probably due to the fact that potential participants reported being saturated by invitations for follow-up or requests to participate in other research projects. When it became apparent that a suitable sample size could not be obtained from past BHR participants, the study was opened to other couples that had not participated in the course. The remaining participants were largely a convenience sample, with some snowball sampling.

For the purposes of this study, both members of a couple were required to participate in the interview, because couple dynamics were a component of the study. Additionally, this study limited involvement to heterosexual partnerships, as gender based differences were a consideration in the interview.

### Participants

Twenty individuals (ten couples) participated in the study. All were legally married, although this was not a requirement of the research. All were living in the Fraser Valley at the time of the interviews, and with the exception of one participant, all were Caucasian, although there was cultural variation among participants. The age

of participants varied from 25 to 64, with an average age of 40. Of the couples, four years represented the shortest relationship, and forty-two years the longest. The average length of relationship was 17.7 years. For each of the participants with the exception of one, this was a first marriage. Seven of the couples had children, while the remaining three did not. With regard to education, level of education completed ranged from high school to graduate degree.

#### Procedure

Once couples had agreed to participate in the study, phone contact was established in order to determine a date and location for the interview. Couples were given options with regard to location. Some chose to conduct the focus group in a comfortable office setting, while others elected to have the interview in their home. Couples were informed prior to the interview that they would receive a copy of Gottman and Silver's 1999 book, Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work as an incentive for participation.

At the outset of each focus group, the primary researcher engaged the couple in some informal conversation, in order to set a comfortable, relaxed tone. Participants were also asked to complete a brief demographics form (see Appendix C). Following this, informed consent was reviewed with the participants (see Appendix D), with special emphasis on confidentiality, considering the personal nature of the information that was to be discussed. Participants were provided with an opportunity to ask questions concerning the research or the focus group procedure. Couples were invited to create their own pseudonyms, and were informed that any identifying information would be deleted.

Each focus group ranged from one to two hours in length, including the preliminary explanations, as well as a period of time to debrief following the interview. As is typical of focus group interviews, a protocol outline had been constructed prior to the interview. This outline consisted of a number of open-ended questions concerning marital communication (see Appendix E). These questions ranged from extremely broad, to more specific questions focused primarily on gender issues and level of hope regarding the couple's communication. Participants were provided with copies of the protocol outline; however, the questions were provided as a guideline to direct conversation and were not closely followed.

In addition to the couple, only the primary researcher was present for the focus group interview. According to Gibbs (1997), the role of the moderator in the focus group can be quite complex. In addition to making participants feel welcome and explaining the process, the moderator is also required to facilitate interactions between participants. Additionally, keeping the conversation relevant without being overly directive is an issue that requires balance. Gibbs also notes that the moderator must use restraint in expressing judgment or approval, which was certainly an important point in dealing with couples, particularly if personal responses were triggered by participants' comments.

All focus groups were recorded with a tape recorder, and no notes were taken during the interviews. Couples were informed that any statements that they made during the interview, but did not wish to be included in the transcript, would be deleted. Couples who wished to be informed as to the results of the study were asked to leave contact information with the primary researcher.

### Data Analysis

Richard A. Krueger (n.d.), a focus-group researcher, has established guidelines for the systematic analysis of data, which were employed by this researcher in the analysis process. From Krueger's perspective, analysis actually begins during the interview, with the researcher listening for inconsistent or vague comments, and probing for further understanding. Immediately following the interview, Krueger recommends recording hunches and initial interpretations around possible themes. From there, interviews are transcribed and analyzed on an individual basis, and then transcripts are compared and contrasted in an effort to discover shared themes. Krueger offers seven tips for analyzing focus group data, which include the following:

1. A consideration of the actual words used by participants.
2. The context of responses; statements must be considered in light of previous dialogue.
3. Paying attention to internal consistency within the interview; monitor whether participants' stories or opinions remain unchanged throughout the interview.
4. A consideration of the frequency or extensiveness of topics raised by participants. Also, pay attention to what received limited attention.
5. Instances in which participants speak with intensity should be noted.
6. Greater attention should be given to responses that are personal and specific, as opposed to responses, which are impersonal and vague.
7. Finding big ideas may require additional time to reflect, or the perspective of an additional researcher.

After focus group interviews had been conducted, audiotape recordings were transcribed by the primary researcher. These transcripts, or protocols were read and re-read several times, in order to get a 'feel' for the content of the discussions. The next step in the analysis process was to break each protocol down into a series of meaning units, with each meaning unit representing a discrete segment of the interview. Some of these meaning units consisted of only a phrase or sentence, while others might have encompassed a paragraph or more. This process was completed with the use of a word processor, with a change in meaning unit signified by a change in colour of highlight.

The next step in data analysis involved identifying primary themes for each protocol (refer to Appendix F). Summaries of meaning units were constructed and then organized into primary theme categories, noting the frequency in which each theme occurred (refer to Appendix G). Once this had been completed, transcripts were compared and contrasted with one another, and primary themes were edited and revised on an ongoing basis. Another member of the research team contributed to this process by offering insights and suggestions regarding theme categorization.

Once primary themes had been established, the next task involved establishing shared themes, which embody the 'big ideas' of the interviews. Refer to Appendix H for shared theme frequencies, and to Appendix I for primary theme classification into shared themes. According to Flanagan (1954), there are three tenets of classification, including:

1. Choosing a frame of reference that most meaningfully described the subject of study.
2. An inductive approach to the development of categories, which entails

ongoing modification and revision.

3. Finding an appropriate balance between specificity and generality in choosing categories.

In order to minimize researcher bias and address reliability issues, two co-researchers participated in the categorization of meaning units. Once a primary theme list had been established, each co-researcher sorted ten per cent of the meaning units according to their perception of theme. The agreement between the co-researchers' classifications is reported as KAPPA (see Results Section). To address concerns related to reliability, two couples who participated in the study and one couple that did not were asked to provide feedback to the shared themes, which were presented in list as well as narrative formats.

In addition to coding the content of the transcripts, an additional step was taken to code for process oriented material that took place between participants during the of the interview, because interaction is a primary concern of focus group methodology. After reading through the protocols several times to become acquainted with the material, ten categories of process codes were established. Interactions occurring between participants were classified according to these ten codes, and then frequency counts were completed for each transcript (refer to Appendix J).

Due to the nature of the research question, confidentiality and data maintenance raise important considerations. To protect the anonymity of participants, actual names were not included in the transcripts, and were replaced by the pseudonyms of the participants' choosing. All tapes and transcripts have been kept in a secure location, accessible only to the primary researchers. Upon completion of the



project, copies of the study were deposited with the BHR Board and the Counselling Psychology Program of Trinity Western University.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

## Participants

The couples that participated in this research all come with their own unique stories and experiences of marriage and communication. The following descriptions provide a brief 'snapshot' of each of the couples, using the pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

Lucy and Harry

Lucy, who is 45 and Harry, 47, are a married couple who have been together for twenty years, and are raising a family of five children. Lucy and Harry are first generation Canadians, both with a high school education. They are a hard-working couple, and the demands of balancing work with a large family can be a challenge when it comes to maintaining good communication. Lucy and Harry have participated in the Building Healthy Relationships course, and found it to be helpful for them.

Ozzy and Wilma

Ozzy, who is 38 and Wilma, 33, have been together for four years, and are parents of a young son. Wilma has a Bachelor's degree, and Ozzy has recently returned to university to further pursue his education. Adjusting to married life has been more challenging than either Ozzy or Wilma might have expected, and they have been learning significant lessons about themselves, each other, and how they communicate with one another. They have sought counselling to assist them in dealing with some challenges, and are hopeful regarding the direction their communication has been taking.

Linda and Ralph

Linda, 62 and Ralph, 64 have forty-two years of marriage behind them, and have accumulated much of the wisdom that comes with experience. They have two grown children, and have been 'empty-nesters' for some time. Both Linda and Ralph have recently retired, although they continue to remain very active. Linda and Ralph each have some post-secondary education, supplemented with the life experiences of careers in the military. Change has been characteristic of Ralph and Linda's communication as a couple, along with a healthy dose of humour.

Don and Gina

Don and Gina, who are 60 and 58, respectively, have been married for 32 years and have two grown children. This is a second marriage for Don, and the first for Gina. In terms of education, Don has completed high school, while Gina has a Bachelor's degree. Not only have Don and Gina embarked on marriage and parenting together, but they have also worked together for several years in their own small business, which adds a unique aspect to their communication as a couple. Despite very different personalities, Don and Gina have a great respect for one another and are aware of the balance they bring to one another.

Elaine and Heber

Elaine, 50, and Heber, 49, are a married couple who have been together for 29 years. They have three children, two of which are still at home. Both Elaine and Heber have Bachelor's degrees, and both are of European descent. Elaine and Heber note a marked improvement in their communication as a couple, particularly over the last ten to twelve years. Elaine has had to contend with a serious illness, which the couple acknowledge to have been a shaping factor in their communication. Among

the many lessons learned over their years together, Heber and Elaine are much more intentional with one another than they were earlier in their marriage.

#### Ken and Lynette

Ken, 33, and Lynette, 30, are married, and have been together as a couple for 12 years. They have school-aged children at home. Both Ken and Lynette have completed high school, and Lynette has some additional post secondary training. Ken and Lynette both work outside the home, although at the time of the interview for this study, Lynette had just learned that she was to be laid off. Both Ken and Lynette view their love and devotion for each other as foundational to their communication, and rely on it to bring them through difficult times.

#### Agatha and Gordon

Agatha, who is 33, and Gordon, aged 39, are a married couple who have been together for 14 years. They have two children at home and both work outside of the home. Gordon has a high school education and Louisa is currently enrolled in a university program. Gordon and Agatha are unique to this study, in that they differ in both race and cultural background. They note that in particular, cultural differences have required some adjustment relating to issues of communication.

