

Regulating Partners in Intimate Relationships: The Costs and Benefits of Different Communication Strategies

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This study tested the success of communication strategies used by relationship partners ($N = 61$ romantic couples) who were videotaped while trying to produce desired changes in each other. Strategies varying in valence (positive vs. negative) and directness (direct vs. indirect) were differentially associated with postdiscussion perceptions of success as well as ratings of demonstrated change in targeted features gathered at 3-month intervals during the following year. Direct strategies (positive and negative) were initially perceived as relatively unsuccessful but predicted increased change over the next 12 months as reported by the targeted partners and (for positive-direct strategies) as perceived by female agents. Positive-indirect strategies, in contrast, were associated with higher concurrent perceived success but did not predict later change. Increases in problem severity also forecasted lower relationship quality over time. These findings indicate that one mechanism through which regulation strategies impact relationship outcomes is the extent to which engaged strategies are successful at producing desired change.

Keywords: communication strategies, regulation, conflict behavior, relationship change

One of the principal ways in which individuals attempt to improve their intimate relationships is by trying to change their partners (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006). In the first systematic investigation of partner regulation processes, however, Overall et al. (2006) found that more strenuous self-reported attempts to change intimate partners along important relationship-relevant dimensions, such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, and status, were associated with lower relationship quality both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. This may seem a paradoxical result given that the motivation behind regulatory efforts is presumably to enhance relationships. Overall et al.'s explanation, which was supported by modeling dyadic effects in romantic couples, posited that higher levels of partner regulation signal lack of acceptance and negative views about the partner. Indeed, recent research has shown that believing a partner harbors negative views of the self has corrosive effects on relationship quality (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006).

Overall et al. (2006) also discovered a second reason for the negative links between partner regulation and relationship quality. Although cross-sectional analyses indicated that targeted partners

increased self-regulatory efforts when their partners reported trying to change them, regulation efforts were typically perceived to be unsuccessful, and hence, couples became less satisfied with their relationship. Nevertheless, individuals who perceived their regulation efforts to be relatively more successful in producing change in targeted characteristics evaluated their partners and relationship in a more positive fashion (as did their partners). These findings suggest that a chief mechanism through which regulation attempts impact the relationship may be the extent to which targeted partners demonstrate desired change over time.

One key to successful regulation attempts should be the kind of communication strategies people use to change their relationships. Different strategies are likely to vary in their benefits (e.g., successfully producing desired change) and costs (e.g., reducing relationship satisfaction). For example, direct negative strategies (e.g., nagging or demanding change) are likely to be poorly received by the targeted partner and, accordingly, may be less successful than indirect positive strategies (e.g., using positive affect to soften the regulation attempt). On the other hand, positive and subtle strategies may keep relationships buoyant in the short term but be less successful at changing partner behavior across time. To date, there has been no examination of how relationship problems vary across time or the role played by different communication strategies in producing desired changes in relationships (see Bradbury, Rogge, & Lawrence, 2001). The current study examined these novel questions by measuring the communication strategies adopted by relationship partners as they discussed attributes of each other that they wanted to change, and by longitudinally following couples to assess long-term success in producing desired change.

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Communication Behavior in Intimate Relationships

A vast body of research has investigated the communication and influence strategies intimate partners use in problem-solving or conflict interactions (see Heyman, 2001). The general consensus arising from hundreds of studies spanning three decades is that engaging in hostile, critical, or demanding communication behavior, and reciprocating partners' negative influence attempts, leads to lower relationship satisfaction (for reviews, see Gottman, 1998; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). For example, in a meta-analysis of 14 longitudinal studies measuring negative behavior in conflict interactions, Karney and Bradbury (1995) reported that for both men and women, negative communication predicted reductions in later satisfaction in both partners. There is also evidence that the converse is true; namely, softening influence attempts by using positive affect such as humor to deescalate conflict (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998) and accommodating when confronted with undesirable partner behavior (i.e., ignoring negative behaviors and remaining steadfastly positive in the face of provocation; Fletcher, Thomas, & Durrant, 1999; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991) are both associated with higher relationship satisfaction.

The most widely accepted explanation for this pattern of findings is that negative communication undermines problem solving by evoking destructive affective and behavioral reactions from the partner, which then filter through to future interactions and erode relationship quality. Positive conflict behavior is typically assumed to have the opposite effect by fostering an empathic, caring, and rewarding relationship atmosphere (Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Other well-established interaction patterns also indicate that negative conflict behavior evokes negative and defensive reactions from partners. For example, critical, blaming, and demanding communication from the person who wants change often elicits defensive withdrawal from the targeted partner, and this demand-withdraw pattern predicts reduced relationship satisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Klinetob & Smith, 1996).

Some research, however, points in the opposite direction. For example, although greater expression of negative affect (e.g., anger) and communicative behavior (e.g., blame and hostility) during conflict interactions are negatively associated with concurrent relationship satisfaction in many studies, a handful of investigations have found that negative strategies predict relative increases in relationship satisfaction across time (and vice versa). Gottman and Krokoff (1989), for example, found that disagreement and criticism were associated with positive changes in relationship satisfaction across a 3-year period, whereas wives' agreement and humor predicted more negative long-term relationship evaluations by both partners. Similarly, Heavey, Layne, and Christensen (1993) reported that husbands' demand behavior, including blame and pressure for change, was associated with increases in wives' relationship satisfaction 1 year later (also see Heavey et al., 1995). Both Gottman and Krokoff (1989) and Heavey et al. (1993, 1995) concluded that some types of negative communication behavior might produce positive relationship outcomes because they reflect engagement and commitment in the relationship, generate real change in the partner, and might, therefore, reduce the seriousness of the problem over time.

These early studies attracted methodological criticisms including concerns about regression to the mean of extremely satisfied versus distressed groups and failure to control for initial satisfaction to assess true change (Woody & Constanzo, 1990). However, more recent investigations employing analytic techniques that overcome these limitations have also found that negative conflict behavior can have positive benefits over time. Karney and Bradbury (1997), for example, used growth curve analyses to examine the links between conflict behavior and change in relationship satisfaction over a 4-year period. Although relationship satisfaction generally declined across time, negative communication by the female partner was associated with more positive trajectories of the satisfaction of both couple members. Similarly, investigating the interaction between negative life events, conflict behavior, and longitudinal satisfaction, Cohan and Bradbury (1997) found that when faced with stronger life stressors, wives' expression of anger during marital problem-solving discussions predicted greater relationship satisfaction 18 months later, whereas more humor by husbands predicted greater probability of divorce.

Taken together, these studies indicate that the presence of negative communication can be potentially beneficial for relationships in the long term. As indicated above, one explanation for these seemingly contradictory findings involves the success of different strategies used to resolve conflicts and produce desired change. Directly confronting the problem and engaging in conflict (which often entails negative affect, anger, and criticism) may be crucial in resolving problems and maintaining long-term relationship satisfaction (Holmes & Murray, 1996) precisely because negative communication behavior motivates partners to bring about desired change. In contrast, withdrawal from conflict and/or positive loyal responses may reduce conflict in the short term but leave the problem unaddressed. Unresolved problems, even in the presence of positive behavior, might eventually erode satisfaction over time (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Holmes & Murray, 1996).

Conceptualizing and Coding Communication/Regulation Strategies

A wide range of typologies have been used to code the way in which people communicate during problem-solving interactions (see Heyman, 2001, for a review). These typologies converge in the way they characterize both negative communication behavior (e.g., put-downs, blaming, displays of negative affect) and positive communication behavior (e.g., reasoning, problem solving, displays of positive affect, partner support).

For example, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) found positive longitudinal effects of negative communication using codes from the Marital Interaction Coding System (MICS; Weiss & Summers, 1983), which included disagreement and criticism (incorporating hostility and anger). Similarly, they found negative relationship outcomes associated with the MICS positive codes of agreement, approval, and humor. Karney and Bradbury (1997) reported similar findings using the Verbal Tactics Coding Scheme (VTCS; Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982), which codes for negative behaviors such as hostility, rejection, criticism, and faulting the partner, whereas Heavey and colleagues (1993, 1995) used their Conflict Rating System, which codes for problem discussion, blaming, criticizing, sarcasm, and demands. Finally, Cohan and Bradbury (1997) found positive long-term effects of anger and

negative effects of humor using the Specific Affect Coding System (Gottman, 1994).

The majority of these negative behaviors are active, direct, and partner focused (e.g., criticism, blame, and rejection), whereas the positive codes appear soft, are relatively passive, and avoid or minimize overt conflict (e.g., through the use of humor). This is consistent with the proposition that longitudinal outcomes associated with positive versus negative behaviors arise from encouraging different levels of problem engagement and the associated generation of change (or lack thereof). However, not all negative communication is active and direct, and not all positive conflict behavior is passive and undemanding. In the studies mentioned above, for example, indirect negative communications such as whining and sadness (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) predicted declines in satisfaction, perhaps because these behaviors express general unhappiness but do not actively promote specific changes. In addition, across most coding schemes, positive but more direct behaviors are assessed by integrative tactics (VTCS) and constructive problem engagement (MICS), both of which focus on explaining the problem and discussing solutions. Such positive behaviors are likely to be more effective at targeting and changing behavior than softer strategies that minimize the issue, such as humor and passive approval.

The distinction between direct and indirect strategies is commonplace in the research literatures concerned with influence (e.g., Bui, Raven, & Schwarzwald, 1994; Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986), communication (e.g., Canary, 2003; Hojjat, 2000; Sillars et al., 1982; Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994), and relationship maintenance (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1991). Direct communication strategies include being explicit, overt, and directly engaging the partner, such as providing rational reasons for change and proposing solutions (positive) and being demanding and coercive (negative). Indirect strategies, by comparison, involve using passive or covert ways to resolve issues and induce change, such as using humor (positive) or whining and evoking guilt (negative). As these examples illustrate, these two dimensions—directness (direct vs. indirect) and valence (positive vs. negative)—may be largely orthogonal, forming four categories of behavior representing different combinations of valence and directness. We have outlined the most commonly assessed behaviors within each category in Table 1 and describe these communication strategies in more detail below. To reiterate, we think that distinguishing communication strategies according to both directness and valence may be pivotal in clarifying the short-term versus longitudinal impact of conflict behavior.

Immediate and Long-Term Success of Communication Strategies

Positive-direct strategies, such as rational reasoning, confront the problem by clearly explaining concerns, assessing causes and solutions, and attempting to persuade partners about the best course of action to resolve the issue. In contrast, negative-direct strategies, such as coercion and autocracy, actively pursue desired changes by derogating and blaming the partner, rigidly demanding change, and offering little room for negotiation. As with a positive-direct approach, these tactics explicitly express discontent and directly impress upon the target the need for change. In short,

targeted partners should become acutely aware of their partner's dissatisfaction and the severity of the problem.

In the short term, a more accurate but pessimistic assessment of the partner's desired change is likely to produce defensiveness and negative affect in the targeted partner, exacerbating conflict and impeding immediate success in resolving the issue. In addition, these destructive effects may be more severe if direct strategies are also negative. However, summarizing prior arguments (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Holmes & Murray, 1996), a clear understanding of the nature and seriousness of the problem might also lead to greater and more effective change attempts by the targeted partner and therefore more successful problem resolution over time. Hence, the immediate deleterious outcomes associated with the use of direct negative strategies should be mitigated if they produce real desired change over time.

