

RELATIONSHIPS AND COUPLE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Adina Lupu¹

¹Bantean High School of Otelu Rosu, Romania

Corresponding author: Adina Lupu, adina_lyu13@yahoo.com

Abstract: The paper presents certain aspects of a couple's life, more exactly issues related to the communication between partners (satisfaction within a relationship, perception on the quality of communication concerning the sexual relationship, perception of affection, communication regarding the financial aspect, satisfaction in communication, confidence and communication in case of conflict). The aim of the research is to build a measuring instrument, able to test some of the dimensions chosen as relevant for the couple. The study starts from the following hypotheses: 1. a high level of communication concerning the sexual relationship tends to be associated with a higher level of satisfaction within the relationship; 2. there is a relationship between satisfaction in communication and affection perception; 3. there is a positive association between a high level of satisfaction in communication and the relationship; 4. there is a positive connection between the communication related to the financial aspect and the degree of confidence; 5. there is a difference between men and women in terms of the affection perceived by the couple.

All these research hypotheses were confirmed (except hypothesis 4 which could not be validated), thus significant links between the dimensions of a relationship and differences between men and women in terms of the affection perceived are observed.

KEYWORDS: communication within a couple, conflict within a couple, satisfaction within a relationship

1. INTRODUCTION

Our emotional needs are in constant change: we want a partner to answer our desires and our status, to appreciate our qualities, to love us for the "right" reasons, to support us, to help us become the person we want to be. A partner who meets our needs in case of weakness, who amplifies our strengths, who loves unconditionally, is what everyone wants from a relationship. The reality is that few relationships develop at such "standards". A couple's life and the events in one's life are the most important sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Studies on romantic relationships show that all couples have discrepancies and misunderstandings on various topics: money, friends, sex, spare time, affection expression, children, confidence, etc. A longitudinal study,

involving couples presenting a high level of satisfaction, and couples who divorced, revealed the fact that, conflict and even satisfied couples, have misunderstandings on the same topics and moments of intense dissatisfaction (Gottman, 1991).

This paper presents the problem of communication within a couple, more exactly the strategies of communication used within a couple and their role in perceiving the quality of such a relationship. An interesting aspect is presented by Iolanda Mitrofan (1989), in her book *Cuplul conjugal-Armonie și dizarmonie (Conjugal Couple-Harmony and Disharmony)*, where she states that "The conjugal couple is deeply marked by the freedom of making choices, having love as essential criterion, with the corollary of rupture, when the conjugal union loses its reason of being, due to the disappearance of love".

In his book *Speak to me, I have so much to tell you*, Jacques Salome (2002), reports on human interaction, the game of giving and receiving, on the exchange that represents the union of two beings who are in a relationship, an exchange which is done only through communication. The exchange has as finality change, the personal growth within a viable relationship. The author states that this exchange occurs when the partners have the opportunity to speak on the three essential levels of communication: realistic, imaginary and symbolic: "The utterance at all these levels allows you to reach a healthy relationship" (Salome, 2002). For any problem within a couple it is better, for the two sides, to focus primarily on issues aiming at improving communication between them. Any conflict would better be addressed directly, not avoided or ignored.

The problem must first be identified and then solved together with the partner. For example, a behaviour that pleases the partner may be adopted. It is recommended for the adopted behaviour to offer satisfaction to the other. Psychologists believe that the degree of satisfaction in a couple is given by the number of positive interactions between partners. Those who do not get along, have more negative than positive interactions. Negative interactions generate

hostile and contradictory feelings. In terms of therapy perspective and conflict prevention, psychologists and sociologists' investigations, when talking about communication, have generally referred to: a. Rules on the exchange of ideas, information and privacy; b. Rules concerning the conflict – both kinds of rules assuming confrontation and declination (avoidance) of responsibilities within human communication. When the members of a couple are able to listen to each other, to question and comment on issues related to their desire to understand each other, to use proper words, or to decide on in order to get informational consensus, they can work together and properly interact, so that both could be stimulated to grow and experience satisfaction (Mitrofan & Mitrofan, 1993).

2. OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

The scope of this research is to build a measuring instrument, able to test some of the dimensions chosen as being relevant for the romantic relationship. The specific objectives refer to the highlight of the presence or absence of correlations between the dimensions of the research and to analyze whether there are differences between men and women on a particular dimension related to the couple

The hypotheses are:

1. A high level of communication concerning the sexual relationship tends to be associated with a higher level of satisfaction within the relationship;
2. There is a relationship between satisfaction in communication and affection perception;
3. There is a positive association between a high level of satisfaction in communication and the relationship;
4. There is a positive connection between the communication related to the financial aspect and the degree of confidence;
5. There is a difference between men and women in terms of the affection perceived by the couple.

3. METHOD

The present research is an experimental research. The participants are represented by 112 subjects (of which 56 women and 56 men) and were randomly chosen. The subjects are students from different faculties from Timisoara, with ages between 19 and 26 years. The questionnaire was carried out within three days and the subjects were chosen from students' dorm from Timisoara.

The questionnaire used was realized for this research. The questionnaire that evaluates couple satisfaction and communication consists of 59 items, which

measure seven dimensions, presented from a theoretical point of view. This type of questionnaire was chosen, because, so far, no such questionnaire was built to measure the degree of couple communication and satisfaction, strictly on the dimension chosen for this research. The 59 items were divided into dimensions as follows:

A) Relationship satisfaction: it refers to the subject's degree of relationship satisfaction. The goal was to see whether the subject is satisfied or not by his relationship. The items for this dimension were:

1. I am satisfied with how much time I spend with my partner.
2. I am satisfied with the way in which we express our feelings to each other.
3. Generally, I am satisfied with my relationship.
4. I feel safe within my relationship.
5. I feel I can easily communicate with my partner.
6. I feel I am respected within the relationship.
7. I feel we can have fun together within this relationship.
8. I feel well in this relationship.

B) Perception of the communication quality related to the sexual relationship: the intent was to observe if the two easily communicate about their sexual life and how this communication takes place. The items for this dimension were:

1. I do not feel good when speaking about sexuality with my partner.
2. It comes easy to me to tell my partner what I like about him/her when we make love.
3. It comes easy to me to tell my partner what I do not like about him/her when we make love.
4. I cannot speak about sexuality with my partner.
5. My partner speaks to me about things related to our sexual relationship.
6. We talk openly about our sexual relationship.
7. We share each other sexual fantasies.

C) Perception of affection: it was intended to see whether the subject feels that the partner meets his/her needs, whether the latter supports his/her weak points and amplifies the strong ones, whether he/she feels is loved and accepted by the partner. The items for this dimension were:

1. I feel that I receive enough affection within this relationship.
2. I feel my partner can make me happy, in this relationship.

3. I feel my partner is attentive to my needs.
4. My partner shows he/she loves me.
5. I feel that my relationship is better by the day.
6. My partner pays enough attention to me.
7. My partner encourages me.

D) Communication on the financial aspect: this dimension was intended to observe whether partners were talking about that aspect of their couple life and whether the decisions regarding the financial side were made in common or separately. The items for this dimension were:

1. We make decisions together regarding how we spend money, within our relationship.
2. Each of us makes his own decisions.
3. Most often we do not agree when it comes to money.
4. Before going out, I decide with my partner how much money we spend.
5. We have disagreements when speaking about money.
6. Within our relationship we talk about how much money we should spend together.
7. My partner lets me know when he has financial troubles.
8. Before spending our money, we talk about it.

E) Communication satisfaction: this aspect was intended to observe whether the subject could communicate freely and whether he could be capable to listen to his partner talk at his/her turn.

1. I feel I can communicate easily with my partner.
2. Within our relationship, there are moments when I feel I cannot communicate what I am thinking about with my partner.
3. Generally, communication in our couple is satisfactory.
4. I can share the most intimate thoughts to my partner.
5. When expressing my opinion, I feel I am understood.
6. I feel my partner does not tell me what he/she is thinking.
7. My partner tells me his/her most personal thoughts.
8. My partner takes my opinion into consideration.
9. I am satisfied with the extent we can openly behave with each other.

F) Confidence: was intended to observe whether within the relationship the subject is confident that he/she can rely on the other, whether he/she can have unlimited trust in his/her partner or not, or whether

the exchange of faith their relationship is based on meets the subject's needs and expectances. The items referring to this dimension were:

1. I consider my partner is honest with me.
2. I consider my partner is faithful.
3. I believe that my partner will be close to me in difficult moments.
4. I feel comfortable when my partner pays attention to a person of opposite sex.
5. My partner gave me reasons to doubt him.
6. I am totally trustful in my partner.
7. My partner has the habit to flirt with persons of opposite sex.
8. I am thinking about testing my partner's faithfulness.