#### Homer and Barbara

Homer, 29, and Barbara, age 26 are married and have been together for six and a half years. They have no children, and both have post-secondary education (Barbara has completed a Bachelor's degree, while Homer has a Master's degree). Both Barbara and Homer are of European descent. For Barbara and Homer, communicating as a couple has involved adjusting to each other's different styles and preferences. This couple has some advantages in terms of communication skill, but

note that for them, success in communication also relies upon commitment to one another and an acceptance of each other as they are.

### Nauna and Chuck

Nauna, who is 27, and Chuck, 29, are married, and have been a couple for 10 years. They have no children, and are both of European descent. With regard to formal education, Chuck has completed some university, and Nauna has completed a Master's degree. Nauna's education and employment is closely related to the field of couples' communication, and she and Chuck have become increasingly aware of the importance of being intentional in their communication, whether that means participating in a seminar, leaning from past mistakes, or finding the right time and place for a difficult conversation.

### Praveen and Janey

Praveen, who is 27, and Janey, 25 are a married couple who started dating in high school and who have been together for eight years. They have no children and are both of European descent. Janey is in the process of finishing a Master's degree, while Praveen has completed some university. Janey and Praveen are very positive about the way they communicate as a couple, but sometimes find that work schedules make it difficult to connect, as Janey works days, and Praveen works evenings. Making time to connect has become a priority for both, although Janey tends to take the lead in this regard.

### Shared Themes

Based on the information gathered from each of the couples' transcripts, the following themes were identified as areas of common experience among participants. Examples from the transcripts are included to illustrate theme descriptions. Full

transcripts may be accessed by contacting the Counselling Psychology Program at Trinity Western University (604-888-7511).

### Intentionality

In order to foster and maintain good marital communication, couples find it necessary to be intentional. Demands of family life and busy schedules require that couples work together to create time and situations amenable to communication. This intentionality often requires hard work, but it is something that couples perceive to be necessary. Being direct and specific in communicating needs helps to facilitate this process. Couples indicate that an absence of intention results not only in stagnation, but also in deterioration, that will require 'catch-up.'

#### Example #1:

Homer: "I do think that there are things that we do intentionally to put ourselves in situations that are more likely to be conducive to conversation...I think I do that more intentionally now than I did in the past. So, I think I'm cognizant of the effort that needs to be put into communication".

Barbara: "Because it won't happen, hey? If one of us doesn't initiate it, it's not going to happen."

Homer: "No."

#### Example #2:

Elaine: "Once we've started working on things, it's almost like we can slide back, and I'm scared. Sometimes I just get too tired to...I guess I can see why people leave marriages. It's too hard work. You know, you can slide back, and I just want to be aware of that. Keep working on it, keep working on it."

### Intimacy and Companionship

Continuing to grow in knowledge of the other partner, and being able to enjoy one another are identified by couples as integral aspects of communicating well.

Fostering a friendship within the marriage and having fun together are key, as is the

closeness of a sexual connection. Couples often reported that good communication is associated with a sense of comfort and ease.

Example #1:

Gina: "Some people lose all physical feelings for one another after a length of time, but because they have all that shared time between each other, they never want to part. It's hard to part. I can't really think of what it would be like without Don around."

Example #2:

Wilma: "It's comfortable. I feel comfortable being in the same room as him. When things aren't right, there's an edge. I'm not sure what he's thinking, I'm not comfortable with the way he's acting. And when we're communicating and when we're doing really well, it's comfortable."

### Virtue

Couples recognize virtue as an important element of communicating well.

Qualities such as commitment, love, tolerance, respect, honesty, and sacrifice were identified as foundational to the relationship. These qualities are often evident in concert with communication skills, and are often characterized by a conscious choice of the individual to do what is best for the relationship, even though it might be difficult.

Example #1:

Chuck: "...you've got to want to...you can have two people who know how to make it work, but they've just decided that they don't love each other, and they don't want to make it work. Then there's no point. If they don't value that commitment, then for them, there's no point."

Example #2:

Ozzy: "And at the same time, whatever anger or frustration that you have, I understand it's there, but you need to love the person through that, over it, beyond it. And it has to be a choice, and therefore that will mean communicating certain things...anything you can, you must do."

Extrinsic Shaping Factors

Couples recognize various external factors that influence communication within the relationship, in both positive and negative ways. These factors are often (but not always) beyond the control of the individual or couple. Examples include the influence of the family of origin, societal norms, cultural background, and religion and faith.

Example #1:

Agatha: "Maybe I was too outspoken before. He'd be like, "Oh, you can't say that!""

Researcher: "So, you had an additional challenge of having to learn the rules of communication in a different culture."

Agatha: "Yeah."

Gordon: "Yeah, probably."

Example #2:

Lynette: "And it has everything to do with the way you're raised, I think. That's my belief. Because the two households that we grew up in were totally different, and you can only go by your own experience...in my family, it was utter chaos, 24-7. And that's what I was accustomed to. And in some ways, I think when we were first married, I probably created chaos, because that's what I'm comfortable with."

Dynamic Nature of Communication

Couples describe their communication as dynamic, rather than static, and note that adjustments are made throughout the relationship. Both men and women refer to a maturing that comes with age and experience. Dealing with adversity tends to impact the way in which couples communicate, in either a positive or negative way. Additionally, the work required for communication has some relation to stages of family development.

Example #1:



Heber: "I think Elaine's light going on—I don't think mine was so dramatic—I think yours was more to do with your whole (pause) maturing...she has quite some health issues that sort of came up about ten years ago, as a consequence of her polio. So then she wasn't able to substitute teach and I think she sort of went through a transition stage then, and that's really what started it off."

Example #2:

Linda: "My mother always said that a marriage changes every seven years, and I've found that to be the case. It took seven years for us to improve upon what we didn't have, so we could get on to the next level, and after we got to know one another a little better, we made another change."

### Basic Communication Skills

Couples identified several aspects of basic communication skills as key for them. These included achieving a balance of listening and speaking, non-verbals such as facial expression and body language, use of empathy, and capacity for perspective taking.

Example #1:

Nauna: "I can picture that I have a choice: I can go ahead with what I'm just instinctually wanting to do, which is just yell my point of view until he gets it (laughs), or I can put mine aside just temporarily and try to get him... "okay, I can see why you would think that.""

Example #2:

Gordon: "I would say, be a smart talker. I don't know how you would say that, but be a better listener. Be a better listener than you are a talker."

Example #3:

Lucy: "How do I know he's listening to me?"

Harry: "Eye contact. The way I react."

Lucy: "If he's too tired, then I think 'this is not a good time'. He's not even listening. He's saying "yeah, yeah," but he's not. If he's laying on the couch and his eyes are half shut."

Hopefulness

Regarding future communication, couples indicate a high level of hopefulness. Even couples who consider their communication to be very good, still envision positive growth in the future, and do not consider themselves to 'have arrived.' Some of the male participants were more likely to point out potential barriers to good future communication than their female partners.

## Example #1:

Barbara: "I guess I always just assume that it's going to get better and better."

Homer: "I think the fact that you understand me better, gives me hope. Like, better now than what you did four years ago. That makes...I'm fairly hopeful that things will get better."

## Example #2:

Elaine: "I think it's going to get better. I think it's got a long way to go. When we said that it had improved...yeah, that's definitely true, but it's certainly not at the pinnacle."

Researcher: "How about you?"

Heber: "Oh, I'd say that...that's definitely, based on how things have started to develop over the last ten or twelve years, and even more so in the last five years or so. Things will continue to improve...I'd say I'm very optimistic."

Repair Attempts

Couples make use of various repair attempts to change the direction of communication. The most frequently cited repair attempt was the use of humour.

Softening of stance and use of kind gestures are other repair attempts that

Couples make use of.

## Example #1:

Barbara: "So then I find it helps to say, "I'm sorry I overreacted" or whatever."  
(Homer: "Yeah.") "Then your defenses are down a little bit more, and then we can actually talk."

Homer: "Exactly: Well, I think at this point, somebody needs to choose to take the 'one-down' position. And sometimes it's Barbara and sometimes it's me. Then it's kind of a de-escalation."

Example #2:

Janey: "Like, all of a sudden, he'll start doing some wrestling move in the middle of when I'm angry, and it just works (laughter). Just to be able to change the situation."

### The Terrible Triad

Couples note three elements of a destructive process that tend to work together, often along gender lines. Frequently, the process begins with unchecked assumptions (both male and female). This is often followed by a harsh, emotional reaction (usually on the part of the female), and then by avoidance or 'checking out' (usually on the part of the male).

Example #1:

Gordon: "...she was mad on Sunday because she burned that cake too."

Agatha: "The cake was fine! He *thought* it was the cake, but it was the truck."

Gordon: "I'll usually get blasted first. Because it's all my fault, of course (laughter). Every time. So...that's how she communicates to me...I just *know*...no use in playing with dynamite. If the dynamite's lit, and she's holding it, just back off. She'll be mad for a day and then it's okay."

### Intervention and Education

Couples realize that at times, communication issues (or issues that impact communication) may require additional attention or intervention. Self-education (such as reading related books), participating in psychoeducational groups or seminars, or pursuing counselling are all identified as means of resolving or improving communication-related issues. Less formal intervention, such as support from friends and family has also proven to be beneficial for several couples.

Example #1:

Chuck: "...maybe I need to improve on realizing the value of that. That maybe we should, when things are good, go to see a counsellor or go to a marriage retreat. I mean, I think that's what people should do. They shouldn't wait until they get a problem, which is what I do. So maybe I need to focus more on thinking about our communication skills when there's nothing wrong."