Indirect strategies, on the other hand, are likely to be much less efficient in generating desired outcomes (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Drigotas, Whitney, & Rusbult, 1995). Positive-indirect tactics, such as minimizing the problem, focusing on more salubrious partner features, and validating the partner's views, soften conflict and communicate esteem but also convey that all is well and the issue is relatively trivial. This type of warm accommodating behavior should be less stressful and more comfortable in the short term and thus is likely to be perceived as relatively successful. However, positive-indirect strategies are unlikely to impart the need for change effectively and, therefore, should be less successful in ameliorating relationship problems in the long term.

Finally, negative-indirect strategies might yield a somewhat different pattern. Tactics such as appealing to the partner's love or relationship obligations and portraying the self as a powerless victim indirectly attempt to motivate change by inducing guilt and sympathy. Such manipulative strategies are often perceived as underhanded and elicit resentment and resistance in the targeted partner (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994, 1995) and, therefore, are unlikely to be met with immediate success. Moreover, we suspect that, as with positive-indirect strategies, negative-indirect tactics will be relatively ineffective over time. Such tactics dump the responsibility for change on the partner, but they leave it vague and ambiguous as to how the partner is supposed to deal with the problem.

Though no prior research has tested our predictions longitudinally, existing research suggests that, at least in the short-term, negative communication behavior generally impedes problem resolution, whereas positive strategies are more effective at motivating change. For example, Heavey et al. (1993) found that more demanding behavior was associated with less discussion satisfaction, including the degree of progress toward resolving the issue, whereas positive communication, including compromising, expressing positive affect and humor, and validating the partner (mostly positive-indirect behaviors), predicted more positive perceptions of the discussion by both partners.

Taking a different tack, Lewis and Rook (1999) assessed individuals' perceptions of the strategies adopted by their partners when attempting to change their own health-related behaviors (e.g., quitting smoking or exercising more). In this context, retrospective reports of receiving positive strategies were associated with successfully changing the targeted behavior, whereas negative strategies did not predict reported behavior change but were associated with greater hostility and irritation (also see Lewis &

Table 1
Communication Strategies Categorized by Valence (Positive vs. Negative) and Directness (Direct vs. Indirect)

Communication strategy	Associated tactics
	Negative-direct
Coercion	Derogate partner (e.g., criticize, insult, belittle, ridicule, and make fun of in a hurtful way) Indicate negative consequences for partner (e.g., threaten punishment, infer that something desired will be withheld) if partner does not conform to desired change Display negative affect (e.g., anger, irritation, displeasure, frustration, yelling, cursing, violence) when partner fails to conform to wishes Accuse and blame partner for discrepancies and/or problems in the relationship
Autocracy	Insist or demand that the partner think, feel, or behave in a certain way Talk from a position of authority and/or assert or imply that self is more of an expert regarding the topic under discussion or is in a superior position to comment on the topic Attempt to exert superiority by trying to make partner feel inferior and/or invalidate partner's point of view (e.g., be patronizing, use sarcasm, be condescending, or reject and invalidate partner's arguments) Take a domineering and/or nonnegotiative stance (e.g., not listen to partner's arguments, repeat own point of view or argue until partner agrees, interrupt partner, control the conversation)
	Negative-indirect
Manipulation	Attempt to make partner feel guilty (e.g., remind of past favors or partner transgressions, appeal to obligations, commitments, or fairness) Appeal to partner's love and concern
Supplication	Use emotional expression of hurt (e.g., tears, sulking, making sad face, pouting) Debase self (e.g., portray self as less capable, worthy, or powerful than partner) and/or present self as needing help Emphasize the negative consequences the situation or partner's behavior has for self
	Positive-direct
Rational reasoning	Use and seek factual or accurate information Use logic and rational reasoning (e.g., weigh pros and cons, assess consequences, present arguments in a logical fashion, suggest solutions, outline benefits of particular approaches) Explain behavior or point of view (e.g., outlining possible causes) in such a way that the partner would find it reasonable to behave/think that way if the partner were in the same position
	Positive-indirect
Soft positive	"Soften" persuasion attempts (e.g., minimize problem, point out good characteristics of partner) Encourage partner to explain point of view and express feelings about the issue Be open to, acknowledge, and validate partner's views Be charming and express positive affect (e.g., humor)

Note. A comprehensive list of the typologies reviewed when generating this taxonomy, as well as the specific descriptions and items used to code each strategy, is available from Nickola C. Overall.

Butterfield, 2005). Finally, Oriña, Wood, and Simpson (2002) reported that both negative (coercive derogation and negative affect) and positive (logic and reasoning) direct influence tactics were associated with observer ratings of the targeted partner moving further away from the actor's position.

Consistent with our predictions, these studies suggest that in the short-term, negative or bluntly direct communications are likely to

be met with truculence and resistance, whereas positive and perhaps indirect communication patterns are received warmly and may have more success. However, these studies did not track the status of the problem over time and, of importance, they did not assess whether desired changes or improvements in the partner and relationship were actually achieved. As outlined above, direct strategies might yield positive long-term benefits because they

directly confront the problem, convey the seriousness of the problem, and therefore prompt change. However, positive and negative indirect communication behaviors, which do not engage the partner, tend to avoid the problem, and are ambiguous with regard to the severity of the problem and how the issue can be addressed, should produce little change.

Two early studies assessing a global dimension of conflict engagement—"the degree to which partners confront marital problems and issues directly, actively and persistently" (Miller, Lefcourt, Holmes, Ware, & Saleh, 1986, p. 162)—provide some provisional support that direct strategies facilitate communication success and have positive benefits over time. Miller et al. (1986) coded the extent to which couples (a) discussed issues in an open, direct, and persistent way (i.e., conflict engagement) and (b) exhibited negative affect and hostility when improvising conflict situations. Couples who were more engaged reached better and more satisfying solutions as perceived by the partners and rated by observers, but solution quality was attenuated (but not eliminated) for couples who also communicated with negative affect and hostility. Similarly, Smith, Vivian, and O'Leary (1990) found that less engagement during a problem-solving discussion predicted declines in relationship satisfaction 18 months and 30 months later, but this negative effect was reduced if communication was also positive.

The findings of these two studies provide preliminary evidence that direct communication promotes problem resolution and, in turn, relationship satisfaction. However, the results also indicate that the beneficial effects of direct communication strategies might be boosted when using positive-direct strategies, and the detrimental impact of indirect strategies exacerbated when engaging negative-indirect strategies. The global measures of engagement used in these studies, however, make it difficult to evaluate and compare the findings of these studies with others that have used the most commonly employed coding schemes to tap the negative and positive communication behavior described above. Moreover, as with other research, these studies did not assess the link between the kinds of communication strategies employed and their success in eventually producing desired change over time.

Overview of Study

The current study was designed to examine the relative success of communication strategies that varied in both valence (positive vs. negative) and directness (direct vs. indirect). We first conducted an extensive review of the literature to identify communication behaviors that have been consistently incorporated within (a) major coding systems used in observation studies of couple conflict (see Heyman, 2001, for a review), including those described above, and (b) taxonomies of conflict and influence tactics in close relationships (e.g., Bui et al., 1994; Buss, Gomes, Higgins, & Lauterbach, 1987; Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Howard et al., 1986; Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Oriña et al., 2002; Rausch, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974; Rule, Bisanz, & Kohn, 1985). We specifically targeted communication behaviors that could be applied to regulation attempts in relationships and have been consistently classified according to valence (positive vs. negative) and/or directness (direct vs. indirect), producing four categories of communication strategies (see Table 1). As shown in Table 1, four classes of negative

regulation behavior emerged that combined various communication codes and conflict tactics (coercion, autocracy, manipulation, and supplication) and that could be further categorized into direct (coercion and autocracy) and indirect (manipulation and supplication) communication strategies.

Using these categories, we coded the interaction behavior of couples in ongoing heterosexual relationships discussing aspects of each other that they wanted to change. We assessed perceptions of regulation success and other judgments both immediately after the dyadic discussions and at 3-month intervals during the following year. After testing the validity of the coding scheme using multidimensional scaling (MDS), we examined the links between strategies that varied in valence (positive vs. negative) and directness (direct vs. indirect) with (a) concurrent perceptions of success at inducing change and (b) change in targeted features over time.

Guided by prior research and the arguments outlined above, we derived and tested the following predictions. First, we expected that perceptions of successful change reported immediately after the discussion would be more optimistic if positive strategies were used but less optimistic if negative and direct strategies dominated. Second, we hypothesized that greater use of direct regulation strategies would be more successful in producing change in the partner over time, regardless of whether the strategy was positive or negative. However, by measuring negative-direct and positive-direct strategies separately we were also able to assess whether improvements were stronger for direct strategies that were also positive. Third, we examined the links between change in the targeted partner, problem severity, and relationship quality. We expected that greater regulation success at producing desired change would be associated with a reduction in problem severity and more positive evaluations of relationship quality across time.

Method

Participants

Sixty-one couples involved in heterosexual romantic relationships responded to advertisements posted at a New Zealand university. Women ranged from 18 to 43 years of age ($M = 23.05$, $SD = 4.99$), and men ranged from 18 to 49 years of age ($M = 23.90$, $SD = 5.89$). Of the sample, 61% were living together or married, and the mean length of relationships was 33.67 months ($SD = 33.89$ months). Questionnaire data from this sample were also published in Overall et al. (2006; Study 2), but none of the measures and analyses presented in this article have been previously reported.

Procedure

On arrival at the laboratory, couples were given general information about the study and assured of the confidentiality of their written responses and videotape data. Partners were then directed to separate rooms. After reporting demographic information and completing a scale assessing relationship quality, each participant was asked to identify and rank in order of importance (a) at least three aspects of *themselves* they wanted to change or improve and (b) three aspects of their *partner* they wanted changed or improved. Participants were informed that they would discuss with their partner one of the features they desired to change in their

partner in the next phase of the research. They were asked to describe each feature in enough detail so their partner would understand the topic before the interaction.

The features to be discussed were chosen by the researcher. The most important ranked partner feature was selected for discussion. If, however, the targeted feature had also been listed by the partner as something they desired to change about *themselves*, the topic was discarded and the next highest ranked feature (not identified by the targeted partner as something he or she desired to change about him- or herself) was selected. This procedure ensured that the agent (the partner wanting change) was likely to desire more change than the targeted partner.

Couples were then reunited in a comfortable, soundproofed laboratory where they engaged in a series of video-recorded interactions. First, to relax participants and familiarize them with the discussion format, couples discussed events they had experienced during the past week, excluding the current study. Participants were encouraged to talk and interact as they normally would and were reassured of the confidentiality of their data. Couples were left alone during the interaction and were informed via intercom when to start their discussion and when 5 min had lapsed.

Next, couples engaged in two discussions about features that each individual desired to change about themselves (not reported here) and then engaged in two discussions involving aspects of each other about which they desired change (analyzed here). Half of the sample discussed female-nominated male features first (i.e., an aspect of the male partner that the female partner desired to change), and the other half discussed male-nominated female features first (i.e., an aspect of the female partner that the male partner desired to change).¹ Partners separately completed a pre-discussion questionnaire for each of the features to be discussed (described below) and then discussed each targeted feature for 5 min. Prior to each discussion, the experimenter emphasized that the aim of the discussion was to help bring about desired change. Agents (the dyad member who nominated the feature to be improved) were asked to consider why they wanted change in that particular aspect of their partner and how it could be changed. At the end of each discussion, partners individually completed a postdiscussion questionnaire (described below). Couples were debriefed and paid NZ\$40 for their participation. Sessions typically lasted 2 hr.