G) Communication in case of conflict: this dimension is intended to measure the extent in which the partners communicate in case a conflict occurs in their relationship. First of all the subjects were asked a filter question: Were there situations when you had different views than your partner's related to a certain subject? If they the answer was YES, they had to solve the following items:

1. We discuss later about what we feel.
2. We get along in no time.
3. My partner sustains his opinion.
4. We do not talk to with each other for a certain period of time.
5. We take into consideration the other's opinion.
6. I sustain my own opinion.
7. We arrive at a consensus.

If the answer was NO, the subjects had to approach the items referring to their school level, workplace, and their occupational status. At the end of the questionnaire, the subjects had to fill in with their gender, age and the university attended. The questionnaire was ranked on a scale from 1 to 5, as follows: 1. Very little extent; 2. Little extent; 3. A certain extent; 4. Large extent; 5. Very large extent. The first step in validating this questionnaire consisted on the evaluation offered by experts from the academic environment.

For this purpose, another questionnaire was realized, with questions on the item importance scaled from 1 to 5 (1. Very little relevant; 2. Little relevant; 3. Relevant in a certain extent; 4. Relevant; 5. Very relevant), to observe the extent in which an item from a chosen dimensions was relevant or not. The experts' answers were used to construct an average for the items of each dimension. The second step consisted in calculating the internal consistency of the scale. Therefore, the Alfa Crombach coefficient was

calculated for each of the items of the seven dimensions.

4. DATA PROCESSING, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The correlative analysis was used to check the research hypotheses, in order to observe the measure in which changes of a variable are accompanied by changes of another, according to the results of the “t” test for differences. As shown by Table no. 1 (with references to the first hypothesis), the correlation between the communication concerning the sexual relationship and relationship satisfaction is of 36. The result is as follows: $r(110) = 36$, $p < 0.1$, thus resulting a significant positive relationship between

the communication on the sexual characteristic and the one referring to the satisfaction obtained within a relationship.

Thus, these data confirm the hypothesis established, according to which a high level of communication referring to the sexual relationship tends to be associated to a higher level of satisfaction. This first hypothesis is also confirmed by other studies showing the connection between sexual satisfaction and satisfaction within such a relationship. More precisely, men and women who said they were satisfied both from the sexual and from communicational points of view, registered high levels of satisfaction.

Table 1

EX	RELS		EX	RELS	SATREL
		Pearson correlation	1,000		,358
		Sig (1-pas cu pas)			,000
		N	112		112
EL	SATR	Pearson correlation	,358		1,000
		Sig (1-pas cu pas)	,000		
		N	112		112

Even if the hypothesis of the study according to which a high level of communication related to the sexual relationship tends to be associated to a higher level of satisfaction, it has been also confirmed by both the data acquired and by previous researches. Other researches based on therapeutic interventions stated that future researches should develop through more complex models than those used in the past as regards these variables. The results presented in

Table no. 2 (for the second hypothesis) are as follows: $r(110) = 71$, $p < 01$, the data obtained confirm the second hypothesis and there is a significant positive relationship between the satisfaction in communication and the perception of affection. It seems that subjects consider a good communication between partners helps them better understand and perceive feelings expressed.

Table 2

OM	SATC		OM	SATC	PERFAECT
		Pearson correlation	1,000		,709
		Sig (1-pas cu pas)			,000
		N	112		112
PERAFFECT		Pearson correlation	,709		1,000
		Sig. (1-pas cu pas)	,000		
		N	112		112

A possible explanation was that, when women felt attention and a positive affection related to their men’s communication behaviour, they began feeling better, with themselves and the others. In conclusion the research hypothesis was confirmed by both statistical data and by other studies, subjects considering that a positive communication offers satisfaction within the relationship, being associated with their perception on the idea of affection.