Example #2:

Wilma: "Counselling has been very helpful for us. And lots of prayer, and also, just living with somebody for four years, and figuring out and actually talking about it and figuring out what you're actually saying when you say that."

Researcher: "So, experience and knowing one another better."

Wilma: "Yep. That helps too. But without the counselling, we would not be where we are."

### Personal Responsibility and Awareness

Couples address personal responsibility and awareness in two primary ways.

First, several couples made reference to the importance of dealing with their own personal issues (for example, mental health concerns, addictions, or 'emotional baggage' from past relationships). Unfinished business in areas such as these is often presented as a roadblock to good communication. Second, couples also speak to the advantage of being aware of one's own contributions and mistakes in the relationship, and of taking ownership of them.

Example #1:

Heber: "I think that each of us is sort of dealing with...um...oh, I don't know what I would call it, but a personal issue that has been different for each of us that has been around for a long time. And I think for each of us, those are mellowing out or resolving themselves, too. And so I think that's allowed things to get better."

Elaine: "Well, one of the things Heber's talking about that's influenced me a lot, is that I have been a compulsive eater...that did interfere with our marriage. It sure didn't help it."

Example #2:

Wilma: "I learned that I can't change him. I can only work on myself...So, for me it was a matter of realizing it's always a two-way street. There's always things that both participate in. I need to work on changing myself, rather than on changing him."

### Emotion vs. Cognition

Within the couple, the wife is more likely to communicate from an emotional framework, emphasizing relationships, a process-orientation, and empathy. The husband is prone to communicate from a cognitive standpoint, emphasizing tasks and problem solving, and preferring a straightforward approach over tact. Additionally, men tend to weather their own emotional struggles on their own, and may be inclined to avoid intense emotion or conflict.

#### Example #1:

Barbara: "I felt like he wasn't really being genuine unless he told me about his feelings, or expressed his emotions. But now I've learned that that's not going to happen anytime soon, and it's just as important to him...however he chooses to express himself, that's the way that he does it, and that's how he's getting his point across, and that's the way he's sharing with me..."

#### Example #2:

Praveen: "I find issues fascinating...I really do. I find that kind of stuff really intriguing, and Janey wants to discuss emotion. And quite often, when we have a conflict, it's when Janey is already feeling a very powerful emotion and going from there."

### Pursue-Withdraw Pattern

Within the couple, the female partner is more inclined to pursue the male in order to deal with issues, initiate discussions and be the 'caretaker' of the relationships, while the husband is more likely to avoid these behaviours. This is particularly true as the level of pressure from the pursuer is increased. This pattern is reversed in 20% of the couples in this study.

#### Example #1:

Gina: "The times that I have decided to go into silence—and as you can tell, that's not often—Don is never the one to initiate a conversation. And I'm sure it's uncomfortable for him. I can make it very uncomfortable."

Example #2:

Ozzy: "Sometimes I don't feel if I have the right response, then I resent those emotions. And then I use avoidance when I can, or denial, which is sometimes my own defense mechanism against not being able to do what I know I should do. Because I just can't."

### Differences Bring Balance

Although couples can find differences (stereotypically gender-based and otherwise) to be challenging or frustrating, most agree that ultimately, these differences bring balance to the relationship.

Example #1:

Researcher: "Do you sometimes wish that she was a little bit more like you, or that he was a little bit more like you?"

Gina: "I've gone out with guys that were more like me. NO! No no no no! You have to be able to meld. You can't just be the same. No no no."

Don: "I think it would be harder if we were the same."

Example #2:

Lucy: "I think it helps, because he usually calms me down, you know...if I get really uptight, he'll say "it's not the end of the world," or you know, he slows me down."

Researcher: "So, he might provide some balance?"

Harry: "Yes. Exactly."

Lucy: "Yeah! Yeah! That's what it is. Balance. Men bring balance to women."

### Pressures of Life

Couples were able to identify several of life's pressures that can present a major hindrance to communication. Some of these are clearly negative, such as

ongoing financial strain. Others, such as parenting or demands of work are not viewed as inherently negative, but often contribute to a sense of overwhelming 'busyness', and can be a source of conflict.

Example #1:

Heber: "This one time, we didn't have a car...I forget who it was, but one of us brought the taxi home from the university, and the other got in the same taxi and went back to the university! (laughter) I think that only happened once, but that's the story that we sort of use to remind ourselves of how busy we were."

Researcher: "It sounds like it was chaotic almost."

Heber: "Yeah. But it was a good time, you know. I don't think we really realized the price we were paying for it; the price as far as not really developing in our relationship."

Example #2:

Linda: "I was a dedicated housewife, and with Ralph being at work all day, plus he'd maybe have to do things after work. I'd be with these kids so long, and when he'd come home and say "How was your day?", I attacked him. It was like I was getting every thing out, and it wasn't fair."

#### Narrative: Jeff and Heather's Story

In order to present the shared themes in a format that is representative of the lived experience of the participants, themes were integrated into a narrative, describing the marital communication of a fictional couple, Jeff and Heather. Although each couple and their experiences are unique, the following narrative seeks to incorporate the shared themes spoken of by couples during their interviews.

Jeff and Heather are a couple in their mid-thirties. They have been married for twelve years, and have two children, aged nine and seven. They consider themselves a 'typical' couple in many regards; a good marriage, but not without it's challenges. Between parenting two young children and hectic work schedules, it's often a challenge for them to find time to connect. Especially since having kids, they find that

they have to work a little harder at having meaningful time together. When they realized they hadn't been on a 'date' for four months, they decided to plan ahead, and now every other Friday is their official date night.

Looking back over their relationship, both Jeff and Heather are aware of some changes in the way they communicate with one another. They were in their early twenties when they first met, and they've both matured since then. Jeff came from a family that didn't express emotion or affection very openly, whereas Heather's experience was quite different. Where Heather is comfortable talking about things on an emotional level, Jeff is more inclined to communicate with his head rather than his heart. He sees himself as a good problem solver, and has a hard time understanding why Heather seems resistant to his solutions when she is upset about something.

If you were to ask Jeff and Heather what is best about their communication, they would more than likely talk about the bond of friendship and intimacy that they have. When things are really good between them there is an ease and comfort in the way they communicate with one another. They enjoy having fun together and talk about their goals and dreams. Even after knowing each other for fifteen years, they are still learning about one another.

Like every couple, Jeff and Heather have their bad days when it comes to communicating with one another. Their most recent argument happened just a few days ago, when both assumed that the other was going to pick up the kids from school. Eventually, the school called and Heather raced to the school to pick them up. When Jeff arrived home a few minutes after they returned, Heather was upset, and made sure Jeff knew it. When out of anger, she made a comment about work being more important than the kids, Jeff started to object, but then just shook his head and



left the room. After a few tense hours, Heather apologized for being so harsh and Jeff admitted that he had forgotten to check the schedule that morning.

Although situations like this are now few and far between, there was a time earlier in the marriage when they were more frequent. Heather in particular became increasingly concerned, and at her suggestion, they went for some counselling sessions together. They both gained some insight regarding some personal issues (Heather's tendency toward perfectionism, and Jeff's difficult relationship with his father), and found that although it took hard work, they did start to notice an improvement.

Over the years, Jeff and Heather have learned to be more intentional around some of their communication skills. Some of this was learned in counselling, but much of it they learned from experience, learning from past mistakes. For instance, they have become more aware of their posture and eye contact, and worked on listening skills. They have become better at expressing empathy and really attempt to understand each other's perspective. As important as these things are, both Jeff and Heather see love and commitment as key to success in their communication. Sometimes, putting those skills into practice can be a challenge and it takes a healthy dose of tolerance and sacrifice to really make them work. Both Jeff and Heather also have strong views regarding their marriage commitment. They vowed to be there for each other through thick and thin, and they intend to do so.

As strong as their commitment is, sometimes Jeff and Heather are amazed at how different they are; while Heather is happy discussing relationships, Jeff would rather debate issues; while Heather seeks Jeff's solace when she is upset, he is more likely to weather the storm on his own; when they argue, Heather prefers to work

things through immediately, while Jeff usually needs more time. These differences can be a source of frustration for both Jeff and Heather, and they sometimes find themselves irritated with one another. However, in the long run, their differences also bring balance to the relationship. They often joke that if they were both like Heather, the relationship would be volatile, and if they were both like Jeff, silence would reign. Humour plays an important role for Jeff and Heather. Sometimes a little levity can dispel a lot of tension.

When asked about how they feel about where they are headed in terms of their relationship and communication with each other, both Jeff and Heather are in agreement in that their hopes are high. Even though they feel pretty good about their communication now, they see that there is room for ongoing improvement. They both acknowledge that there will be more hard work to come, but view this hard work as a worthy investment.

#### Reliability and Validity

Several steps were taken throughout the course of this study to ensure that attention was given to the reliability and validity of the data. The first of these steps occurred in response to technical difficulties involving the recording of two of the interviews. After realizing that data for the final two interviews had been lost, general impressions regarding the content and process of the interviews were noted, based on the researcher's memory. The same two couples were then re-interviewed, using the original protocol outline. At the end of each interview, participants were asked what they were able to recall from their initial interview, and to comment on any significant differences or insights. Both of the couples appeared to have limited recall concerning specific questions, but the content in the first and second interviews were

quite consistent. One of the female participants found that she was better able to articulate her thoughts in the second interview, and the other female participant noted that she thought that in the second interview, she and her husband were able to more clearly represent themselves.

