

# Gottman (1999)



Psychologists are interested in helping couples maintain healthy relationships. John Gottman argues that the way we communicate with our partners - both verbally and nonverbally - plays a key role in the success of our relationships.

The following study looked at the role of both positive and negative affect on marital satisfaction and the risk of divorce. The research may be used to answer questions about the role of communication in relationships as well as why relationships fall apart.

## Background information



Gottman and Levenson have studied couples in their "Love Lab" since 1986. They have found that couples' communication styles and interactions have significant stability - that is, they do not change much over time. They also discovered that most relationship problems (69%) never get resolved but are "perpetual problems" based on personality differences between partners.

Since problems will always exist in relationships, Gottman predicts that it is the way that we communicate about and respond to conflict that is a strong predictor of whether the marriage or relationship will survive in the long term.

Gottman suggests that diffuse autonomic arousal (DPA) has serious consequences on marital interaction, including a reduced ability to process new information, a reliance on learned behaviors and cognitions, and a tendency to invoke fight or flight behaviors.

**Carerre & Gottman (1999)** carried out a study to determine whether psychologists could accurately predict if a couple in marriage counseling would end up divorced, after only a few minutes of conversation. The Specific Affect (SPAFF) coding system was developed to measure both the positive and negative affects during an interaction. These include:

- Positive affect: interest, validation, affection, humor, joy
- Negative affect: disgust, contempt, belligerence, domineering, anger, fear, defensiveness, whining, sadness, stonewalling
- Neutral affect

In this prospective study, 124 newlywed couples were recruited using a purposive sampling method.

Sampling included an attempt to **stratify** the sample; couples reflected a range of economic and ethnic demographics in the Seattle area. Each couple completed a survey, (each husband and wife completed the survey separately) and then discussed the results with a researcher in order to identify one or two problematic issues in their relationship.

These issues were then used as the basis for a 15-minute discussion which was video recorded and then coded using SPAFF. Couples were then checked once a year for six years to find out if they were still married.

SPAFF scores from the originally recorded discussion were compared for husbands and wives who were still married after six years and those who were not. The results below are based entirely on the first 3 minutes of the 15-minute discussion.

	Negative emotions	Positive emotions	Differ
Married husbands	-33.5	85.7	52
Divorced husbands	-59.7	45.9	-13
Married wives	-39.1	85.0	45
Divorced wives	-66.9	46.0	-20

From this research, Gottman argued that communication styles play a key role in the maintenance or dissolution of a relationship. Further analysis was the basis for his theory of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse - that is, the four traits that lead to the break-up of relationships: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

Subsequent research added **belligerence** to the four horsemen – that is, a behavior that is provocative and that challenges the spouse's power and authority. For example, *“So what if I go out drinking tonight with my buddies? What are you going to do about it? You can't tell me what to do.”*

Gottman explains that these communication styles lead to a vicious circle. The interaction between the couple reinforces the behaviors specific to each partner. The husband's stonewalling makes the wife more dissatisfied; her negative affect increases; in turn, this makes her husband feel less satisfied with the relationship, increasing his withdrawal from intimacy.

## Procedure and results

As much of the research on relationships is focused on identifying factors that make a marriage “dysfunctional” rather than focusing on the factors that lead to a happy, stable marriage, Gottman carried out a study to determine the role of positive factors. In particular, he wanted to test the **Active Listening Model** - also known as the validation model. In this model, the listener does not become defensive but acknowledges the feelings and concerns of the speaker. This validates their feelings and lets them know that the listener is supportive, even if s/he disagrees.

In this study, couples were recruited from a newspaper advertisement; they had to have married for the first time within six months of participating and be childless. All participants took the Marital Adjustment

test (MAT) to test for marital satisfaction.

124 couples were assessed with the MAT each year for six years. At the end of the six years, there were a total of 17 divorces.

The marital interaction assessment consisted of a discussion by the husband and wife about a problem that was a source of ongoing disagreement in their marriage. From these topics, the researchers selected topics for the interactive session.

To start the interactive session, couples were asked to sit quietly for two minutes to establish a baseline for physiological measures.

The couples then discussed the chosen topics for 15 minutes. Physiological predictors (like heart rate, pulse transmission, and skin conductivity) were measured at baseline and during the interaction as levels of physical arousal.

Two remotely controlled video cameras recorded both spouses during the sessions. The **Specific Affect Coding System** was used to code the couples' conflict interactions. The test draws on facial expressions, vocal tone, and speech content. Each video was coded in its entirety by two independent observers.

**Active listening** was measured when one partner expressed negative affect and the other partner validated the negative affect.

After the session, each spouse returned separately to view the videotape of the first session's interaction. A continuous rating of affect was obtained by having the spouse manipulate a rating dial that used a 9-point scale (anchored by very negative and very positive on the extremes and by neutral at the center). Spouses were instructed to adjust the dial as often as necessary so that it always reflected the way they felt during the interaction.

After six years, the researchers found that both the husband's and wife's high-intensity negative affect (belligerence, defensiveness, and contempt) predicted divorce. A wife's low-intensity negative affect (whining, sadness, disgust, stonewalling) predicted divorce, but this was not the case if this was shown by the male.

Evidence supported that contempt, belligerence, and defensiveness were the destructive patterns during a conflict. But this was something that had already been determined by previous research. What surprised Gottman was that the active listening model did **not** predict positive outcomes.

Active listening was *rarely* demonstrated in these discussions. The couples in the study rarely validated their spouse's feelings. They were so surprised by the findings, they went back and looked at 13 years of videotape and transcripts – and they found that there were very few examples of validation in conflict.

Although the Active Listening Model is often used in marriage therapy to develop strategies to support a relationship, there was not enough evidence in either the successful or failed marriages in this study to support that claim.

## Evaluation

Gottman's research uses **data triangulation**, collecting physiological as well as observations of couples interacting about a problem in their relationship.

Using more than one coder to rate the behavior of the couple is a way to establish **inter-coder reliability**. This increases the internal validity of the study.

The SPAFF is a standardized test that has been shown to have high **reliability**. That being said, it may not have cross-cultural reliability. Using the SPAFF with a diverse sample may have low cross-cultural validity.

The sampling methods of both studies are self-selected. This may lead to a **selection bias** in that the people who volunteer may have specific traits that make them willing to participate.

The approach is rather **reductionist**, arguing that it is one's communication style that leads to the success or failure of a relationship. In looking at divorce rates over six years, it would be important to ask about the factors that the couple attributes to their divorce. It could well be that extraneous variables played a key role. The **internal validity** of such longitudinal and prospective research is problematic.