Finally, during the next 12 months, both partners in each relationship completed four telephone interviews at 3-month intervals. For each interview, each couple was entered in a NZ\$50 cash draw. Only 47 of the 61 couples completed all four follow-up phases: 13 couples ended their relationship during the year, and 1 couple chose not to participate. Comparisons across intact versus dissolved couples are reported below.

Measures

Relationship quality. The Perceived Relationship Quality Components inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) was used to assess relationship quality. Items tapping satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, love, and romance (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?"; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) were averaged to provide an overall index of relationship quality. This measure had good internal reliability, and both men ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 0.67$, $\alpha = .85$) and women ($M =$

6.16 , $SD = 0.62$, $\alpha = .82$) reported relatively positive perceptions of relationship quality.

Prediscussion ratings. Prior to the discussions, influence agents and targets rated the extent to which the feature to be discussed was a serious problem in their relationship (1 = *not at all serious*, 7 = *extremely serious*) and the degree to which the agent desired change in the targeted feature (1 = *no desire to change*, 7 = *strong desire to change*). Ratings of severity and desired change were strongly correlated ($r_s = .41$ to $.65$, $p_s < .001$) and were averaged to form a single measure of problem severity. Both agents and targets also provided ratings regarding the extent to which the target could easily change this feature of him- or herself (1 = *difficult to change*, 7 = *easy to change*).

Postdiscussion ratings. Immediately following each interaction, both partners rated the extent to which the discussion was experienced as stressful (1 = *not at all stressful*, 7 = *extremely stressful*) and the extent to which they felt upset during the discussion (1 = *not at all upset*, 7 = *extremely upset*). These two ratings were highly correlated ($r_s = .70$ to $.83$, $p_s < .001$) and were averaged to form a single index of stress/upset. Participants also rated the extent to which the discussion was realistic and reflected how they would normally discuss this issue (1 = *not at all realistic*, 7 = *extremely realistic*). Finally, both agents and targets provided three ratings of the success of the discussion (1 = *not at all successful*, 7 = *extremely successful*). Specifically, agents and targets (worded to their perspective) rated (a) how successful the discussion was in bringing about change or intention to change in the feature discussed, (b) how successful the agent was in bringing about change or intention to change in the feature discussed, and (c) the extent the target moved toward the agent's position regarding the issue. The three ratings of success for each discussion were highly correlated for both agents ($r_s = .71$ to $.84$, $p_s < .001$) and targets ($r_s = .50$ to $.73$, $p_s < .001$) and were averaged to form two overall measures: (a) agent's perceptions of success in bringing about change or intention to change and (b) target's perceptions of success in bringing about change (alphas ranged from $.80$ to $.92$).

Postdiscussion assessments over time. At 3-month intervals during the following year, each relationship partner verbally (via telephone interviews) completed the Perceived Relationship Quality Components inventory to assess relationship quality (see above). The scale had high internal reliability for men and women across all testing phases (alphas ranged from $.83$ to $.89$). In addition, both agents and targets were reminded of the features discussed in the laboratory interaction and, for each targeted feature, rated the extent to which (a) the couple had discussed the issue during the past 3 months (1 = *not discussed at all*, 7 = *discussed a great deal*), (b) the targeted feature was currently a serious problem in their relationship (1 = *not at all serious*, 7 = *extremely serious*), and (c) the agent currently desired change in the targeted feature (1 = *no desire to change*, 7 = *strong desire to change*). As with the prediscussion measures, ratings of severity

¹ Order of discussion was not related to the communication strategies exhibited in the discussions ($r_s = .01$ to $.24$, $-.04$ to $-.17$, $p_s > .05$) or how the discussions were perceived ($r_s = .04$ to $.24$, $-.03$ to $-.22$, $p_s > .05$), and controlling for discussion order did not reduce the significant associations reported in Tables 3 and 5 ($\beta_s = .19$ to $.64$, $-.20$ to $-.35$, $p_s < .05$).

and desired change were strongly correlated for both men and women at each of the four time points ($r_s = .36$ to $.69$, $ps < .01$) and were averaged to form a single index of problem severity. Finally, participants were asked to consider what the agent specifically wanted changed and what change the agent had hoped to achieve. Both agents and targets were then asked to rate the extent to which the *target* had demonstrated change in the feature during the past 3 months (1 = *not changed at all*, 7 = *changed this feature a lot*).

Coding Procedure

Two coders independently coded the videotaped interactions for the valence (positive vs. negative) and the directness (direct vs. indirect) of the communication strategies used (see Table 1). As described above, the strategies (e.g., coercion) and the more specific tactics associated with each strategy (e.g., derogation) were generated from an extensive review of (a) the major coding systems used in observation studies of couple conflict, including the MICS (Weiss & Summers, 1983), the Specific Affect Coding System (Gottman, 1994), the Couples Interaction Scoring System (Gottman, 1979), the Kategoriensystem für Partnerschaftliche Interaktion (or Interactional Coding System; Hahlweg et al., 1984), the Conflict Rating System (Heavey et al., 1993, 1995), the VTCS (Sillars et al., 1982), and the Interaction Dimensions Coding System (Julien, Markman, & Lindahl, 1989), and (b) taxonomies of conflict and influence tactics in close relationships (e.g., Bui et al., 1994; Buss et al., 1987; Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Howard et al., 1986; Noller et al., 1994; Oriña et al., 2002; Raush et al., 1974; Rule et al., 1985). Strategies and tactics were chosen according to consistency across previous coding schemes and influence tactic taxonomies, in particular focusing on those communication behaviors that have been consistently classified as embodying positive or negative and direct or indirect strategies. Of note, the development of this coding scheme allowed us to assess communication strategies that were consistent and comparable with previous research while providing a clear assessment of the distinction between valence and directness. The resulting taxonomy consisted of six different types of communication strategies that fell within four specific categories of communication strategies: negative-direct strategies (including coercion and autocracy), negative-indirect strategies (including manipulation and supplication), positive-direct reasoning strategies, and positive-indirect soft strategies (see Table 1).

The descriptions provided in Table 1 for each category of communication strategies were used to rate the behavior of both partners during each discussion. Strategies were coded globally by rating on 7-point Likert-type scales the extent to which each communication strategy was exhibited (1–2 = low, 3–5 = moderate, 6–7 = high). Coders were given a detailed description of each strategy as well as specific items tapping associated behaviors, and were instructed to take into account the frequency, intensity, and duration of the behaviors associated with each strategy across the entire interaction. For example, when rating coercion, coders were instructed to attend to the frequency, intensity, and duration of both behavioral and emotional cues associated with the strategy (e.g., “How intensely, how often, and for how long did the individual criticize, insult, threaten, and/or blame his/her partner and/or display negative affect to influence his/her

partner?,” adapted from the Interaction Dimensions Coding System; see Julien et al., 1989).

There were two primary reasons why we coded the interaction behavior in this manner. First, the communication strategies listed in Table 1 represent global categories that describe a cluster of interrelated behaviors. However, not all individuals exhibited all of the specific behaviors associated with each strategy or employed associated behaviors to the same degree. Second, prior research indicates that globally rated behavior displayed across an entire interaction produces data that are as reliable and valid as behavioral assessments at a micro-level (e.g., categorizing each single turn of speech) (see Julien et al., 1989; Weiss & Tolman, 1990; also see Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Noller et al., 1994; Oriña et al., 2002).

Coding was conducted in three waves. In the first wave, the interactions were coded for the presence of coercion and autocracy. Coding was conducted in blocks of 5 couples, and the interaction behavior exhibited by men and women was coded separately. For half the interactions, the female partner was coded first; for the other half, the male partner was coded first. After every block, coders compared ratings, discussed any discrepancies, and, if necessary, reviewed discrepancy-related interactions and established final ratings through consensus. This procedure was designed to limit coder drift and increase reliability. In the same manner, manipulation and supplication were coded in a second wave, followed by rational reasoning and soft positive strategies in a third wave.² Interrater reliability was calculated separately for each strategy within each discussion. For all discussions, across both men and women, coder ratings prior to consensus discussions were highly correlated ($r_s = .81$ to $.98$, $ps < .001$, average $r = .93$; see Table 2 for the average r for each strategy).

Targeted features. For descriptive purposes, Nickola C. Overall categorized the features targeted in the discussions. The majority of targeted features (55%) comprised relationship-relevant interpersonal qualities and behaviors, such as commitment, trust, intimacy, and expression of emotions. Less relationship-oriented dispositions such as being self-confident, active, and outgoing were also commonly targeted (23%). Less common categories included more objective personal attributes such as physical appearance, finances, and ambition (12%), and idiosyncratic behaviors and annoying habits such as tidiness and sleeping patterns (10%). Although Overall et al. (2006) did not examine open-ended data of this type, these features fit well with the categories (and associated structured scales) assessed in that study as targets of

² We also coded relationship referencing communication strategies, including tactics such as highlighting the importance of the relationship, stressing shared outcomes and relationship-related obligations, and appealing to the target's commitment and love (Oriña et al., 2002). Relationship referencing was correlated with both positive-direct ($r_s = .24$ to $.37$) and positive-indirect ($r_s = .19$ to $.31$) strategies and, for women, negative-indirect tactics ($r_s = .21$ to $.27$). Consequently, relationship referencing did not fall clearly within the dimensional structure necessary to test the impact of different combinations of valence and directness. In addition, relationship referencing was not associated with postdiscussion success ($\beta_s = -.06$ to $.10$, $ps > .05$), and although agent's referencing predicted greater average levels of change across time ($\beta_s = .23$, $p > .05$), these paths were not significant when controlling for positive-direct strategies. Hence, we do not consider relationship referencing strategies further.

Table 2
Means (and Standard Deviations) of Communication Strategies and Prediscussion and Postdiscussion Ratings

Communication strategy and discussion ratings	Interrater reliability	Female-nominated male feature		Male-nominated female feature		Correlations across communication strategies			
		Agent (women)	Target (men)	Agent (men)	Target (women)	Negative-direct	Negative-indirect	Positive-direct	Positive-indirect
Negative-direct									
Coercion	.94	1.75 (1.09)	1.28 (0.45)	1.41 (0.72)	1.98 (1.24)				
Autocracy	.96	2.34 (1.24)	1.72 (0.95)	1.69 (0.98)	2.16 (1.38)	—	.48*	.06	-.38*
Negative-indirect									
Manipulation	.94	2.85 (1.61)	1.74 (1.08)	2.21 (1.33)	2.46 (1.68)				
Supplication	.94	2.92 (1.54)	2.51 (1.19)	2.51 (1.29)	3.08 (1.46)	.33*	—	-.10	-.31*
Positive-direct									
Rational reasoning	.93	4.59 (1.40)	3.98 (1.18)	4.37 (0.95)	4.40 (1.26)	.19	.10	—	.16
Positive-indirect									
Soft positive	.87	2.43 (1.16)	2.00 (0.93)	2.49 (1.06)	2.30 (1.16)	-.19	-.19	.07	—
Prediscussion ratings									
Problem severity		5.07 (1.19)	5.17 (1.13)	4.92 (1.29)	4.90 (1.02)				
Perceived changeability		3.72 (1.60)	3.96 (1.59)	3.93 (1.42)	3.63 (1.68)				
Postdiscussion ratings									
Success		4.41 (1.59)	4.67 (1.16)	4.22 (1.39)	4.99 (1.32)				
Discussion realism		5.69 (1.32)	5.28 (1.14)	5.16 (1.39)	5.64 (1.17)				
Stress/upset		2.57 (1.52)	2.90 (1.53)	2.75 (1.59)	3.00 (1.80)				

Note. Interrater reliability is the average r between coders' ratings across discussions and across women and men. Correlations across different communication strategies engaged by the female partner (averaged across discussions) are presented above the diagonal, and correlations across communication strategies engaged by the male (averaged across discussions) are presented below the diagonal.