The second step in addressing issues of reliability involved the use of multiple raters in sorting meaning units into primary theme categories. After being sorted by the primary researcher, 10% of the meaning units were sorted by two additional researchers; the first was a member of the research team while the second had no involvement with the research in any other capacity. The first rater, who had some familiarity with the themes, scored a KAPPA of 0.84. The second rater, who was unfamiliar with the research, scored a primary KAPPA of 0.70. Following some clarification and minor revisions to primary themes, the second rater re-sorted the selected meaning units and scored a KAPPA of 0.91. Both of these raters KAPPA scores indicated a high level of agreement with the primary researchers distribution of meaning units among primary themes.

A third step undertaken to address the validity of the study, elicited feedback from two couples who participated in this research, as well as from another couple who had not. Couples were given a copy of the shared themes, as well as a copy of the narrative, reflective of the shared themes. They were all asked to look over the material, and to comment on how well the themes and narrative reflected their experience of communicating as a couple. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate what items or themes were true of their experience, and also to indicate information that was contradictory to their experience. Lastly couples were asked to include any pertinent information that they thought had been overlooked. The

couples' responses indicated that overall, the themes presented to them provided a good portrayal of their communication as a couple. Several affirmative comments, or indications such as checkmarks were made. Contradictions for the most part related to stage of life issues (i.e., having children at home), or other specific data included in the narrative. Some comments reflected overall agreement with a theme, while providing some individual variation or explanation. Overall, responses from these three couples have suggested that the data is valid in relation to their experience.

### Process Results

A unique aspect of this research was the dynamics that occurred within the couple during the interview process. While an exploration of the content was the primary focus of this study, there is a pool of significant and rich data within the process of these interviews, which should not be ignored. It is important to acknowledge that the process during the interviewing involved three individuals; however in exploring the process-oriented information, attention was given to the interactions between the partners, and did not directly include interactions between the primary researcher and the co-researchers. This is not to say that those interactions did not take place, or that they are not important; only that they are not a focus of this research.

Interactions between partners are complex, and not always obvious. However, in an effort to operationalize some of the process that occurred during research, ten categories including some of the most common forms of interactions were established. Transcripts were coded according to these ten categories, which include the following:

### Interruption, or Speaking for Spouse

This process code was used at any point where one partner interrupted the other, or answered a question that was directed to the other partner. Interruptions of the primary researcher were not coded.

### Consult/Clarify

Interactions were coded in this manner whenever a partner made an attempt to clarify a confusing issue, or check out some information. Often, these consultations were regarding factual information, and differed from prompting or questioning, in that the requested response was generally brief.

### Encourage/Agree

This was by far the most commonly coded interaction. Encouragement to proceed, particularly when the spouse was in agreement, was frequent. Agreement ranged from a simple “yeah” to more complex elaborations.

### Disagree

Some of the more explicit disagreements throughout the interviews were reflected in straightforward, contrary statements. Also coded in this category were less obvious forms of disagreement, including some instances of sarcasm, as well as statements in defense of self.

### Expression of Hurt/Anger

This was one of the process codes least represented, and was perhaps somewhat limited by an audio, rather than video recording, which did not pick on more subtle gestures, such as facial expression. Interactions which were ambiguous (i.e., laughter following a judgmental statement by partner) were not coded.

### Expression of Hope/Affection

Although couples frequently said flattering things about their partners, the incidence of direct statements of affirmation to the partner was lower. As the purpose of this categorization was to focus on process between the couple, indirect statements were not coded.

### Humour/Facilitation of Conversation

This process code is descriptive of interactions where a partner makes use of humour or other mechanisms to move the conversation forward. Sarcastic, seemingly hurtful humour was not included in this category.

### Ignore/Deflect

This code was used when a participant did not answer a question directed to them by their partner, or deflected attention back on the spouse. Also, a change of direction in the conversation at an unnatural point was coded in this category.

### Blame/Criticism

Again, coding in this category was made for interactions in which one spouse directly blamed or criticized the other, as opposed to statements a partner made to the primary researcher regarding the other.

### Prompt/Question

This category is distinguished from consultation/clarification in that the questions posed by one spouse to the other were generally open-ended and required a more thoughtful or complex response. Also included in this category were prompts, which encouraged a spouse to elaborate or answer a question, which they appeared to be avoiding.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

One of the greatest strengths of qualitative methodology lies in the richness of the data, represented by hours of interviewing and hundreds of pages of transcribed material. The primary challenge for the researcher involves organizing the data into meaningful and cohesive themes. Once this task has been accomplished, the researcher faces the additional challenge of a consideration of these shared themes in the context of the current literature. Viewing results in light of the relevant literature will enable the researcher to make more grounded statements regarding program evaluation and clinical implications.

The co-researchers involved in this study demonstrated a great deal of cumulative wisdom, which was shared throughout the course of the interviews. Many of the themes that evolved from the interviews are well documented in the current literature, while others are relatively speaking, less familiar. For purposes of clarity, familiar themes will be examined first, followed by a discussion of the more novel themes represented in the data.

#### Themes Familiar to Current Literature

In an exploration of the themes derived from this research, approximately half of the fifteen themes are well represented in the literature. These seven themes include the following: (1) Intimacy and Companionship; (2) Virtue; (3) Basic Communication Skills; (4) Repair Attempts; (5) Hopefulness; (6) Emotion vs. Cognition; and (7) Pursue-Withdraw Pattern.

#### Intimacy and Companionship

Intimacy and companionship are identified by the majority of couples who participated in this study as an integral aspect of positive communication. Although

the literature does not always make an explicit connection to communication, there is a significant amount of research that speaks to the importance of intimacy and companionship in the marital relationship. Gottman (1999) is one theorist who does make a direct connection between intimacy and communication, and encourages couples to establish 'love maps.' Appleton and Bohm (2002) in their study of partners in mid-life, identified one of their primary themes as 'The ties that bind us,' with sub-themes of 'best friends,' 'allies' and 'companions.' As in the current study, a sense of comfort was often identified as a salient feature of companionship by participants. Similarly, Robinson and Blanton (1993) found that an enjoyable friendship was one of two major characteristics of an enduring relationship. Couples in this study often identified a friendship as an element of their marriage, which has taken them through difficult times. This is also reflected in a study conducted by Harper and Schaalje (2000) who found intimacy to be a mediating factor between stress and marital quality. Although participants in this study tended not to go into detail regarding their sexual relationships, they did seem to echo the conclusion of Scott and Sprecher (2000) that sexual satisfaction is associated with general relationship satisfaction.

### Virtue

A second theme well represented in this study is that of virtue. A skills-based approach has dominated the literature in recent years, but the topic of virtue has been receiving increased attention of late. Even the BHR course, which is almost exclusively skills based, speaks to the relationship between attitude and skill, noting that skill used without a caring attitude results in manipulation. Participants in the study often referred to concepts such as commitment, love, tolerance and sacrifice, and commitment is certainly an area that has been appearing more frequently in the



literature. Robinson and Blanton (1993) describe commitment as a feature of enduring relationships and also describe it as being connected with communication. In Clement and Swenson's 2000 study, they identified commitment to one's spouse as the strongest and most consistent predictor of marital quality. A 2002 study by Worthington Jr. is one of the first studies to explore the role of forgiveness in couples' interventions. Although results of the study are somewhat ambiguous regarding a forgiveness-based approach, the fact that virtue is being chosen as a topic of research is significant. Also of interest is a theoretical paper written by Jeffries (2000), which aims to conceptualize the relationship between the virtue of love and couples' conflict resolution.

#### Basic Communication Skills

In addition to relationship building and virtue, couples also identified communication skills as an area of importance with regard to their overall marital communication. These skills ranged from basic attending and verbal tracking, to more advanced skills, such as use of empathy and perspective taking. As noted earlier, communication skills is an area that has been heavily researched, and skill building has been largely presented as the intervention of choice. As noted by Kurdek (2002) and Larson and Holman (1994), it is generally assumed that couples that have skills associated with communication, such as empathy, active listening, and conflict resolution, are also considered to have more stable and satisfying marriages. Although a purely skills-based approach has recently come under fire (Burleson & Denton, 1997; Gottman, 1999), it is not surprising that communication skills represented a significant theme for the participants of this study, as years of research

have identified communication skills as a key contributor to marital satisfaction (Butler and Wampler, 1999; Markman et al., 1993; Renick et al., 1992).

### Repair Attempts

One of the more specific themes that appeared in co-researchers' interviews was that of repair attempts, which couples use in order to change the direction of a conversation. Softening of stance, admission of wrongdoing, or kind gestures are examples of repair attempts used by couples; however, the most common repair attempt described by participants was the use of productive humour (as opposed to biting, sarcastic humour). Gottman (1999) writes extensively of repair attempts, with an acknowledgment that Nancy Dreyfus's 1992 book Talk to Me Like I am Someone You Love initially drew his attention to the topic. Gottman notes that repair attempts cannot be associated with a strict skill-based approach, as the use and delivery of repair attempts alone do not guarantee their success. Other theorists, such as Weiss (2002) have explored the role of humour in marriage, and found that use of positive humour was related with intimacy and marital satisfaction for both husbands and wives. Perhaps the most salient connection between the literature and the couples' experiences of repair attempts is the emphasis on a productive or positive approach to changing direction of conversation.

### Hopefulness

One of the areas of interest in the current study was in couples' levels of hopefulness regarding the communication in their relationship. Without exception, couples responded that they had high levels of hope in this regard, although male participants were slightly more inclined to point out possible challenges or roadblocks. Couples' responses to hope-centered questions tended to be very succinct

and positive, which leads to speculative interpretation, including the following: (1) Couples did not feel safe enough to discuss a lack of hope in the presence of their partner; (2) Questions regarding issues of hope could have been asked in a more engaging manner; and (3) Participants in the study experienced both their 'willpower' and their 'waypower' (as described by Snyder in 1994) as very positive. It is likely that these three factors worked in combination. As Snyder notes, level of hope has much to do with commitment and shared goals. Couples motivated enough to participate in a lengthy and personal interview regarding their marital communication, are also likely to demonstrate shared goals around improving communication as well as a commitment to one another.