When analyzing hypothesis no. 3 (table no. 3), the idea suggested was also confirmed because $r(110) = 77$, $p < .01$, a significant positive association existing

between a high level of satisfaction in communication and the satisfaction obtained within that relationship. The conclusion is that the present subjects consider that a good communication within a couple produces a higher satisfaction. In particular, the association between both variables offers the explanation according to which this positive association is valid only in the case of couples who communicate efficiently and might be associated as being negative in the case of unhappy couples, which lack abilities of a positive communication.

Table 3

		OM	SATC	SATREL
OM	SATC	Pearson correlation		,774
		Sig. (1-pas cu pas)		,000
		N		112
EL	SATR	Pearson correlation		1,000
		Sig. (1- pas cu pas)		,000
		N		112

Hypothesis no. 4 couldn't be tested, because the Alpha Crombach coefficient was not statistically significant for the two dimensions to be tested. Very few researches took into consideration couple communication on subjects as the financial aspect. In order to test hypothesis no. 5, a parallel was drawn between the two groups of subjects.

Thus, one can notice, in Table no. 4, a significant difference between the two groups of subjects as regards their gender.

In Table no. 4 the "t" value represents the difference average (3,9464) divided with the standard difference error (1,0550), a division that produces the value – 3,741. The significance value (Sig) being smaller than 0,05, the information on the second line had to be used. As shown, the variants are significantly different because $t(100,32) = - 3,74, p <.05$. The result is statistically significant, the research hypothesis being confirmed. Therefore, there is a difference between men and women on the perception of affection within the relationship.

Table 4

	N	GE	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error Mean
PERAFECT	Feminine		56	500 30,7	6.3910	0 ,854
	Masculine		56	964 34.6	4.6355	4 ,619

Various studies have tried to emphasize the existing differences between men and women, starting from differences from the brain level up to differences connected to self-image. The basic idea is that there are major differences between men and women, these being neither good nor bad; but just differences. According specialty literature experts, women are more suitable than men to have as primary responsibility their family, thus women who work and have familial responsibilities, have to make different decisions in order to manage such responsibilities.

Quantitative analysis

In order to evaluate the internal consistency of items presented in the questionnaire used for this research, the alpha coefficient was employed. For the items related to the seven dimensions, the items fidelity average was calculated, the result being: for the items related to the dimension *Relationship Satisfaction*, the alpha coefficient is .89; for the items related to the dimension *Perception of Communication Quality regarding the Sexual Relationship*, the alpha coefficient is .77; for the items related to the dimension *Perception of Affection*, the alpha coefficient is .91; for the items related to the dimension *Communication Regarding the Financial Aspect*, the alpha coefficient is .52; for the items related to the dimension *Satisfaction in*

Communication, the alpha coefficient is .73; for the items related to the dimension *Confidence*, the alpha coefficient is .41; and for the items related to the dimension *Communication in Case of Conflict*, the alpha coefficient is .36.

Besides checking of the items method, appreciations of some experts in the field were also used. The hypotheses of this research were checked by calculating the correlation index r (hypotheses 1, 2 and 3) and the "t" index, used to compare the two groups of students , regarding their gender (hypothesis 5).

Hypothesis 4 could not be checked because the alpha coefficient for the two dimensions was not significant. A pilot study should be performed in the future in order to avoid such problems. There are few studies in the field to emphasize communication regarding the financial aspect or other variables that might be correlated with it. In generally, regarding this aspect, it is considered that discussions related to money can produce conflicts and the key to solving them would be communication.

An important characteristic would also be the partner's financial independence, without being forced to justify to each other, thus avoiding the conflicts. The authoress of the book *Conscious Spending for Couples: Seven Skills for Financial Harmony*, Deborah Knuckey (2002) thinks that each

person should explore his/her own money personality, a personality which develops through education and personal experience. Thus this aspect should be studied in detail and requires a more minute research. All the hypotheses of the present research have been confirmed (except hypothesis 4 which could not be validated), existing both significant connections among the relationship dimensions, and differences between men and women on the perception of affection. The dimensions that didn't obtain a satisfactory Alpha Crombach (Communication on the Financial Aspect, Confidence, and Communication in Case of Conflict) could not be validated and their role within the relationship could not be found out.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present research brought new information on the romantic relationship. The results acquired (on a smaller scale) can be a starting point for a more elaborated and attentively supervised research on the multiple dimensions of the relationship. When talking about the hypotheses to be tested, it can be concluded that communication within a couple, satisfactory or not, plays an important role and especially influences the relationship in a positive or negative way. Thus communication in any dimension connected to a couple, is a decisive factor for all aspects of the present process.