* $p < .01$.

partner change: warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources.³

Results

The results are reported in three sections. First, we present descriptive statistics and analyses concerned with the coding of the communication strategies. Second, we examine the links between the frequency of communication strategies and perceptions of success assessed immediately after the discussions. Third, we report the analyses concerned with how the use of different communication tactics predicted change in targeted features over the following year.

Descriptive Statistics

Means and standard deviations of communication strategy use and prediscussion and postdiscussion ratings are shown in Table 2. The discussions were rated as realistic and reflecting how the issue would normally be discussed. Nominated features were, on average, perceived as reasonably serious relationship problems and relatively difficult to change. Nevertheless, couples generally reported low to moderate levels of stress during their interactions. Partners displayed relatively low levels of negative communication behavior and moderate levels of rational reasoning during their discussions. Women exhibited greater use of all types of negative strategies compared with men, $F_s(1, 60) = 6.62$ to 15.10 , $ps < .05$, and agents employed relatively more reasoning and soft positive strategies compared with targets, $F_s(1, 60) = 8.13$ and 7.23 , $ps < .05$, respectively.

Strategy Dimensions

As discussed above, we coded behaviors hypothesized to tap four categories of communication strategies defined by two dimensions: valence (positive vs. negative) and directness (direct vs. indirect). The dimensional structure of the coder ratings of exhibited communication strategies was tested using MDS. For both women and men, stress and RSQ (squared multiple correlation) indexes indicated that a two-dimensional solution provided a good fit to the data (stress = .07 and .09, RSQ = .97

³ There were no differences in the use of specific communication strategies across types of targeted features, $F_s(3, 57) = 0.25$ to 1.25 , $ps > .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$ to $.06$, with the exception that female agents and male targets exhibited greater positive-indirect strategies when discussing the less serious features captured by the fourth category, such as annoying habits, $F(3, 57) = 3.08$, $ps < .05$, $\eta^2 = .14$. Not surprisingly, male agents and female targets also rated interpersonal qualities and behaviors as constituting more serious relationship problems, $F(3, 57) = 3.66$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .16$. However, controlling for problem severity did not reduce the relations between communication strategies and success postdiscussion or across time (described below). Moreover, there were no differences in perceived success, $F_s(3, 57) = 0.76$ and 1.03 , $ps > .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$ and $.05$, or change over time, $F_s(3, 57) = 2.49$ and 0.53 , $ps < .05$, $\eta^2 = .15$ and $.04$, across types of targeted features, except that male agents reported female targets changed personal attributes, such as appearance and finances, more over time, $F(3, 43) = 3.50$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .20$. Similarly, these types of features were perceived to be easier to change by female targets, $F(3, 56) = 3.72$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .17$. Nevertheless, controlling for the extent to which targeted features were perceived to be easy versus hard to change did not alter the links between communication strategies, perceived success, and change in targeted features over time (described below).

and .98, respectively) and was superior to a single-dimension solution in both cases (stress = .28 and .36, RSQ = .90 and .78).⁴ As displayed in Figure 1, the two dimensions (and the associated four quadrants) mapped directly onto the hypothesized distinctions between positive versus negative and direct versus indirect strategies. For both men and women, the top right quadrant involved coercion and autocracy and represented *negative-direct* strategies. The bottom right quadrant involved manipulation and supplication and represented *negative-indirect* strategies. And the two remaining positive strategies singly fell within *positive-direct* (reasoning) and *positive-indirect* (soft positive) quadrants. Accordingly, coercion and autocracy were standardized and averaged to assess the use of negative-direct strategies, and manipulation and supplication were standardized and averaged to measure negative-indirect strategies.

The correlations between these four categories of communication strategies for both women and men (averaged across the two discussions) are shown in the left-hand side of Table 2. Consistent with the MDS analyses supporting the distinction across the four communication strategies, level of strategy use was generally not associated across categories (only 4 of 12 correlations were significant). Thus, the following analyses were conducted separately for each type of communication strategy. Nevertheless, partners who engaged more negative-direct strategies were also more likely to exhibit negative-indirect strategies and, for women, lower positive-indirect strategies (see Table 2). This pattern indicates that partners employ strategies of similar valence. Thus, we also present analyses controlling for the general valence and directness of communication strategies.

Immediate Postdiscussion Perceptions of Success

We first tested the extent to which communication strategy use was associated with the perceived success of the discussions in producing change or intention to change in the targeted partner. To accomplish this, we followed the actor-partner interdependence model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), analyzing the observed means using the EQS structural equation modeling program (Bentler, 1995). This approach allowed us to (a) analyze both the agent and target simultaneously, (b) control for the associations between agent and target variables across discussions, and (c) control for a number of potential artifacts. Our analytic approach is illustrated in Figure 2, which displays the links between the communication strategies that both couple members used in their discussions and the perceived success of the interaction in inducing change or intention to change assessed immediately after the interactions.

The top half of Figure 2 represents the strategy use and perceived success of both partners while discussing a feature of the male target that was nominated by the female agent. The bottom half of Figure 2 includes the strategy use and perceived success of both partners when the male partner was the agent and the female was the target. In both cases, *Path a* represents the association between *agent's* level of communication strategy use and how successful the agent perceived the discussion to be in producing change. In contrast, *Path b* represents the association between the *agent's* level of strategy use and how successful the *target* perceived the discussion to be. *Paths c* and *d* reflect the impact of the

target's communication strategies on the *agent's* (*Path c*) and *target's* (*Path d*) perceived success.

Analyzing the data in this way accounts for the nonindependence between strategy use across partners and across discussions. Prior research has indicated that individuals tend to reciprocate the interaction behavior of their partners (Gottman, 1998), and we also found that partners who engaged in a particular strategy in one discussion were more likely to employ that strategy in the second discussion ($r_s = .28$ to $.68$, $p_s < .05$, average $r = .53$). The double-headed arrows running across strategy use and discussions for both partners control for all these associations. In addition, all paths were calculated simultaneously. Thus, this analytic approach allows an examination of which strategy use (i.e., the agent's, the target's, or both) predicts perceived success in producing desired change while controlling for the couple's general conflict style across discussions.

Equivalent analyses were run separately for each type of strategy. All models were run with the paths pooled across gender, and there were no significant gender differences in any of the path coefficients, Lagrange Multiplier tests (LM) $\chi^2(1, 61) = 0.01$ to 1.58 , $p_s > .05$.⁵ The resulting standardized path coefficients for these sets of analyses are shown in Table 3. First, agents who engaged in more direct (both negative and positive) strategies perceived the discussion as less successful in bringing about change or intention to change (illustrated by significant *Path a* coefficients for models analyzing negative-direct and positive-direct strategies). Targets also perceived the interaction as less successful when the agent employed more positive-direct tactics (see coefficients for *Path b* when modeling positive-direct strategies). Second, agents who were more positive and indirect in their attempts to bring about change perceived the discussion as more successful, as did their targeted partners (see *Paths a* and *b* for the model examining positive-indirect strategies). Third, both agents and targets perceived lower success in producing change when the target responded with negative-direct and (for agent-perceived success) negative-indirect communication tactics (see *Paths c* and *d* for models analyzing negative strategies).

In sum, the results showed that employing more negative and more direct (both positive and negative) communication strategies was associated with lower immediate perceived success, whereas, as expected, positive indirect strategies were associated with more positive perceptions of immediate perceived success.⁶ However,

⁴ Because specific strategies were positively correlated across discussions ($r_s = .28$ to $.68$, $p_s < .05$, average $r = .53$), MDS was conducted on averaged ratings of strategy use across discussions to simplify the analyses.

⁵ Although the paths were constrained to be equal across men and women, the standardized path coefficients reported can differ slightly owing to gender differences in the variances of the measures.

⁶ None of the unmodeled paths (e.g., running from communication strategies exhibited during one discussion to perceived success in the other discussion) were significant when included in the model ($\beta_s = .02$ to $.18$ and $-.05$ to $-.19$, $p_s > .05$) with one exception: Negative-indirect strategies engaged by both agents and targets in one discussion were associated with lower perceived success in the other discussion ($\beta_s = -.24$ to $-.27$, $p_s < .05$). This might suggest that negative-indirect strategies have a diffuse impact, such that the communication of helplessness and appeals for partner responsibility associated with these strategies generalize beyond specific problems to other areas of the relationship.

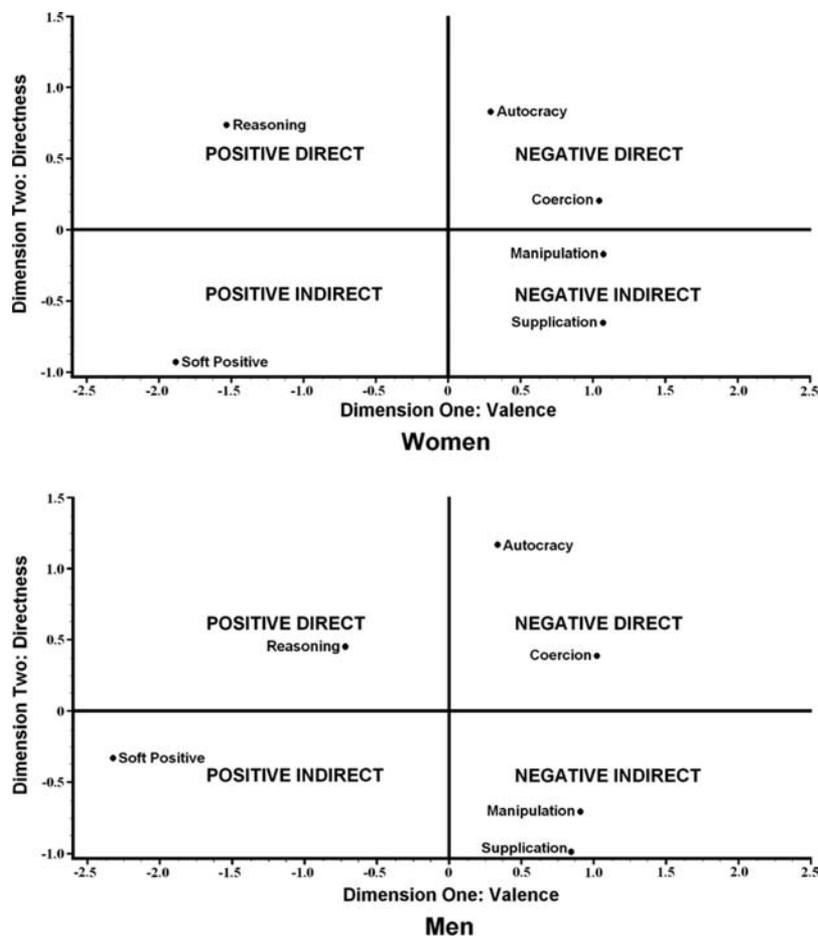


Figure 1. Multidimensional scaling of ratings of communication strategies engaged by women and men across discussions.

these results may simply be a function of the context in which these types of strategies are employed. For example, agents who rated the feature under discussion as more serious and who desired greater change in the targeted feature exhibited more negative communication behavior ($\beta_s = .19$ to $.22$, $p < .05$) and were less likely to use positive-indirect strategies ($\beta_s = -.30$, $p < .05$, for both women and men). Thus, we recalculated the models controlling for agent's perceived severity of the issues under discussion. The results from these analyses are shown in parentheses in Table 3. All of the significant paths between communication strategies and perceptions of success were virtually unchanged, and controlling for target's perceived severity yielded identical results ($\beta_s = .20$ to $.23$ and $-.19$ to $-.34$, $p_s < .05$).