#### Emotion vs. Cognition

An area of specific interest for this study revolved around gender issues in marital communication. Couples did speak of gender-related topics throughout their interviews, and in particular, made mention of an emotionally-based approach to communication for women and a cognitively-based approach more often used by men. This difference has been well documented in the literature. As both Tannen (1982) and the participants in this study indicate, communication tends to be driven by different goals for men and women, with females working toward relationship building and males more focused on individual status and carrying out tasks. Research also supports the notion that women's conversations contain more emotional content than the conversations of men (Goldschmidt & Weller, 2000; Gottman & Levenson, 1992).

### Pursue-Withdraw Pattern

Another gender-related theme that became evident throughout the interviews with the participants is that of a pursue-withdraw pattern. This concept is described by Christensen and Heavey (1993) who indicate that in 60% of couples, it is the wife that tends to pursue, while the husband withdraws from attempts to initiate conversation or work through issues. In 30% of couples, this pattern is reversed, while the remaining 10% demonstrate equality in pursuing and withdrawing. Klinetob and Smith (1996) as well as Christensen and Heavey (1990) note that men tend to display more 'pursuer' characteristics when issues are initiated by themselves, as opposed to by their wives. In the current study, 80% of the couples identified the wife as the primary pursuer, while 20% viewed the husband as the partner more likely to pursue. Considering that women tend to be relationship focused in their communication (Tannen, 1982), it is not surprising that the majority of the couples represented in this study considered the wife to be the 'caretaker' in the relationship, taking responsibility for the emotional upkeep of the relationship (Heaton & Blake, 1999; Klinetob & Smith, 1996).

### Conclusions and Contributions Related to Familiar Themes

The seven themes discussed in the preceding pages are representative of a great deal of literature that has already been carried out in the well-researched area of marital communication. While a consideration of the individual themes may be confirmatory of existing literature as opposed to groundbreaking, this researcher does contend that contributions are made in two significant areas. The first of these involves use of qualitative methodology in the exploration of data generally

approached from a quantitative perspective, while the second major area of contribution has to do with the relationship among individual themes.

The majority of research conducted in the field of marital communication is done with the use of quantitative methodologies. While this is important and useful work, it tends to be somewhat limiting with regard to capturing the lived experiences of couples. A particular strength of this study is the qualitative approach, which facilitates an understanding of couples' communication that is more holistic. Rather than a reliance on specific measures and researcher-driven definitions, participants paint a picture of their own experiences of communicating with one another, offering a richer, more complete understanding. Related to this is the reality that most research regarding couples' communication gathers information only from one spouse, or from both partners separately. The adapted focus group methodology used in this study made it possible for couples to engage in a living demonstration of the very topic of focus, allowing for the interactional processes of couples' communication to be woven into the fabric of the project.

The second area of contribution with respect to the familiar themes concerns to interaction among the themes that became evident through the participants' responses. As the couples spoke, it became obvious that there were not clear distinctions among issues such as communication skills, intimacy and companionship, and issues of virtue. While practical limitations of quantitative research may restrict researchers to only a few constructs, the present research allowed for an exploration of several. Participants in this study indicated that different facets of marital communication were present simultaneously, and were sometimes reliant upon each other. This is suggestive that some of the dichotomies that have

been debated in theoretical discussions may be more related to theoretical constructs than the lived experience of couples.

### Novel Themes

In addition to the seven 'familiar' themes gleaned from the interviews with the participants, there were eight additional themes that were novel in some aspect. These remaining themes either represent somewhat of a departure from the major currents in marital communication research, and/or were not anticipated as probable areas of focus. These themes include the following: (1) The terrible triad; (2) Intervention and education; (3) Personal responsibility and awareness; (4) Differences bring balance; (5) Pressures of life; (6) Extrinsic shaping factors; (7) Dynamic nature of communication; and 8) Intentionality.

#### The Terrible Triad

Probably the most complex theme that has evolved from the couples' data is a process destructive to communication entitled "The Terrible Triad." In this process, unchecked assumptions are followed by a harsh emotional reaction (generally on the part of the female), which in turn is followed by avoidance or 'checking out' (generally on the part of the male). It is not surprising that due to the specific and complex nature of this process, it is quite novel in relation to the current literature. Having said this, parallels can certainly be drawn to Gottman's (1999) description of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, which he defines as corrosive behaviours, which can be used in predicting likelihood of divorce. According to Gottman, these behaviours generally occur sequentially, beginning with criticism, and then advancing to defensiveness, contempt, and finally to stonewalling (which implies a withdrawal from the interaction). With regard to the gender difference noted by participants in

this study, Gottman also notes that 'harsh start-ups' are more common among women, while avoidance or 'stonewalling' is a behaviour more often associated with men. While the process outlined in the current study is not identical to Gottman's (he does not address the role of assumption), similarities are otherwise striking, which is of interest as this was not an area specifically targeted for exploration by the researcher.

### Intervention and Education

During the course of the interviews it became apparent that intervention and education were important for couples in order to address communication-related issues and to enhance their relationship in general. While there have been mountains of research generated to address the efficacy of several forms of intervention, couples' attitudes with regard to accessing further education or intervention has received considerably less attention in the literature. Lees 1986 study sought to address exactly this issue, with findings that participation in The Couples' Project intervention led to significant changes in a Willingness to Seek Help With Marriage measure. Also, a study by Bringle and Byers (1997) concluded that those with a positive attitude regarding counselling, as well as those with a positive history regarding counselling, were more likely to seek marital counselling. With regard to gender, Bringle and Byers note that overall, women were more likely to pursue marital counselling and were also more likely to have a more positive attitude about it. Although many of the men in the current study spoke favourably regarding education or intervention they had participated in, they were also quick to admit their participation was generally at the urging of their wives.

### Personal Responsibility and Awareness

Participants in the current study spoke repeatedly of areas of their own personal lives in which they had to take responsibility for their own sake, as well as for the sake of the marriage. An everyday example of this might include taking ownership of a grouchy mood, while significantly more demanding tasks might involve wrestling with an addiction or mental health issue. With regard to the literature, there are numerous studies that speak to the relationship between marriage and issues such as mental illness or addictions. For example, Sandberg et al. (2002) describe the challenges of the marital process when older adults struggle with depression, noting that communication and problem solving suffer during 'down times.' With regard to addiction, Leonard and Roberts (1996) address some of the negative impact that excessive drinking has on quality of marital relationships. While examples of personal issues in relationship to marital quality are plentiful, literature exploring the role of responsibility of the individual within relationship is scant. A recent conceptual paper by Leary (2002) attempts to define how some individual processes such as self-esteem and egocentrism impact relationships in both positive and negative ways.

### Differences Bring Balance

In discussing differences (gender, personality, etc.), participants often indicated a sense of frustration that they did not share more common ground in their approach to communication. However, in spite of these frustrations, couples also acknowledged a sense of relief regarding these very differences, in that they bring a necessary balance to the relationship. Although this concept is not an unfamiliar one, its familiarity appears to be grounded in anecdotal wisdom, as opposed to research.



Most are familiar with the term 'opposites attract,' but with regard to exploring differences, the literature tends to focus on challenges related to differences, rather than mediating effects. For instance, Heaton (2002) notes that less heterogamous relationships are associated with lower levels of marital happiness and higher rates of divorce. In addition, other differences, such as those found in demand-withdraw patterns are strongly associated with marital dissatisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). This theme is likely representative of a gap between the lived experience of couples and the current literature in the area, in that mediating effects of differences between partners in relationship has not been adequately explored or documented.

### Pressures of Life

When couples were questioned about roadblocks to their marital communication, they often spoke of various 'pressures of life,' such as lack of time, challenges of parenting, financial pressures, and the demands of work outside the home. The pressures identified by participants are not necessarily negative, but are factors that impact the way in which they communicate with their partner. For instance, couples spoke of the joys of having children, but acknowledged the strain it sometimes put on their relationship. These results are echoed in a 2003 study by Nomaguchi and Milkie, who indicate that parenting is associated with an increase in marital conflict. Other factors, such as work in and outside of the home restrict the amount of time couples have to spend with each other, and may introduce additional stressors. For instance, Barling and MacEwen (1992, cited in Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000) relate increased job stress with less satisfying marital relationships. Also of interest with regard to couples' communication is the notion that spouses tend to withdraw from family interaction following high stress days at work (Repetti, 1994).

### Extrinsic Shaping Factors

In addition to various stressors encountered by couples, participants also identified other 'bigger picture' factors that influence their communication. Examples of these extrinsic shaping factors include influence of the family of origin, societal norms, cultural background, as well as religion and/or faith. Participants in the current study, and in particular the female participants, made frequent reference to the impact family of origin has had on the way they communicate in their marriage. A recent study by Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring (2003) found that family of origin experiences of both the husband and wife figure significantly in marital adjustment. Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring also found that while women's experience of family of origin influenced both partners' accounts of their own marital adjustment, men's family of origin experiences informed only their own accounts of their marital adjustment. Religion and faith were also topics that were raised by couples, largely described as helpful, stabilizing factors. Call and Heaton (1997) do find that there is a strong connection between religiosity and marital stability, particularly when partners share beliefs and practices. While much of couples' success in marriage has to do with their own efforts and skills, results of this study are supported by the literature in suggesting that external factors have some role in shaping couples' experiences.