Besides the confirmation of hypotheses, a confirmation on the difference between men and women concerning at least one dimension of the relationship, was produced. It would be interesting to study the differences between the two genders for most important dimensions and factors related to a couple. The conjugal couple has been an attentively studied "phenomenon" for many years, and aroused much interest for researchers throughout time. Solutions for settling down problems occurring during the relationship, have always looked for, and one of the solutions proposed was the efficient communication between the two partners.

It is advisable for the partners to consider their relationship as a progressive process. Generally, couples in strife have a static view regarding their relationship ("Nothing more is to be done!"). For example, the two partners can be suggested to first focus on the positive aspects of their relationship. Recollection of the moments when they met, of the pleasant situations lived together, of the decision to live together, might help them surpass the present conflict. Re-establishing the feelings of affection and improving communication between the partners, represent the best techniques of solving conflicts. It is

never advisable to wait for the other one to change! Conflicts within a couple should be solved together and require effort from both partners. One should ask one's partner what pleases him/her day by day to find out new facets of his/her way of being. At the same time, one should try to analyze negative thoughts regarding the partner's behaviour. Are these thoughts much different from one's reality? If he/she did not kiss you when he/she came home does it mean he/she is cheating you? In many cases a tendency to exaggerate appears and to interpret the behaviour of one's partner in a catastrophic manner.

Thus, new methods related to both the person and the couple or family appeared and were improved – with the purpose of offering models for acquiring abilities to allow the subjects prevent and minimize such an issue. Multiple studies were performed on the consolidation of harmonic non-stressful relationships – by identifying and adapting a high level of satisfaction and competences. At the moment, there are various textbooks and papers which teach the human subject how to learn by himself/herself to protect his/her person (teach – yourself manuals) and therefore to avoid the stress within the family.

Other methods with the purpose of enriching the subject with proofs of self- knowledge, for a better understanding of the couple and family, with pieces of advice for those experts who suggest solutions regarding friendship, family foundation, counselling in case of religious issues, respect for vicinity, consolidation of likes, etc. are also available.

These methods act, in fact, on a private interrelationship level by helping at the same time acquire learning abilities at professional level and becoming competent within the relationship. Methods of learning and treatment for intercommunicative relationships, can be given as example: psychotherapy; acquiring social abilities; pre-marital advice; marital advice; therapy for marital behaviour; family therapy; maximization of couple interrelationships; and self-support for single parents, divorced persons etc.

In recent decades, family psychotherapy aims not only to cure unsuitable patterns of communication, but to make them more aesthetic, by promoting interpersonal harmony within the family core. For such a reason, communication models that prevail in families must first be identified, as well as their significance for their balance and development.

The idea is that people have to learn how to cooperate with the nearby person, thus to develop ourselves as sensible beings to the needs of others and the compromises made by partners will help a more balanced life. "A successful relationship starts

with auditions, goes on with rehearsals and daily shows and depends on the casting and the manner the team perform together under the management of a reliable director – the unconditioned love” (Littauer, 2004).

Although life in two is a definite matrix of human existence and is carried on as a dialogue and as an erotic, sexual, procreative, interactive, valuable, moral and educational communion, it continues to engage the attention of researchers from different fields of activity (medical, demographic, psychological, social, juridical, etc), being a little known issue and, as a consequence, with a consistent degree of impudence in evolution.

Iolanda Mitrofan (2002) considers that the main elements of success, stability and satisfaction within a couple are represented by a certain “correspondence and complementarily” when speaking about ideas, attitudes, conceptions and aspirations, but also when approaching communication, erotic and sexual behaviour. This sexual, affective and ideational correspondence assures the interactional balance within a couple, by offering partners the possibility for a mutual satisfactory adaptation.

It seems that one of the “secrets” of relationship happiness is the couple’s capacity to steadily create and recreate, as a dual entity, in the core of which “the two engaged personalities assert, develop and satisfy each other, assimilate and psychologically

condition each other, this conferring sense and value to the conjugal union” (I. Mitrofan, 2002). Within a couple, everything evolves, depending on the ideal kept by each partner. A relationship doesn’t only unify two persons, but also transforms them.

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