Similarly, both the agent and the target experienced more stress and upset when either partner displayed more negative strategies ($\beta_s = .18$ to $.24$, $p_s < .05$), and female and male targets experienced higher levels of stress when agents exhibited more positive-direct tactics ($\beta_s = .23$ and $.19$, $p_s < .05$). In addition, agents and targets who perceived that the targeted feature could be more readily changed perceived the discussions as more successful ($\beta_s = .19$ to $.22$, $p_s < .05$). When we controlled for postdiscussion ratings of stress/upset and per-

ceived changeability, however, none of the significant paths in Table 3 changed in their levels of significance, and the size of the paths altered very little ($\beta_s = .17$ to $.25$ and $-.18$ to $-.36$, $p_s < .05$). We also recalculated the models controlling for both partners' relationship quality. Again, all of the significant paths held ($\beta_s = .17$ to $.21$ and $-.19$ to $-.36$, $p_s < .05$).

Finally, as indicated above, partners employed strategies of similar valence (see Table 2). Thus, we also recalculated the models controlling for both (a) valence (e.g., running models with negative-direct and negative-indirect strategies simultaneously predicting perceived success) and (b) directness (e.g., running models with negative-direct and positive-direct simultaneously predicting perceived success). All significant paths shown in Table 3 remained significant ($\beta_s = .18$ to $.31$ and $-.14$ to $-.40$, $p_s < .05$) with one exception: The association between target's negative-indirect strategies and agent's perceptions of success was eliminated when controlling for valence (i.e., negative-direct strategies). Thus, when targets communicate with negative direct (but not indirect) strategies in response to their partner's regulation attempts, the interaction is perceived as less successful in producing change. It is important to note, however, that when we controlled for directness, both negative-

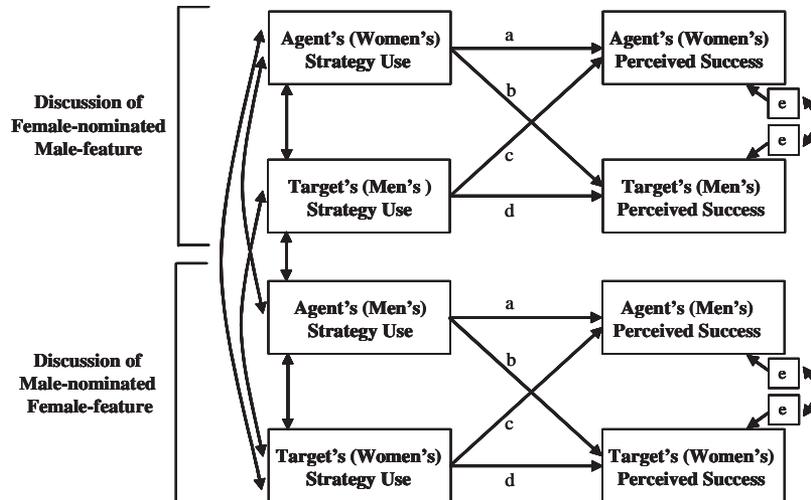


Figure 2. Model testing the associations between agent's and target's strategy use and postdiscussion perceptions of success. The top half of the figure calculates the associations between agent's and target's strategy use and perceived success for discussions where the female partner was the agent and the male partner was the target (female-nominated male feature). The bottom half calculates the equivalent associations when the male partner was the agent and the female partner was the target (male-nominated female feature).

direct and positive-direct strategies engaged by the agent were associated with lower perceived success.

In sum, we ruled out several potential artifacts. The associations between negative and direct strategies and low perceived success were not a function of problem severity, the degree to which the targeted feature was difficult to change, the level of aversiveness experienced during the interaction, or the perceived quality of the relationship prior to the discussion. The links between direct strategies and low perceived success also held when controlling for the general valence and directness of strategies employed. These findings provide impressive evidence that, as predicted, the use of both positive- and negative-direct communication strategies leads to lower immediate perceptions of success, whereas the use of positive-indirect strategies is perceived to be relatively successful.

Change Over Time

Next, we tested whether communication strategy use was associated with change over time. We first examined whether there were any differences between the couples that had dissolved their relationship during the year ($n = 13$) and those who continued to participate. There were no significant differences across intact versus dissolved couples in problem severity, $t(58) = 0.30$ to 1.17 , $ps > .05$, $ds = .11$ to $.39$; postdiscussion perceptions of success, $t(58) = 0.30$ to 1.25 , $ps > .05$, $ds = .09$ to $.32$; or level of communication strategies engaged by targets or agents, $t(58) = 0.06$ to 1.10 , $ps > .05$, $ds = .02$ to $.34$. However, medium effect sizes indicated that female agents from dissolved couples engaged in more negative-direct strategies, $t(58) = 1.81$, $p = .08$, $d = 0.57$, and female targets used fewer positive-direct strategies, $t(58) = 1.46$, $p = .15$, $d = 0.46$, within their discussions. In addition, male partners from dissolved couples rated the discussions as more stressful and upsetting, $t(58) = 2.93$ and 2.19 , $ps < .05$, $ds = 0.92$ and 0.69 , for agent and target ratings, respectively, and reported

more negative relationship evaluations at the initial session, $t(58) = -3.24$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.0$. Of note, however, controlling for stress/upset and relationship quality did not reduce the relations between communication strategies and perceived success postdiscussion (described above) or change across time (as reported below).

The 47 intact couples that continued to participate completed all four follow-up phases across the 12-month period following the initial session. Table 4 displays the means and standard deviations for these measures. Mean levels of all variables were steady over the 12-month period (all $F_s < 1$). Intact couples retained positive evaluations of their relationship and reported moderate levels of change in the targeted partner across the four time points.

Target-reported change. To test the long-term effectiveness of particular communication strategies, we examined whether the behavior exhibited during couples' interactions predicted change in targeted characteristics over time. We first examined the four ratings of actual change reported by the targeted partner across the following year. Maintaining an actor-partner interdependence model and structural equation modeling approach, we again analyzed both couple members simultaneously and controlled for the associations between agent and target variables within and across discussions. In addition, by employing latent growth curve modeling, we analyzed both the average amount of change over the 12-month period and the extent to which level of change varied across the four measurement phases (see Willett & Sayer, 1994).⁷

⁷ Analyzing the longitudinal data using hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett, 1995) produced virtually identical effects. We present the latent modeling approach for consistency and direct comparability with the analytic strategy utilized to analyze cross-sectional perceptions of success, and as recommended by Kenny et al. (2006) when repeated measures are relatively few and evenly spaced across dyads.

Table 3
Standardized Path Coefficients Testing the Associations Between Communication Strategy and Postdiscussion Perceptions of Success (Controlling for Problem Severity)

Communication strategies		Agent's perceptions of success		Target's perceptions of success	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
Negative-direct strategies					
Agent of change	Path a	-.19* (-.20*)	-.24* (-.25*)	Path b	.01 (-.00)
Targeted partner	Path c	-.26* (-.26*)	-.32* (-.32*)	Path d	-.34* (-.35*)
Negative-indirect strategies					
Agent of change	Path a	-.08 (-.10)	-.10 (-.12)	Path b	-.12 (-.11)
Targeted partner	Path c	-.21* (-.21*)	-.24* (-.23*)	Path d	-.09 (-.11)
Positive-direct strategies					
Agent of change	Path a	-.30* (-.30*)	-.35* (-.35*)	Path b	-.27* (-.27*)
Targeted partner	Path c	-.13 (-.12)	-.15 (-.15)	Path d	-.16 (-.18)
Positive-indirect strategies					
Agent of change	Path a	.19* (.20*)	.23* (.24*)	Path b	.21* (.22*)
Targeted partner	Path c	.14 (.13)	.17 (.16)	Path d	.14 (.15)

Note. Path notations refer to Figure 2. Coefficients in the first two columns represent the association between agent and target strategy use and agent's postdiscussion perceptions of success (Paths a and c, Figure 2) for both women and men. Coefficients in the latter two columns represent the association between agent and target strategy use and target's postdiscussion perceptions of success (Paths b and d, Figure 2) for both women and men. All paths are pooled across men and women (see footnote 5). Paths in parentheses control for problem severity.

* $p < .05$.

Growth curve modeling involves two stages of analysis. First, the intercept and slope of an overall trajectory of change across the year were calculated. We did this by using the four ratings of target-reported change as (a) equal indicators (i.e., fixed to 1) of a latent factor representing level of change at time 0 (the intercept) and, simultaneously, as (b) indicators of a factor representing the rate of change across the four time points (the slope). For the second factor, indicators were assigned different fixed values according to the follow-up phase at which the rating was gathered (i.e., at time intervals after the discussions of 3, 6, 9, and 12 months) with time centered at zero (-1.5, -0.5, 0.5, 1.5). Thus, the intercept represents the level of change averaged over the four time points (1 year), and the slope measures how reported change varies as a function of time (i.e., whether levels of change increased, decreased, or remained the same across the four measurement phases). Latent factors representing average level (intercept) and rate (slope) of change were included for both men and women and correlated within and across partners. The errors were also corre-

lated within each time point across couple members (see Kenny et al., 2006), and the variances of each factor were pooled across men and women, LM $\chi^2(1, 47) = 0.08$ and 0.07 , $ps > .70$.

This baseline model achieved a good model fit, $\chi^2(20, 47) = 17.72$, $p = .61$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .02, and provided the following important information. First, the factor means of the intercept and slope describe the average trajectory of change. Targeted partners displayed moderate levels of change across the year ($M_{int} = 3.88$ and 3.91 for women and men, respectively), and on average, men retained the same level of reported change across the follow-up phases ($M_{slope} = .02$, $z = 0.19$, $p > .05$) and women reported lower change at each subsequent 3-month period ($M_{slope} = -.23$, $z = 2.29$, $p < .05$). Second, before analyzing predictors of change, we needed to establish the existence of significant variation between individuals in the average amount of change reported (intercept) and rate of change across time (slope). For target-reported change, both level ($Var_{int} = 1.07$, $z = 5.37$,

Table 4
Means (and Standard Deviations) of Measures at 3-, 6-, 9-, and 12-Month Follow-Up

Follow-up measures	3 month		6 month		9 month		12 month	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Target reports								
Demonstrated change	4.21 (1.50)	3.91 (1.28)	3.87 (1.86)	3.81 (1.42)	3.85 (1.60)	3.92 (1.75)	3.47 (1.77)	3.98 (1.57)
Problem severity	3.68 (1.56)	3.56 (1.07)	3.04 (1.43)	3.23 (1.28)	3.20 (1.36)	3.23 (1.24)	3.09 (1.27)	2.43 (1.39)
Discussed	4.55 (1.67)	4.02 (1.79)	3.60 (1.96)	3.62 (1.87)	3.17 (1.79)	3.30 (1.65)	3.36 (1.75)	3.04 (1.49)
Agent reports								
Demonstrated change	4.28 (1.83)	4.32 (1.49)	4.06 (1.93)	4.23 (1.48)	4.15 (1.81)	4.21 (1.53)	4.11 (1.63)	3.72 (1.74)
Problem severity	3.70 (1.44)	3.31 (1.35)	3.30 (1.51)	3.07 (1.32)	3.13 (1.43)	2.93 (1.29)	2.97 (1.50)	3.09 (1.48)
Discussed	4.26 (1.87)	4.06 (1.49)	3.91 (1.69)	3.77 (1.67)	3.47 (1.87)	3.36 (1.71)	3.36 (1.99)	3.49 (1.71)
Relationship quality	6.24 (0.61)	6.15 (0.52)	6.24 (0.65)	6.15 (0.57)	6.22 (0.69)	6.08 (0.69)	6.23 (0.64)	6.08 (0.82)

Note. $N = 47$ couples intact at final 12-month follow-up.