### Dynamic Nature of Communication

In interviewing couples for this study, it became apparent that marital communication for these participants is not static, but dynamic. Couples spoke of changes in the way they relate with one another, due to maturing, learning from past mistakes, and adjusting to different stages of family development. Although the concept of change and development in marriage is not a novel one, until recently, the

bulk of research on couples' communication has focused on relatively young couples (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). This stands to reason, as a number of family life interventions, including the BHR course are geared to premarital preparation. The majority of the research that has been conducted concerning this theme revolves around family life cycles. Most of the research is suggestive of a U-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction, with satisfaction declining during early years of marriage (often corresponding with the arrival of children), and then increasing in later years (Orbuch et al., 1996; Peterson, 1990). Recently, VanLaningham et al. (2001) have argued that marital satisfaction actually declines throughout the duration of the marriage, most sharply in the early and late years of the relationship. Although the participants in this study did not appear to share this grim description, they did view their relationships and communication in particular as dynamic, rather than static.

### Intentionality

In describing their marital communication, couples often referred to the need to be intentional in order to establish and maintain effective interaction with one another. In the face of life stressors, demands on time and even apathy, participants acknowledged that without ongoing work, communication suffers. This theme is echoed in the work of Stafford and Canary (1991) who describe five types of marital maintenance behaviours used by couples to maintain or strengthen marriages, including: (1) positivity; (2) openness; (3) assurances; (4) network (referring to shared affiliations); and (5) sharing tasks. Stafford and Canary note that couples who engage in these maintenance behaviours report higher levels of satisfaction, commitment, and liking. Couples in this study often referred to making time for one another, and appeared to view this as a preventative strategy. Similarly, Clements and

Swenson (2000) found that in older adults, intimacy was a mediating factor in dealing with stress and hassles. According to both the couples in the current study as well as the literature, the adage “love is a verb” appears to ring true; successful communication within marriage requires ongoing attention.

### Conclusions and Contributions Related to Novel Themes

The novel themes in this study include themes that are either not well represented in the literature, or those that were not anticipated as foci at the outset of the study. In some cases, both of these descriptors apply. As with the familiar themes, an advantage pertaining to collecting and understanding the data lies in the qualitative approach. Some of the more complex themes (such as The Terrible Triad) are less likely to have been pursued by quantitative researchers, but the nature of this research opens the door to all experiences of couples' communication, whether or not they are well researched. Semi-structured focus group interviews allowed for a broader, more holistic understanding of a complex process, than can sometimes be fragmented by quantitative approaches.

In reviewing the novel themes, two areas of interest become evident. The first is with regard to the role that environmental processes have in shaping couples' communication. While the familiar themes tend to be focused on interactions that happen between husband and wife, the novel themes appear to have more emphasis on environmental factors such as family history, family life cycle, social and cultural influences, as well as pressures of life such as demands of parenting and time constraints. A second area of interest has to do with the role of the individual in the process of marital communication. Several themes, including intervention and education, personal responsibility, pressures of life, extrinsic shaping factors, and

intentionality address issues of the individual within marriage (although these are not exclusively individual issues). Participants in this study were clear that although couples' processes are key to marital communication, both environmental factors, as well as individual factors/contributions are also key pieces of the puzzle. These contributions are important, largely in that they address clinical implications, which take us from the 'what' to the 'so what?'

#### Implications for the Building Healthy Relationships Course

The primary objective of this research is to address the appropriateness of the BHR course in light of participants' feedback regarding themes of communication within marriage. The couples in this study were not asked to evaluate the course itself (only two of the couples were participants in the BHR course), but rather, to speak from their own experiential wisdom regarding communicating with their partners. With this information, it is then possible to reflect on the content and goals of the BHR course and assess whether or not these are reflected in the themes shared by the couples.

Although the BHR does make passing mention of attitudinal approaches to skill, as well as gender differences in communicating, it is primarily a skills acquisition program, designed to enhance communication and conflict resolution skills within the couple relationship. In support of the BHR course, participants in the current study did identify skills and skill building as major components of their marital communication. Concepts such as basic attending, balancing listening and speaking, use of empathy, and perspective-taking were well represented in the interviews with the couples. Furthermore, the acquisition of skills through practice, learning from past mistakes, and seeking specific skill-building interventions were

identified as helpful to the overall process of marital communication. Based on the information gathered in this study, a response to the question, "Is the BHR course worthwhile?" would likely be a resounding "yes."

The BHR course may very well be meeting its authors' goals of enhancing communication and conflict resolution skills, which is commendable. Certainly, the comments of the couples in the current study attest to the importance of these skills. However, it is also necessary to ascertain if skill building is adequate in developing and maintaining healthy communication in marriage. Based on the information gathered from the co-researchers, it seems probable that significant areas of importance are being overlooked by skills-based courses such as the BHR. Although participants raised several issues as important, there are four broad areas of interest that are currently not well represented in the BHR course, including: (1) The role of virtue; (2) Relationship and intimacy development; (3) Awareness of gender-related issues; and (4) Education around dealing with stressors and external influences on the marriage.

With regard to the first two areas of interest (virtue, and relationship building), it became evident in establishing themes that couples in this study did not view them separately from the use of skill. The use of communication-based skills was often described as motivated by love for one another, by commitment to the relationship, and involved an intimate understanding of the spouse, and acts of selflessness. These results are suggestive that while skill is important, it does not stand alone. Therefore, some attention to intimacy enhancement and the role of virtue may serve to enhance the work that is currently being done around skill development.

The remaining two areas of interest (gender-awareness and education around stressors and external influences) are also areas that were emphasized by participants. Husbands and wives identified significant differences in the ways in which they perceive issues, and communicate with one another. This being the case, it is also probable that males and females will think and respond differently with regard to the use of specific skills, and might benefit from some additional attention in area during the BHR course. Similarly, education around dealing appropriately with pressures and demands associated with environmental stressors may better equip couples in their efforts to communicate with one another.

The BHR course is designated as a skills acquisition program and it may be outside of the scope of the program to make sweeping amendments while maintaining a clear focus for the course. However, this current research clearly suggests that a skills-based approach alone may neglect other processes and concepts that are fundamental to couples' communication. Recognition of these components will undoubtedly offer clients of the BHR course with a more holistic perspective on marital communication, more reflective of the everyday experiences of couples.

#### Implications for Counselling Psychology

Although the primary purpose of this study was to address the effectiveness of the BHR course in relation to the experiences described by couples, the results also carry some implications for broader clinical practice. In training, clinicians are encouraged to identify and define their theoretical underpinnings, which is essential for an ethical practice. However, a potential pitfall of this process could involve an unnecessarily narrow perspective, neglectful of the larger picture. The themes that have been presented by the co-researchers in this study relate to several approaches to

marital therapy, inclusive of skill building, relationship enhancement, family of origin work, and stress management, among others. The challenge to marriage therapists is to maintain a sound theoretical foundation that is capable of addressing a wide variety of issues that are of concern to the overall process of couples' communication. While a single approach might be appealing with regard to clarity and simplicity, the participants in this study describe their marital communication as a complex relationship involving several factors. Acknowledging the complexities that our clients experience in their marital communication will assist us in providing responsible and ethical intervention.

Without exception, the participants in this study indicated that their level of hope for the communication in their relationships was high. Snyder, in his 1994 model of hope, would describe these positive attitudes as a demonstration of the 'willpower' component of hope. An implication for therapists lies in bridging the 'willpower' and 'waypower' components of hope for clients. Snyder indicates that both facets of hope can be nurtured, and that specific goals are necessary to implement change in levels of hope. A therapeutic setting should assist couples by equipping them with the skills and resources necessary to address agency-related aspects of hope, in addition to fostering a sense of commitment and motivation.

An additional result of this project that has implications for counselling psychology relates to the finding that issues such as family of origin, environmental concerns, and role of the individual in relationships are significant contributors to marital communication. While ideally, the participation of both partners is helpful in resolving marital concerns, some tasks may be better addressed by including some individual sessions. For instance, couples' work might be more effective given a



partner's opportunity to work individually on matters such as family of origin experience, mental health concerns or addictions issues, to name a few.

### Limitations of the Study

This research has outlined some of the limitations related to quantitative work that has been done in the field of marital communication. However, qualitative research in general, and this study in particular, also have limitations which must be acknowledged.

One of the primary limitations with regard to the current study revolves around issues of applicability. Participants in this study were quite homogenous with respect to demographics. Although there was good representation with regard to various stages of family life and duration of marriage, other factors such as race, religion, and geographical location were all very uniform. All of the participants currently live in the Fraser Valley region of British Columbia, and with the exception of one, all participants were white, with the majority of participants coming from a Christian heritage. This has obvious implications with regard to applying the results of the study to other, more diverse populations. The demographics of the participants were fairly representative of the participants of the BHR course, which was the focus of the study, but applying the results of the study to other populations would need to be done with great caution, if at all.

In addition to the relatively homogenous sample, the size of the sample was also quite small. For the purposes of the research, elements such as theme saturation were adequately met, but a larger sample size would have allowed for more confident applicability. It is also feasible that with such a small sample, characteristics unique

to a couple or individual could be mentioned frequently enough to skew the results of the study.

A concern of qualitative research in general, and of this current study relates to the believability of participants. Although there are several strengths related to conducting couples' interviews, there may also be some limitations associated with this, as participants could feel compelled to present themselves, their spouse or their marriage overall in a more agreeable light. Participants may also want to please the interviewer by offering what they believe to be the 'right' answer. Additionally, as much of the information during these interviews was of a personal nature, participants might have held back or modified responses. Although repetition among interviews does alleviate some of the concerns in this regard, believability continues to represent of limitation of the study.

One additional limitation with regard to this study concerns the vast amount of literature that exists in the field of marital communication. While in some ways, this is an obvious strength, it presents a limitation in that it tends to colour the researcher's perspective during the interviews and the process of data analysis. While bracketing is not a key procedure in focus group methodology, it is still important for the co-researchers' words to be viewed with their own distinct merit. While the various limitations inherent in this research do require a critical eye in reviewing the results, they are not limitations of such a magnitude to significantly detract from the overall value of the study.

