

## Chapter 2

# What Can Studying Designed Marital Argument Interventions Contribute to Argumentation Scholarship?

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The study of communication generally, and argumentation specifically, as a design enterprise represents a growing interest in the field of argumentation (for a brief review, see Jackson 2015). Treating argumentation research as a design enterprise highlights the importance of understanding the reflexive nature between practices and processes—often the quality of argumentation reflects the conditions (individual, situational, social, etc.) under which the interaction occurs. Further, examining argumentation as design can make a practical difference in improving argumentation practice. As Aakhus (2007) states: “A central puzzle that people face, from a design perspective, is how to make communication possible that was once difficult, impossible or unimagined. Communication design happens when there is an intervention into some ongoing activity through the invention of techniques, devices, and procedures that aim to redesign interactivity and thus shape the possibilities for communication” (p. 112).

Scholars taking up a design approach to studying argumentation identify two general avenues for studying argumentation from a design perspective (e.g., Aakus 2007; Jackson 2015). One avenue involves identifying unmet challenges for problems faced by arguers that call out for design innovations. For example, although not operating from an explicit design perspective, Schultz et al. (1995) theorized an intervention aimed at improving group decision-making by including one person in each group whose role it was to remind the group members of best practices for rational decision-making. A second avenue for design research in argumentation is to identify design hypotheses underlying examples of designed interventions along with a critique or evaluation of the design’s utility. By examining designed interventions for improving marital argumentation, we can uncover underlying theories of argumentation as well as discover insights about

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argumentation in general that might not be readily apparent or that might be unavailable using other methods.

Marital argument constitutes an interesting subject for studying communication design properties because it appears in the everyday stream of relating. Marital argument is one feature of naturally occurring conversation in relationships, it is regulated only by socially embedded rules and resources for social interaction along with idiosyncratic routinized normative practices developed by the speakers themselves. Interpersonal argumentation, in its natural state, generally lacks purposeful design in terms of formal procedures, referees, or rules for appropriate contributions to the dialogue. Perhaps because negotiating close personal relationships present a set of similar challenges across couples and because married arguers share culturally embedded conversational rules and resources, several common stumbling blocks to successful management of disagreements emerge. The designed interaction structures developed by the marital education programs discussed below are attempts to overcome at least some of these stumbling blocks. In the pages that follow, I will present some portion of two intervention programs, examine the underlying design hypotheses guiding the design of the intervention, and identify what we might learn from about argumentation in marriage from examining these intervention programs.

## 2.1 History of Marital Intervention

Psychologists and other social scientists have been interested in marital quality since at least the 1930s (e.g., Terman et al. 1938). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the climbing divorce rate brought new scholarly and therapeutic attention to understanding marital discord (e.g., Weiss 1978). Because divorce potentially aggravates a number of social ills, such as poverty, truancy, depression, and so on (Clarke-Stewart and Brentano 2006), a large number of researchers saw understanding and solving the climbing divorce rate as a social issue beyond personal happiness and satisfaction.

Along with increasing the potential for divorce, the way married couples argue also predicts a variety of relationship, psychological, and health outcomes for the people involved. Arguing in ways that promote reasonableness and convergence on issues has been associated with positive perceptions of both the partner and the relationship (Weger and Canary 2010). Further, arguments absent verbal aggressiveness and other aversive behaviors tend to be more satisfying and stable (Demaris 2000). Aversive argumentation, on the other hand, can lead to unstable relationships (Gottman 1994), rigid patterns of communication (Baucom et al. 2011), serial arguments (Roloff et al. 2015), and can affect physiological functioning of people's cardiovascular, endocrine, and immunological systems (Floyd and Afifi 2011). As the evidence supporting discordant argument as the root of divorce and discontent grew, work moved for research identifying harmful

behaviors to designing marital intervention programs focused on improving couples' communication skills, particularly argumentation, began to appear.

## 2.2 Marriage Education

Both of the intervention programs described below can be classified generally as psychoeducation as opposed to psychotherapeutic interventions. Psychoeducation functions like most any adult education course by delivering a skills-based curriculum much like a college classroom or corporate training environment. The facilitators do not need to be licensed psychotherapists, they only need to have undergone training in delivering the curriculum of the intervention program. These programs usually screen out participants with clinical problems such as domestic violence, drug abuse, mental illness, and other issues beyond the ability of an adult educator to handle. The marital education programs I discuss below both fall into the psychoeducation category. One reason I chose these two programs in particular is my experience with each. I am trained to deliver both curricula and I have taught several complete sessions of each course.

Psychotherapeutic interventions, such as Gottman's *Marriage Clinic* (Gottman 1999) are delivered by trained and licensed psychotherapists rather than adult educators. Trained mental health professionals are able to diagnose and propose a course of treatment for specific clinical issues facing individuals, couples, or families that facing problems beyond the reach of psychoeducation programs. In this chapter, I plan to examine two marital education programs' approach to designing interventions aimed at improving the quality of marital arguments. These programs are the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) and the Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) program.