$p < .01$) and rate ($Var_{slope} = .22, z = 2.97, p < .01$) of change significantly differed across individuals.

We then tested the extent to which the agent's and target's use of communication strategies predicted the variation in average level of target-reported change over the 12-month period and the rate of this change across time. As before, calculating both the agent and the target effects simultaneously meant that we could determine whether the agent's use of specific communication strategies and/or the target's response to the agent were associated with change in targeted features over time. This analytic strategy (displayed in Figure 3) is similar to the prior cross-sectional analyses, except that the dependent variables are latent factors representing both average levels and rate of target-reported change over time (represented by the ovals on the right-hand side of Figure 3). In this analysis, *Path e* represents the association between the agent's frequency of strategy use and average amount of target-reported change over the following year, and *Path f* represents the association between the agent's level of strategy use and rate of partner change across the four time points. In contrast, *Paths g* and *h* reflect the impact of the *target's* interaction behavior on the average (*Path g*) and rate (*Path h*) of his or her own (target) reported change over time. As before, equivalent analyses were run separately for each type of strategy, and all models were run with paths pooled across couple members, except where significant gender differences were found (noted below and shown in italics in Table 5; also see footnote 5).

We first report those findings concerned with how the use of communication strategies adopted by the agent were linked to change in the target and then describe the results for how the strategies adopted by the targeted partner (in response to the agent) influenced his or her own change over time. Table 5 displays the resulting standardized path coefficients for all four types of communication strategies predicting both target-reported average change in targeted features over the year (see first two columns) and rate of change in targeted features across time (see last two columns).

As hypothesized, both male and female agents who used either more negative-direct or more positive-direct strategies induced significantly higher levels of average change during the following year (as reported by the targeted partner). Note that these findings emerged after controlling for the influence of the communication tactics adopted by the targets themselves during the discussions (see Figure 3). In addition, male targets reported significantly greater rates of change over time in response to positive (direct and indirect) strategies employed by their female partners (see Table 5, *Path f*). These latter findings indicate that male targets maintained or increased levels of change across each 3-month period when their female partners used positive communication strategies in the discussion.

These analyses also revealed that communication strategies engaged by the targeted partner influenced the rate of change in targeted features across time (see Table 5, *Path h*). Specifically, targets (men and women) who adopted more negative-direct strategies in response to their partner's regulation attempts changed at a lower rate across the year. Similarly, targets (men and women) who responded to change attempts with more positive-indirect behavior sustained higher rates of change over time. Thus, regardless of how their partners tried to change them, targets who were

more receptive and responded more diplomatically to their partner's regulation attempts reported higher (relative) improvement across the year, whereas targets who resisted influence attempts by utilizing negative-direct strategies were more likely to reduce or cease efforts to change targeted features over time.⁸

Third variables. As noted previously, we assessed problem severity and relationship quality both prior to the discussions and at 3-month intervals over the following year. We also assessed perceived changeability of the targeted feature prior to the discussions, along with stress/upset immediately after the discussions, and at each follow-up we gathered ratings of the amount of time spent discussing the issue during the prior 3 months. It is conceivable that one or more of these variables could be driving our effects. For example, perhaps problem severity causes communication strategies to vary as well as reported change over time, thus producing a spurious correlation between communication strategies and change over time.

Consistent with this possibility, higher average levels of target-perceived severity across the 12-month period were associated with greater change reported by the targeted partner during the year and more positive trajectories of target change (slope) across time ($\beta_s = .28$ to $.44, ps < .05$). Thus, we recalculated all of the paths in Table 5 controlling for average levels of problem severity across the 12-month period (shown in parentheses in Table 5). As is evident in Table 5, the size of the paths between communication strategies and target-reported change did not alter, and all effects described above remained significant.

As before, we also recalculated all of the prior growth curve models sequentially controlling for other potential third variables, including relationship quality, perceived changeability, stress/upset, and amount of discussion about the issue. None of the significant paths in Table 5 between communication strategies and target-reported change over time were reduced in size or significance ($\beta_s = .20$ to $.64$ and $-.24$ to $-.35$).

Mediating variables. A different possibility is that one or more of these variables are mediating factors. That is, communication strategies may play a causal role but indirectly influence change by acting through one of these variables. For example, perhaps the adoption of direct strategies tends to produce more discussion over time, which in turn leads to more change in the targeted feature. Indeed, couples who rated issues as constituting more serious relationship problems ($\beta_s = .41$ to $.52, ps < .05$) and engaged in more positive-direct communication behavior ($\beta_s = .24$ to $.54, ps < .05$) discussed targeted features to a greater extent during the following year. Moreover, greater discussion was associated with greater level and rate of change in the targeted features across time ($\beta_s = .44$ to $.66, ps < .05$).

However, the analyses that ruled out third-variable explanations also rule out related mediating models, given that the main requirement for confirming the latter is that controlling for the mediating variable should reduce the direct path between strategy

⁸ We recalculated these effects using the full-information maximum likelihood method to estimate the models with missing data to include data for the waves completed by the 13 couples who broke up within the year. The coefficients in Table 5 were only minimally altered and increased in significance ($\beta_s = .20$ to $.58$ and $-.26$ to $-.35, ps < .05$).

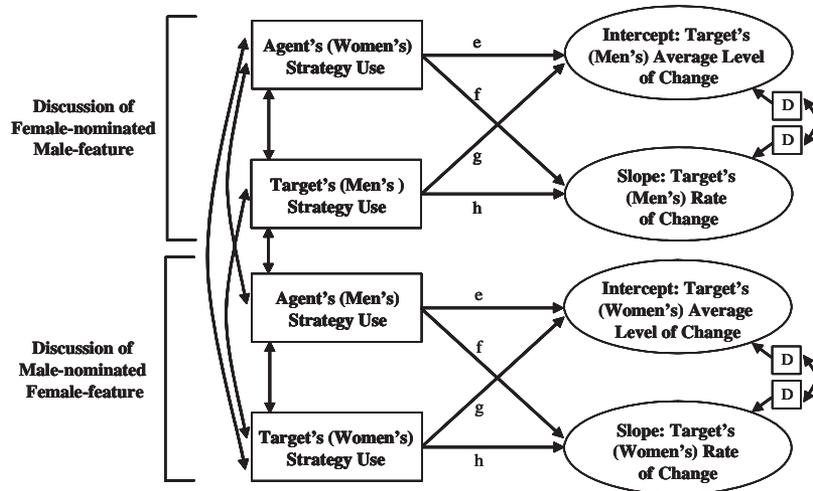


Figure 3. Structural equation model testing the associations between agent's and target's strategy use and target-reported (a) average levels of change over time and (b) rate of change across time. Target's ratings of change for all four follow-up time points served as indicators for the latent factors representing average level and rate of change across time. For simplicity, indicators are not shown. The top half of the figure calculates the associations between agent's and target's strategy use and change for discussions where the female partner was the agent and the male partner was the target (female-nominated male feature). The bottom half calculates the equivalent associations when the male partner was the agent and the female partner was the target (male-nominated female feature).

use and reported change. As described above, this key finding did not emerge in any of the analyses. Thus, there is no evidence that any of the variables analyzed constitutes a mediating variable.

Finally, we also reran the models controlling for (a) valence and (b) directness. Again, the size and significance of the paths shown in Table 5 did not change (β s = .22 to .61 and $-.24$ to $-.28$) with one exception: When valence was controlled, female agents' use of

positive-indirect strategies no longer predicted increased rate of change reported by male partners, indicating that only positive-direct strategies were associated with increased level and rate of change in targeted features over time. It is important to note that when we controlled for directness, both negative-direct and positive-direct strategies engaged by the agent independently predicted increased change in targeted features over time (β s = .22 to .26, p s < .05).

Table 5

Standardized Path Coefficients Testing the Associations Between Communication Strategy and Change in Targeted Partner Over a 12-Month Period (Controlling for Problem Severity)

Communication strategies		Average level of reported change		Rate of reported change across time	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
Negative-direct strategies					
Agent of change	Path e	.25* (.23*)	.25* (.23*)	Path f	-.04 (-.05)
Targeted partner	Path g	-.08 (-.08)	-.10 (-.09)	Path h	-.24† (-.25*)
Negative-indirect strategies					
Agent of change	Path e	.13 (.07)	.11 (.06)	Path f	-.18 (-.25)
Targeted partner	Path g	-.01 (.00)	-.01 (.00)	Path h	-.01 (.00)
Positive-direct strategies					
Agent of change	Path e	.26* (.27*)	.26* (.26*)	Path f	-.08 (-.02)
Targeted partner	Path g	.08 (-.03)	.08 (-.03)	Path h	.02 (-.08)
Positive-indirect strategies					
Agent of change	Path e	-.05 (-.00)	-.05 (-.01)	Path f	-.31 (-.28)
Targeted partner	Path g	.18 (.15)	.17 (.13)	Path h	.42* (.38*)

Note. Path notations refer to Figure 3. Coefficients in the first two columns represent the association between agent and target strategy use and target-reported average level of change across the 12-month period (Paths e and g, Figure 3) for both women and men. Coefficients in the second two columns represent the association between agent and target strategy use and rate of target-reported change across the four time points (Paths f and h, Figure 3) for both women and men. There were generally no differences in the paths across gender, Lagrange Multiplier tests (LM) $\chi^2(1, 47) = 0.01$ to 1.96 , p s > .05 (see footnote 5), with the exceptions in italics; only female agent's positive direct and indirect strategies were associated with greater rate of male target's reported change across time, LM $\chi^2(1, 47) = 7.23$ and 5.78 , p s < .05, respectively. These paths were left unconstrained. Paths in parentheses control for average levels of problem severity across the year.

* $p < .05$. † $p = .06$.

Summary. Controlling for a variety of potential artifacts, these results reveal that greater use of direct (either positive or negative) strategies by the agent produced significantly higher success in terms of reported change by the targeted partner, whereas the use of indirect strategies (positive or negative) was ineffective. These findings are a mirror image of the pattern we found for immediate postdiscussion perceptions of success. In addition, the more targets resisted their partner's regulation attempts by expressing themselves directly and negatively, the less they reported changing over time. In contrast, greater use of positive-indirect strategies by the target (perhaps reflecting more openness and willingness to change) was associated with greater sustained improvement across the year.