#### Directions for Further Research

This project, while providing some insight and clarification regarding couples' perceptions of their communication, also opens the door for further exploration along

a number of avenues. Although the field of marital communication is already a heavily researched area, it is also a complex subject, and one that impacts the lives of couples and the interventions professionals develop to aid them.

One aspect of this study that was of particular interest was that of the process that occurred between partners during the course of the interviews. This study did seek to acknowledge the importance of this process that took place, but it was beyond the scope of the study to launch into a detailed exploration of these couple interactions. Those interested in conducting further research or analysis based on the data from this project may contact the Counselling Psychology Program at Trinity Western University at 604-888-7511 for access to the transcripts. Participants' contributions were rich not only in the content of the words they spoke, but also in the dynamic nature of their interactions. In a field that relies largely on the self-reports of subjects, further research into the process of communication could reveal a depth of meaning that is not always explicit in data collection.

The couples that participated in this study, shed a great deal of light as to the themes that are significant in their marital communication, and it became clear that couples perceive many of these themes (such as intimacy, virtue, and skill) as operating hand in hand. A suggestion for further research would involve exploring the relationship between these constructs in a more detailed manner. For instance, seeking a better understanding around the relationship between virtue and skill could have implications for how courses such as the BHR are designed and taught.

Gender was a major focus of this research, and some interesting information was gathered in that regard. Couples in this study were able to identify several downfalls or frustration with regard to gender differences, yet simultaneously

recognized these differences as beneficial. Perhaps some more revealing data could be collected by conducting focus groups for both men and women with regard to perceptions around gender differences and communication. Holding separate focus groups might provide both males and females an arena where they can speak more candidly concerning their own marital communication, particularly regarding sensitive issues.

As long as there are marriages, there will be a need for further research around the complex process of couples' communication. There is certainly enough ongoing debate at this time regarding the 'best' approach to couples' interventions to merit further research in this field. While we may never have all the answers, we will continue to learn how to ask the right questions.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to hear from the everyday experts in marital communication regarding their own views of couples' communication, and to use this information to address program evaluation of the BHR course. With their openness and willingness to discuss sensitive personal issues, the couples that participated in this project shared a great deal of meaningful information. In a field that is so well researched, the lived experience of the couple is often overlooked, or overly simplified in an effort to better understand fragments of a much larger picture.

The contribution of this study is addressed not only in the fifteen themes which represent the contents of the couples' interviews, but by the complexity of the relationships of these themes. These couples spoke the realities of life that stress and stretch their marital communication, of the work they must do to foster and maintain communication, and of the joys and heartaches that come along the way. According

to the wisdom of the participants, skills are indeed important, but so are a variety of other factors, including virtue, intimacy and companionship, and an awareness of issues such as gender differences and environmental factors.

The primary implication for the BHR course is that skills acquisition, while valuable, does not fully address the needs of couples with relation to building healthy communication in marriages. The current literature is fractured in its attempts to discover the best practice for strengthening marital communication. While the debate rages on, this study hopes to act as a small reminder of the importance of taking a holistic view when it comes to an issue as complex as couples' communication.

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#### APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTION OF THE BHR COURSE

The *Building Healthy Relationships* (BHR) Course was adapted by Lees, Groenhof, and Klassen (1999) from Miller and colleagues' *Couple Communication Program* (CCP) (1992). BHR is provided by a Board of representatives from a variety of community resources and educational institutions including a transition society, Trinity Western University, the Ministry for Children and Family Development, local churches, life skills providers, and private therapists.

The BHR is two hours shorter than the CCP and is offered in two days rather than in multiple sessions with days in between. BHR is simplified in its content and offers a slightly different format in terms of practice opportunities. The CCP has each couple practice their newly learned skills in front of the larger group, whereas the BHR course has sets of couples practice in private with their facilitator. This is intended to save time, keep the couples focused, and give couples the opportunity to witness the process of their partnering couple without feeling overwhelmed by several observers.

The training is divided into three sections: short lectures, role-playing, and skill practicing. The section topics, in order, include: listening, speaking, and conflict resolution skills. Two trained instructors teach the skills for each section and model each of the three skills to the entire group. After each section, sets of two couples and

their facilitator move to a secluded setting to practice the skills taught in the previous lecture. The facilitator attempts to keep the couple focused on the skills and the communication process. After the first couple has practiced their skills for 15 minutes, they observe the other couple practicing those same skills. Couples then return to the larger forum for the next instructional section.

The BHR is a psycho educational course designed to enhance communication and conflict resolution skills within the couple relationship. It is not group therapy and couples are asked to choose seemingly simple or surface issues to use during the practice sections of the training. In other words, the focus is on the skills acquisition rather than the content of the issues brought up. Review or refresher courses are not yet available, but couples are able to register for the course more than once.

Each 10-hour course takes place on a weekend at a college campus in the Fraser Valley or Upper Fraser Valley region. The standard cost is \$30.00 per couple. A maximum of 10 couples can register per group.

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ ,

My name is Landra Mason and I am a researcher in the field of couples' communication. The reason I'm writing you now is to inform you about some current research that you may be interested in participating in. The information gained from this study will be important in determining the effectiveness of the Building Healthy Relationships Course, and will also result in recommendations for improving the course.

In order to find out more about couples' communication, I will be organizing a number of couples' interviews, during which you would sit down with your partner and myself for an informal discussion about the communication in your relationship. You could expect that participating would take about two hours of your time.

People who do participate in research of this kind often find the experience to be an enjoyable one, as they have a chance to discuss issues they have firsthand experience with, in a relaxed environment. To recognize your important contributions, each couple that participates in the study will receive a copy of John Gottman's book, "*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*."

Interested in finding out more? Please call me at 604-807-8092, or email me at [landramason@shaw.ca](mailto:landramason@shaw.ca), and I will be happy to give you further information.

Sincerely,

Landra Mason

## APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHICS INFORMATION

Thank you for your participation. Please assist us by taking a few minutes to complete the following. Your real name will not be used.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Partner's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- Male
- Female      Age: \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you and your partner been together as a couple? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you and your partner currently:

- Dating
- Engaged
- Married
- Separated/Divorced
- Common-law

Number of children: \_\_\_\_\_

Education level completed:

- High school
- Technical school/Diploma/Associate degree
- Some university
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree (e.g. MA, PhD)

Ethnicity:

- First Nations descent
- Asian descent
- African descent
- European descent
- Other

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Building Healthy Relationships through Couples Communication Skills**

Dr. Marvin McDonald (604) 888-7511  
Landra Mason (604) 807-8092

In order to learn more about how people communicate as couples, we are arranging opportunities for couples to meet with an interviewer to discuss what communication is like in their relationship. With your assistance, we are hoping to gather valuable information that will assist in evaluating and improving a course (Building Healthy Relationships), which is designed to help couples improve their communication with one another.

If you decide that you would like to participate in this research, you will meet with your partner and an interviewer to share in discussion about communication in your relationship. There will be a series of questions that you will be invited to discuss in an informal setting. You can expect to spend approximately two hours from start to finish, during which time your conversation will be recorded. To ensure confidentiality, only the primary researchers will have access to these recordings, and your names will not be used.

To thank you for your time, we would like to offer to every couple that participates a copy of John Gottman's book, "*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*." If you decide that you would rather not participate, or wish to withdraw at any time, we will understand and you will be free to leave with no consequence.

I have read and understand the description of the study and I willingly consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

I do not consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## APPENDIX E: PROTOCOL OUTLINE

## Protocol Outline

## General Questions:

1. Please describe your communication as a couple.
2. What are things like when you are really understanding each other well?
3. How would you describe roadblocks to good communication between you? How hopeful are you that you will overcome them?
4. What things impact the way you relate with one another?
5. What strategies do you use to influence one another (i.e., invitations, requests, hints, encouragement, demands, etc.)?
6. In what ways do you think your communication will get better or worse in the future?

## Specific Gender-Related Questions:

1. What differences do you notice between you when it comes to communication style? What about similarities?
2. What difference does being a man or a woman make in the way you relate with one another?
3. What are ways in male/female differences benefit your relationship (for example, providing balance)? How do they make things difficult (for instance, differing perceptions of an issue)?
4. How have you come to understand one another better over the course of your relationship, especially when it comes to being a woman or a man? What hopes do you have in this regard for the future?
5. What strengths do you bring to communication in your relationship? What would you like to do better?

## APPENDIX F: PRIMARY THEMES

1. **Pursue-withdraw pattern:** In the majority of couples, the wife is more inclined to pursue the husband in order to deal with issues, initiate discussions, and be the 'caretaker' of the relationship, while the husband is more likely to avoid these behaviours. This pattern is reversed in about 20% of couples.
2. **Emotions vs. cognitions:** Within the couple, the wife is more likely to communicate from an emotional basis, emphasizing relationships and empathy. Husband is prone to communicate from a cognitive standpoint, emphasizing tasks and problem-solving.
3. **Differences bring balance:** Although couples can find gender-based differences challenging to their relationship, most agree that ultimately, these differences bring balance.
4. **Male avoidance of conflict:** Husbands tend toward avoidance of conflict or intense emotions, which often results in a sense of frustration for wives. Men tend to be more inclined to cope with their emotional struggles on their own.
5. **Women viewed as better communicators:** Women are perceived as being naturally better at communication and are also viewed as valuing communication more, particularly regarding the relationship.
6. **Intention in communication:** Couples identify being intentional as a major communication facilitator. Often this involves altering schedules and environment because communication would not otherwise take place. Couples also describe being intentional in their use of preventative strategies to avoid repeating mistakes.
7. **Perspective-taking:** Being able to view a situation from the spouse's point of view is regarded as helpful to the communication process. This involves setting aside one's agenda momentarily.
8. **Timing of conversations:** Communication tends to go more smoothly when both husband and wife have the time and inclination to engage in a discussion. Finding a mutually workable time is important.
9. **Communicating needs:** Couples indicate that being specific and direct regarding their needs is a benefit to communication. This avoids many of the difficulties that arise from making assumptions.
10. **Affirmation/validation:** Both men and women appreciate being affirmed and validated, as it helps them to feel appreciated and understood.



11. **Accommodating partner/flexibility:** A willingness to acknowledge partner's preferences/communication style and meet on middle ground. This involves 'thinking as a couple' rather than individually. Couples also speak of 'choosing their battles.'
12. **Humour/repair attempts:** Humour, when used appropriately, can help in diffusing a tense situation. Other repair attempts may include a softening of stance or admission of fault or misunderstanding.
13. **Balance listening and speaking:** Couples acknowledge that a balance between speaking and listening is essential, and that as a rule, there should be more listening and less speaking.
14. **Non-verbal cues:** An accurate assessment of non-verbal cues facilitates communication. Examples include use of silence, body posture, eye contact and attentiveness. Incorrect assumptions regarding non-verbal cues can be problematic.
15. **Honesty/openness:** Both men and women identify openness and honesty as beneficial to good communication. Husbands appear to be more inclined toward blunt honesty, while wives take a more tactful approach.
16. **Pressures of life:** These can be a major hindrance to communication. Often this relates to an everyday 'busy-ness.' Conflicting schedules, financial strain, and challenges of parenting can be major factors.
17. **Making assumptions:** This can be detrimental to communication, particularly when one partner assumes that the intentions or motivations of the other spouse are negative or malicious.
18. **Harsh, overly-emotional reactions:** This is a roadblock that is more often associated with women, but not exclusively. Blame, unrestrained judgment, and personal attacks are major hindrances.
19. **Family of origin:** Lessons about communication are first learned within the family of origin. Some regard their families as models, while others identify deficits in communication skill based on their experience in their family of origin.
20. **Culture/religion and social roles/norms:** Culture and religion provide guidelines regarding communication and relationships. Differences in background can be challenging, while similarities tend to facilitate. Also, societal messages about issues such as gender roles and acceptability of divorce appear to have some bearing on how couples think and behave regarding communication.

21. **Intervention/education/support:** Several couples indicate the need or benefit associated with accessing external supports to deal with problems or enhance communication. Some of these include counselling, psycho-educational groups, as well as informal support and self-education.
22. **Comfort and ease:** Many couples associate times of good communication with a sense of comfort or ease. During these times, couples are able to enjoy one another and do not feel compelled to 'work on issues.'
23. **Companionship/connectedness:** Couples identify friendship as an important part of their relationship. Spending time together and supporting one another's interests were components of this. Having fun together and sharing goals and dreams were also identified as strengths, as was connecting on a sexual level.
24. **Process of maturing:** Couples identify a process of maturing that impacts the way they communicate. Couples tend to mature as they age, learning from past mistakes.
25. **Dynamic communication:** Communication changes as the relationship develops. Many couples perceive an improvement over time, but are aware of new challenges to be met.
26. **Communication is hard work:** Couples indicate that developing and maintaining communication requires hard work and adjustment. There is room for healthy conflict and disagreement in this process.
27. **Balance of couplehood and individuality:** While thinking as a couple is important, it is also beneficial to maintain a good sense of self, nurturing individual interests.
28. **Level of hope:** Overall, couples are hopeful regarding the communication in their relationships. Men tend to be somewhat more aware/vocal regarding potential roadblocks.
29. **Virtue:** Characteristics such as sacrifice, commitment, tolerance, and love are an integral part of good communication. These qualities are often used in concert with communication skills.
30. **Self-awareness and personal responsibility:** Being aware of one's own personal issues and shortcomings is important, as is a willingness to work on these things (e.g., mental health or addictions issues, 'baggage' from previous relationships, etc.)

## APPENDIX G: Primary Theme Frequencies

Theme	Transcript Number										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	2	3	2	4	3	5	2	8	2	4	35
2	5	9	3	5	4	1	2	6	11	4	50
3	2	3	2	2	2	4	3	2	2	1	23
4	3	3	5	7	2	2	6	2	3	8	41
5	3	14	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	21
6	5	3	4	4	5	4	4	3	5	6	43
7	1	1	1	3	1	3	2	3	7	2	24
8	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	1	1	8
9	2	0	3	0	2	1	3	1	2	2	16
10	6	1	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	4	18
11	5	0	4	3	2	9	2	3	2	3	33
12	1	0	3	2	1	2	2	1	2	3	17
13	1	2	2	1	0	1	1	2	1	3	14
14	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	3	1	0	13
15	6	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	11
16	4	0	5	2	3	3	4	17	1	0	39
17	4	2	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	1	11
18	3	2	1	0	0	1	6	1	2	3	19
19	0	3	2	0	1	2	1	0	0	1	10
20	0	1	0	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	6

Table continues.

Table continues.

Theme	Transcript Number										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
21	1	2	2	1	2	1	0	0	0	3	12
24	0	0	2	1	3	2	1	0	1	1	11
25	0	3	1	2	0	1	5	2	1	1	16
26	1	6	3	1	4	2	1	0	0	1	19
27	0	0	3	4	1	0	1	0	1	1	11
28	3	3	0	0	1	2	1	1	2	1	14
29	4	0	4	2	4	8	3	3	2	5	35
30	0	4	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	2	13
Total	67	67	61	57	55	63	61	65	58	64	

Note. Refer to Appendix F for a list of the primary themes.

## APPENDIX H: Shared Theme Frequencies

Theme	Transcript Number										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Intentionality	9	3	7	4	9	5	7	6	8	9	67
Intimacy	2	1	7	8	5	3	3	2	3	1	35
Virtue	15	0	9	5	7	17	5	6	7	8	79
Extrinsic	0	4	2	2	2	3	2	0	0	1	16
Dynamic	1	9	6	4	7	5	7	2	2	3	46
Skills	9	5	4	7	4	7	5	9	10	9	69
Hopefulness	3	3	0	0	1	2	1	1	2	1	14
Repair	1	0	3	2	1	2	2	1	2	3	17
Triad	10	7	6	7	2	3	15	4	5	12	71
Education	1	2	2	1	2	1	0	0	0	3	12
Responsibility	0	4	3	4	3	2	2	1	2	3	24
Emotion/Cognition	8	23	3	5	4	1	3	6	12	6	71
Pursue/Withdraw	2	3	2	4	3	5	2	8	2	4	35
Balance	2	3	2	2	2	4	3	2	2	1	23
Pressures	4	0	5	2	3	3	4	17	1	0	39

## APPENDIX I: Primary Theme Classification

Shared Themes	Primary Themes (Frequencies)	Totals
Intentionality	Intentionality (43)	67
	Timing of conversations (8)	
	Communicating needs (16)	
Intimacy and companionship	Comfort and ease (10)	35
	Companionship (25)	
Virtue	Accommodation/flexibility (33)	79
	Honesty (11)	
	Virtue (35)	
Extrinsic shaping factors	Family of origin (10)	16
	Culture, religion/societal norms (6)	
Dynamic nature of communication	Maturing (11)	46
	Dynamic nature of communication (16)	
	Hard work of communication (19)	
Basic communication skills	Perspective taking (24)	69
	Affirmation/validation (18)	
	Balance listening and speaking (14)	
	Non-verbals (13)	
Hopefulness	Hopefulness (14)	14
Repair attempts	Repair attempts (17)	17
Terrible triad	Male avoidance of conflict (41)	71
	Making assumptions (11)	
	Harsh reactions (19)	
Intervention and education	Intervention and education (12)	12
Personal responsibility	Balance couple and individual (11)	24
	Personal responsibility and awareness (13)	
Emotion vs. cognition	Emotion vs. cognition (50)	71
	Women viewed as better communicators (21)	
Pursue-withdraw	Pursue-withdraw pattern (35)	35
Differences bring balance	Differences bring balance (23)	23
Pressures of life	Pressures of life (39)	39

## APPENDIX J: Frequency of Process Codes

Code	Transcript Number										Total	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Interrupt/Speak For Spouse	F	27	7	6	3	6	5	5	6	3	4	142
	M	11	8	5	6	5	9	8	6	8	4	
Consult/ Clarify	F	9	1	4	5	10	8	4	12	1	6	98
	M	2	2	0	4	9	0	4	10	0	7	
Encourage/ Agree	F	32	6	17	17	13	16	13	19	11	13	315
	M	8	4	11	23	5	35	12	35	8	17	
Disagree	F	25	6	1	4	4	0	9	6	0	3	120
	M	20	16	0	2	5	1	6	8	2	2	
Express Hurt/Anger	F	2	5	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	19
	M	3	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	2	
Express Hope/ Affection	F	1	5	3	5	2	1	6	2	1	6	42
	M	0	0	1	3	0	3	0	3	0	0	
Humour/ Facilitate Conversation	F	0	0	2	9	0	3	1	3	2	2	65
	M	1	2	5	5	1	4	7	8	8	2	
Ignore/Deflect	F	3	3	0	0	3	0	1	6	0	0	39
	M	3	5	0	0	4	1	3	1	3	3	
Blame/Criticism	F	10	3	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	3	36
	M	7	2	0	0	0	0	5	3	0	0	
Prompt/Question	F	4	1	1	3	3	4	2	8	3	7	57
	M	7	1	0	0	2	0	1	8	0	2	