Agent-perceived change. Following the analytic strategy described above, we next tested whether communication strategies also predicted the extent to which agents perceived their partner had changed targeted features. Agents perceived moderate levels of change during the year ($M_{\text{int}} = 4.16$ and 4.09 for women and men) and average levels of perceived change differed significantly across individuals ($Var_{\text{int}} = 1.21$, $z = 4.80$, $p < .01$). Consistent with their targeted partner's reports, female agents (on average) perceived the same level of change across the four time points ($M_{\text{slope}} = -.03$, $z = 0.33$, $p > .05$), whereas male agents perceived their female partner's change to slow across time ($M_{\text{slope}} = -.20$, $z = 2.41$, $p < .05$). Unlike target-reported change, however, there was no significant variation in rate of perceived change across individuals ($Var_{\text{slope}} = .12$, $z = 1.45$, $p > .05$), and the inclusion of a factor representing rate of change (slope) did not describe the variation in agent's perceptions of change significantly better, $\chi^2(20, 47) = 34.82$, $p > .05$, CFI = .81, RMSEA = .15, than a single latent factor representing average levels of change during the year, $\chi^2(28, 47) = 47.86$, $p > .05$, CFI = .77, RMSEA = .14; $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(8, 47) = 13.04$, $p > .05$. Thus, to test the impact of strategy use on agent-perceived target change, we ran predictor models that included paths between communication strategy and average levels of perceived change (intercept) only.

Across analyses, only one significant path emerged. Consistent with targets' reports of change, female agents who used more positive-direct communication strategies perceived more change in targeted features during the following year ($\beta = .43$, $p < .05$). Moreover, this association was not reduced when we controlled for relationship quality and problem severity assessed at the initial testing session and throughout the following year ($\beta_s = .42$ to $.43$, $p < .01$) or for the extent to which the problem was discussed during the year ($\beta = .37$, $p < .01$). Thus, greater use of direct strategies engaged by the agent produced greater change over the following year as reported by the target and (for positive-direct strategies) as perceived by female agents.

Links Between Change, Problem Severity, and Relationship Quality Over Time

Finally, we examined two potential outcomes of change in targeted features: problem severity and relationship quality over time. We thought these analyses could reveal two possibilities. First, producing change in targeted features might be accompanied by a reduction in problem severity across the 12-month period and an improvement in perceived relationship quality. Second, in contrast, the success of direct strategies might arise in part because they are accompanied by an increased recognition of the importance of the

problem by targeted partners (Drigotas et al., 1995). If this is true, a relative increase in target-perceived problem severity might be associated with more change across time. We first examined these potential associations with ratings of problem severity and then with relationship quality, both of which were assessed in the four follow-up interviews.

Problem severity across time. Baseline models examining problem severity assessed during the year revealed that agents ($M_{\text{int}} = 3.28$ and 3.07) and targets ($M_{\text{int}} = 3.23$ and 3.28 for women and men, respectively) reported relatively low mean levels of problem severity during the year, and average levels of severity differed significantly across individuals ($Var_{\text{int}} = .95$ and $.91$, $z = 5.27$ and 5.53 , $ps < .01$, for agent and target ratings). In addition, agents ($M_{\text{slope}} = -.24$ and $-.08$) and targets ($M_{\text{slope}} = -.15$ and $-.14$) reported reductions in problem severity at each time point, but this rate of change did not vary significantly across individuals ($Var_{\text{slope}} = .01$ and $.07$, $z = 0.13$ and 1.72 , $ps > .05$, for agent and target ratings, respectively). Consequently, we restricted further analyses to predicting the significant variation in average levels of problem severity during the year. The intercept-only baseline model fit the data well, $\chi^2(28, 47) = 27.84$ and 35.59 , $ps > .05$, CFIs = .99 and 1.00, RMSEAs = .04 and .00, for agent and target ratings. In addition, across analyses, we predicted average levels of problem severity over the year while controlling for problem severity reported at the initial testing session. Thus, any significant paths indicate a predicted decrease or increase away from initial levels of problem severity on average over the year.

There were no significant associations between communication strategies exhibited in the laboratory discussions and average levels of problem severity during the following year ($\beta_s = .03$ to $.19$ and $-.00$ to $-.27$, $ps > .05$). However, as predicted, for female agents, greater perceived change in the targeted partner was associated with a reduction in average levels of reported severity ($\beta_s = -.43$, $p > .05$). In contrast, and as described above, higher average levels of target-perceived severity were associated with greater average levels of target-reported demonstrated change across the year ($\beta_s = .29$ and $.35$, $p > .05$). Moreover, both target-perceived and agent-reported problem severity predicted an increased rate of change across the year ($\beta_s = .35$ to $.49$, $ps > .05$). These latter findings suggest that targets produce more change and maintain efforts across time when the targeted features create a more serious problem in the relationship and their partner desires greater change.

As indicated previously, and shown in Table 5, controlling for problem severity over the year did not alter the significant associations between communication strategy use and target-reported or agent-perceived change ($\beta_s = .23$ to $.59$ and $-.25$ to $-.28$, $ps < .05$). Thus, even though problem severity was a strong motivator of target change, direct communication strategies used by the agent also independently generated desired change. Moreover, perceiving that the targeted partner had changed (at least for females) also led to a reduction in problem severity and desired change by the agent.

Relationship quality across time. When examining relationship quality over time, baseline models revealed that women and men reported high relationship quality throughout the year ($M_{\text{int}} = 6.24$ and 6.11 , respectively, $Var_{\text{int}} = .23$, $z = 4.92$, $p < .01$), and these positive evaluations did not significantly vary across the four time points ($M_{\text{slope}} = -.01$ and $-.03$; $Var_{\text{slope}} = .02$, $z = 1.53$, $p >$

.05). As before, we restricted the analyses to the prediction of the significant variation in average relationship quality over the year, $\chi^2(28, 47) = 31.09, p > .05$, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .09, and across analyses, we controlled for relationship quality at the initial testing session. Thus, any significant paths would reveal a predicted decrease or increase (on average) over and above initial ratings of relationship quality.

The communication strategies exhibited in couples' interactions did not predict perceived relationship quality over time ($\beta_s = -.14$ to $.15, ps > .05$), and, as reported above, controlling for relationship quality during the year did not reduce the associations between communication strategies and target-reported change shown in Table 5 ($\beta_s = .26$ to $.61$ and $-.25$ to $-.28$). However, across time, relative increases in problem severity as perceived by targets ($\beta_s = -.31, ps < .05$, for both men and women) and agents ($\beta_s = -.25, ps < .10$, for both men and women) were associated with more negative relationship evaluations. Thus, although problem severity reduced across time on average, relative increases in perceptions of problem severity were associated with poorer relationship quality for both partners.

Discussion

In this study, romantic couples were videotaped while they discussed aspects of one another that they desired to change or improve. Informed by the extant literature, a broad-based coding scheme tapping two major dimensions of communication strategies—valence (positive vs. negative) and directness (direct vs. indirect)—was developed and then validated. As anticipated, specific strategies fell into one of four categories defined by these two dimensions (see Figure 1). Our primary goal was to examine the costs and benefits of these different regulation strategies by contrasting their concurrent (immediate) and longitudinal (long-term) success in producing change in targeted characteristics.

As predicted, when we examined immediate postdiscussion perceptions of success, stronger engagement of direct strategies (both positive and negative) was perceived as less successful in promoting targeted change, whereas positive-indirect strategies were associated with higher concurrent success as perceived by both agents and their targeted partners. Strikingly, the reverse pattern emerged when the effects of strategy use during the following year were analyzed. Across time, direct strategies produced greater change in the targeted features as reported by the targeted partner and (for positive-direct strategies) as perceived by female agents. Indirect agent strategies, by comparison, yielded little influence. Finally, the way the target responded to change attempts was also important, revealing that responding in a diplomatic and positive fashion forecasted more successful change.

These findings were robust and held when a range of artifactual explanations were tested. In particular, these results were *not* attributable to the level of stress experienced during the interaction, the amount and severity of the change desired, the degree to which targeted features were difficult to change, the extent to which issues were discussed, or relationship quality assessed concurrently and across time. Moreover, they provide a plausible explanation for a puzzling pattern of findings documented in prior research that has examined communication in problem-solving discussions. We discuss this claim in greater detail below.

Explaining a Conundrum: Valence Versus Directness of Communication Strategies

Our results are broadly consistent with the body of research investigating concurrent outcomes of communication behavior. Individuals who utilized more negative-direct forms of partner regulation, such as being coercive and demanding change, achieved less immediate success in producing change as perceived by both the partner who desired change and the targeted partner. In contrast, positive-indirect approaches, such as using positive affect to soften the conflict episode, were initially perceived as more successful in producing change. However, not all positive strategies were associated with immediate perceptions of success. Positive-direct strategies, such as explicitly discussing the consequences of partner behavior, predicted lower concurrent perceptions of success. Thus, frank and explicit attempts to change the partner, even if expressed without rancor or spite, seem to produce—at least in the short term—ill feelings in the relationship that temporarily exacerbate conflict. Open and frank communication is likely to make it abundantly clear to the target that he or she is not living up to the expectations or standards of the partner. As Overall et al. (2006) have shown, such perceptions on the part of the targeted partner, though capable of motivating future self-regulation, can be a bitter pill to swallow (also see Murray et al., 2006).

However, a perplexing set of prior findings suggest that the same negative problem-solving behaviors that are associated with reduced relationship satisfaction concurrently are, at times, associated with *increased* relationship satisfaction longitudinally. Perhaps because it seems self-evident that negative communication behavior should create a gloomy relationship atmosphere and impede problem resolution, these findings have been granted modest theoretical weight (Bradbury et al., 2001) or have been considered a statistical artifact (e.g., Woody & Constanzo, 1990). As a result, the mechanisms underlying the connections between specific types of communication behaviors and longitudinal relationship outcomes have received scant attention. Considering the extent to which communication strategies actually produce desired change over time—as we explored here—helps to explain this pattern.

Our results suggest that the immediate negative outcomes (e.g., decreases in relationship satisfaction, reduced perceived success) associated with negative-direct communication strategies may be counterbalanced by the same strategies generating successful change across time. Specifically, direct strategies (either positive or negative) predicted increased change in targeted features over time as reported by the target. Moreover, female agents correctly noted more change in their partners when using positive-direct communication strategies, and this perceived change was accompanied by a drop in problem severity. On the whole, we found good evidence that adopting a forthright and direct style of communication produces desired change in targeted features across time. In contrast, although greater use of positive-indirect strategies was associated with initial perceptions of greater success and less distress in the interactions, there was no connection between the use of positive-indirect strategies and actual change as reported by either targets or agents across time. Hence, a tactful, patient approach was initially perceived in relatively glowing terms, but it failed the acid test of motivating change in targeted traits or behaviors over time.

These results suggest that directness, not valence, may be the prime determinant of regulation success. As several authors have

suggested (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Holmes & Murray, 1996), direct strategies are probably successful because they engage the partner, clearly communicate the severity of the problem, and vividly convey the nature and degree of change that is required (also see Knudson, Sommers, & Golding, 1980; Miller et al., 1986). As a result, the target is more likely to grasp the nature and seriousness of the problem and be motivated to attempt the difficult task of changing the self. Indeed, consistent with this reasoning, we found that more sustained change over time was produced when the targeted attributes represented more serious relationship problems and agents were perceived as wanting more change. On the other hand, indirect strategies that soften appeals for change, such as minimizing the problem and highlighting other positive aspects of the partner, should lessen the salience and visibility of the problem. Although such strategies may buffer the harshness of an interaction, the partner is likely to remain blithely unaware of the extent of the problem (also see Drigotas et al., 1995).

Negative indirect strategies are also likely either to provide ambiguous information about the specific changes required or to lack clear guidelines as to how desired changes might be achieved. For example, generic messages that the partner should “care more” (guilt induction) or self-focused messages of low power (supplication) convey dissatisfaction but are probably not helpful in communicating exactly what or how the partner needs to change. Hints that the partner is too selfish or does not love the other enough also fail to provide clear courses of action. Consequently, such strategies may lead to efforts by the partner that do not directly address the problem and, in the end, only fuel frustration and lack of understanding. They may also generate a sense of global dissatisfaction and helplessness, which then leaks over to other domains in the relationship and undermines perceptions of efficacy in producing change (Miller et al., 1986; Vanzetti, Nottarius, & NeeSmith, 1992).

Costs and Benefits of Communication Strategies: The Opposing Effects of Valence and Directness

To our knowledge, this study is the first to map change in discussed issues across time and to directly test a key mechanism that may explain why negative behavior—particularly the direct kind—forecasts positive longitudinal outcomes. We also found, however, that the frequency of communication strategies (and associated target change) did not predict changes in perceived relationship quality over time. Why might this be the case?

The standard explanation for how conflict influences relationship outcomes for good or ill is in terms of communication patterns. One standard account runs as follows: Negative communication strategies should reduce the potential for positive and rewarding future interactions and, hence, launch declines in relationship quality (Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Receiving coercive and critical appeals for personal change, for example, should generate perceptions that one is not valued by the partner (Murray et al., 2006). This feedback, in turn, may provoke reciprocation of negative affect and defensive reactions (Gottman, 1994, 1998), reduce openness and willingness to change, and buttress perceptions of problem severity, thereby diminishing relationship satisfaction for both partners. In contrast, positive regulation strategies communicate concern and high regard and, as a result, should induce favorable reactions and ap-

praisals by the targeted partner. This pattern should increase opportunities for rewarding future interactions and should nourish and build relationship satisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Bradbury & Karney, 1993).

Our results provide support for some key elements of this perspective. For example, the use of more negative communication strategies produced greater tension and upset during the discussion, and the increased use of both negative and direct strategies by the agent predicted reduced immediate perceptions of success by the target. Moreover, targets who responded more bluntly and verbally resisted their partner’s regulation attempts were less likely to change over time. In contrast, targets who were more receptive and responded more diplomatically reported greater sustained improvement over the year. Finally, as reported in previous investigations (see Gottman, 1998), negative-direct behavior by the target was more likely to occur when agents engaged in negative-direct strategies (average $r = .26$). Simply put, negative communication strategies generate immediate aversive and defensive reactions in the targeted partner, and this resistance to change continues across time.

With regard to the positive effects of conflict, typical explanations posit that unequivocal or even angry expressions of the need for change (positive- or negative-direct behaviors) render the importance and nature of the complaint pellucidly clear and motivate change by the targeted partner. Prior research by Overall et al. (2006) is consistent with this explanation. They found that the receipt of more vigorous regulation attempts was associated with increased self-regulation of targeted features, despite targets simultaneously becoming more doleful with respect to how they were perceived by their partners. And, to reiterate one of our major findings from the current study, both more negative and positive direct communication strategies were more successful in spurring target change over time.

Viewed together, these two explanations suggest that specific types of communication behavior have different, and sometimes opposing, consequences depending on their valence and directness. For example, a critical blaming approach (negative-direct behavior) should be more likely to prompt change (as a result of directness) but may also be accompanied by the souring of relationship evaluations (due to valence). Such negative effects associated with coercive and hostile communication are unlikely to be fleeting, and the positive changes that are produced by direct strategies may counterbalance—but not reverse—the negative impact of these behaviors. Indeed, the inconsistent links between communication behavior and satisfaction documented in both the current study and prior research may be a function of the contradictory effects produced by the valence versus directness of particular communication strategies. To answer the question posed previously—why didn’t communication strategy use and resultant change predict changes in relationship satisfaction?—we propose that the costs and benefits may have simply cancelled each other out.

Strengths, Caveats, and Future Research Directions

This study had several strengths. We used appropriate data analytic techniques, which allowed us to separate the effectiveness of strategies performed by agents versus targets and to control for several potential artifacts ignored in earlier research, including

problem severity, the ease at which targeted features could be changed, the aversiveness experienced during the discussions, the degree to which the issues were discussed over time, and relationship quality assessed concurrently and across time.

We also compared both the cross-sectional and longitudinal effects of communication strategies by assessing change in targeted features over time. However, the use of self-reports of change over the preceding 3 months as our measure of actual change might be regarded as problematic, given that memories of relationship history can be biased. Indeed, there is good evidence that current beliefs and attitudes systematically bias people's memories of their relationships in ways that either exaggerate the consistency between the past and the present (Holmberg & Holmes, 1994) or motivate people to see the past through rose-colored glasses (Karney & Frye, 2002; Sprecher, 1999). However, the same research showing that current levels of relationship satisfaction tend to distort memories of satisfaction in the past also indicates that memories of *change* in relationship satisfaction across lengthy periods of time attain impressive levels of accuracy (Karney & Coombs, 2000; Karney & Frye, 2002; Sprecher, 1999). In short, people are systematically biased in their judgments of intimate relationships, but they also track relationship reality successfully (Fletcher & Boyes, in press).

In addition, agents' perceptions of their partner's levels of change in the current study were significantly and positively associated with their partner's claims about change over the year ($\beta_s = .34$, $ps < .05$, for both men and women). Moreover, the main findings reported remained robust when controlling for variables that are likely to bias relationship judgments, such as relationship satisfaction and perceptions of problem severity. This suggests that people's memories and judgments about change—as well as our results—are not merely a function of sentiment override or global feelings toward the partner or the relationship. Agent and target reports of change over time in this research, therefore, are likely to be reasonably veridical.

Focusing on the targeted partner is perhaps the most practical and accurate way of assessing whether change occurs across time. In the theoretical accounts outlined above, the impact of communication on the targeted partner is the prime focus in terms of explaining how specific strategies affect relationship outcomes. Thus, a basic test of whether regulation strategies produce improvement is how targeted partners respond to change attempts. Nevertheless, consistent with the findings for target-reported change, female agents who engaged in more positive-direct communication strategies perceived more change in their targeted partner and, in turn, a reduction in problem severity during the following year. However, the frequency of negative-direct communication by female agents was not related to their perceptions of male change, and male agents' reports of change were not significantly associated with the use of any of the communication strategies.

We can only speculate as to why these null findings emerged. Overall et al. (2006) found that (paradoxically) the harder agents tried to change their partners, the more they perceived their partners as falling short of their standards. Consistent with prior accounts of self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998) and self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), regulation attempts provide critical information to both the self and the partner that the partner is not meeting expectations. Making more strenuous efforts to change the partner may serve to increase the salience and psychological significance of the discrepancy; the more agents try to change their partners, the more

they dwell on their partners' failures to measure up. Regulation success mitigates this negative feedback loop, but it does not seem to entirely counter the negative ties between regulation and partner perceptions (see Overall et al., 2006).

A further moderating factor may be how the change is explained (Fincham, 2001). Direct regulatory approaches that prompt change in the targeted partner might encourage agents to attribute that change to compliance rather than real change in the underlying trait. As a result, for agents, behavioral changes by the targeted partner may not equate to perceived change in the targeted features. Future research should examine these speculative explanations, including the impact that differences across agent's and target's perceptions of change might have on the relationship. For example, the agent's failure to recognize the change reported by their targeted partner might lead to dissatisfaction or perceptions of helplessness for both couple members, particularly if targeted partners feel their efforts are not valued or appreciated. Such a process may motivate individuals to simply give up in their quest for change.

Several other caveats should be mentioned. Individuals in this research were relatively young and high-functioning couples. Older married couples, who are more heavily invested in their relationships, might be more likely to use positive-indirect strategies to maintain their relationships (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1991), or they might engage in more direct and negative strategies because it is safer to do so (Oriña et al., 2002) or because it is more important to generate change. In our sample, the longer couples had been together, the more both partners exhibited both positive and negative direct communication strategies (average $r = .18$). Nevertheless, controlling for relationship length and seriousness (i.e., dating, living together, married) did not diminish any of the significant paths between communication strategies, perceived success, and change over time. Regardless of relationship status, however, the relative effectiveness of different regulation strategies could change when couples are experiencing major relationship difficulties. For example, direct, and particularly negative, strategies may cease to prompt partner change if the relationship has become so acrimonious that direct communication simply reaffirms that the relationship has become untenable.

Finally, we did not assess the regulation strategies (verbal or otherwise) that partners displayed across the following year. Nevertheless, we were able to predict change over time from communication behavior emitted in only 5-min discussions. This impressive feat suggests that the strategies displayed in couples' laboratory interactions were proxies for the regulation strategies normally engaged in during daily communications. Individuals' reports that their interactions were realistic and similar to other discussions outside the laboratory also support this interpretation, as does the finding that more use of positive-direct strategies predicted greater discussion over the following 12 months. Prior evidence also suggests that communication strategies are stable across time (e.g., couples exhibit similar communication patterns in recorded interactions observed 2 years apart; Noller et al., 1994).

Despite the weaknesses listed above, by mapping changes in targeted features and assessing the long-term success of communication strategies, this study extends prior research that has focused almost exclusively on assessing relationship satisfaction and stability across time. Our results indicate that the valence and directness of communication strategies are orthogonal and may

impact relationship outcomes via different routes. In this article, we identified and empirically supported one of these key mechanisms: the production of target change. We argued that direct communication behaviors should increase the accuracy with which targeted partners regard the nature and severity of the problem. Such perceptual accuracy should, in turn, result in stronger motivation and more strenuous attempts to change targeted features. Future research should test these predictions.

Partner regulation, however, is a double-edged sword, with negative target regard and resistant reactions constituting a second central route through which communication strategies might influence longitudinal relationship outcomes. In our study, we hypothesized that these two mechanisms may have cancelled each other out, leaving relationship satisfaction unchanged even when the direct communicative approach was apparently successful in producing desired change. Of course, over longer periods of time than 1 year, some kinds of communication strategies might eventually win out. For example, a continued combative atmosphere may damage relationship quality regardless of whether targeted problems are resolved, or perhaps positive improvements become a more powerful determinant of relationship satisfaction over time. One important direction for future research is to investigate the relative importance of these likely opposing mechanisms.

Conclusion

This research represents the first investigation of whether different partner regulation strategies in intimate relationships produce desired changes over time. We found that reliance on explicit, unambiguous attempts to urge partners to change (vs. more subtle communications) is associated with a mixture of costs and benefits. Unsubtle and autocratic communications that encourage partners to alter specific traits or behaviors may cause stress and anxiety and are associated with perceived failure in short-term persuasion, but they appear to be successful in generating desired change in partners over the long term, especially when the partner responds in a diplomatic and accommodating fashion. In contrast, reliance on soft and subtle regulation attempts to accomplish change is likely to maintain harmony and satisfaction in the short term but may ultimately fail to produce any real change. If partners are unable to change and the problem is perceived to worsen over time, couples are likely to face disappointment and the waning of affection. Sometimes, even in loving, intimate relationships, it may pay to be cruel, or at least candid and honest, in order to be kind.

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