## 2.3 The PAIRS Approach

The PAIRS approach to marital intervention was founded by Gordon (2008). The theoretical foundation for this approach rested on the work of Casriel (1972) and Satir (1976, 1988) and later developed by Eisenberg (Gordon 2008). The central tenets underlying PAIRS rest on the belief that bonding and emotional closeness are basic human needs and that it is not always obvious to people how to have those needs met by family, friends, and romantic partners. More than that, experiences during psychological development can result in maladaptive behaviors that create obstacles to our ability to have our needs met. Chief among these obstacles involve maladaptive communication behaviors that manifest in a variety of situations, especially during disagreements. Next I will describe three of the designed communication interventions in the PAIRS program.

2.3.1 Fair Fight for Change

The founders of PAIRS consider communication skills the key element in bonding and emotional closeness and therefore much of the curriculum is designed around developing tools for improving marital interaction. There are many such designed communication tools in the PAIRS curriculum, in this chapter I want to briefly discuss three. I will begin with the fair fight for change (FFFC). Elsewhere (Weger 2011), I have discussed PAIRS’ fair fight for change procedure and interaction design in the context of strategic maneuvering. The FFFC involves ten steps aimed at improving couples’ attempts to initiate behavior change in the partner. Table 2.1 lists the 10 steps.

The FFFC is an example of argument design just as Aakhus (2007) describes it above. The FFFC represents an attempt to reshape difficult interaction through redesign. The FFFC is designed to reduce the most common obstacles in conversations aimed at requesting a change a spouse’s behavior. One common obstacle involves the tendency to frame the request in personal, rather than behavioral, terms. For example, calling a partner lazy for leaving dirty clothes on the floor casts an unwanted identity on the partner which the partner is likely to reject by becoming defensive and escalating the negativity of the interaction. Personalizing complaints increases the likelihood of dysfunctional argumentation and relationship outcomes (e.g., Alberts 1988). As an example, step 3 is an attempt to overcome this obstacle by requiring the partner to state the request for change in behavioral rather than personal terms. Step 6 likewise requires the initiating partner to state a specific alternate behavior. This step creates a clear, observable, and measurable behavioral change that can be discussed without reference to personal qualities of either partner.

Table 2.1 Ten steps to a fair fight for change

Step	Behavior
1.	Invite spouse to use FFFC
2.	Initiator takes a moment to think about complaint
3.	State one specific behavioral complaint
4.	Partner repeats/paraphrases the complaint
5.	Initiator shows appreciation for partner accurately hearing the complaint
6.	Initiator specifically requests a behavior that is preferred to the behavior identified in the complaint
7.	Partner paraphrases the requested behavior
8.	Initiator shows appreciation for partner’s accurate understanding of request
9.	Partner responds by (a) accepting the request unconditionally, (b) stating conditions under which s/he will accept request, or (c) rejects requested behavior. Initiator paraphrases partner’s response and may then begin negotiations over conditions
10.	Continue negotiation and paraphrasing until resolution is reached. Express appreciation for each other’s willingness to fight fairly

Note Adapted from Gordon (2008) with appreciation of, and permission from, the PAIRS foundation

2.3.2 Talking Tips

A second communication tool designed to improve argumentative interaction involves a set of sentence stems that allow partners to identify a troublesome behavior in a partner and guides them through an in-depth discussion of their feelings about the behavior. Unlike the FFFC tool, talking tips is meant to be a confiding tool rather than a negotiation tool, one which allows one partner to disclose feelings about the other’s behavior. To some extent, this tool is designed to *avoid* an argument as much as to help manage one. This tool is called *Talking Tips* and exists in different versions depending on the issue to be discussed. Table 2.2 provides the standard version with sentence stems the partner uses to help guide a discussion of feelings about a particular behavior.

A partner is free to skip some of the stems if they do not feel they are relevant. For example, the spouse might not be hurt by a partner’s behavior so they might skip that stem. Often in relationships a particular behavior has affective impacts on one partner that the other might not be aware of. For example, in the U.S. wives often complain that their husband’s lack of help with household chores is troublesome as much because of the wife’s affective response to the disparity in housework as because of the time and energy required to engage in the additional housework. The talking tips guide is designed to help a couple confide in their partner about their feelings in a safe way so that the partner can really hear what they are saying without denial or defensiveness. Absent the talking tips guide, conversations about negative aspects of partners’ behaviors risk defensiveness on the part of partners which tends to derail conversations from the original topic to one that focuses on partners’ identities (Jacobs et al. 1991).

Table 2.2 PAIRS talking tips guide

Step	Message stem
1.	I notice...
2.	I assume this means...
3.	I think...
4.	I am frustrated by...
5.	I am hurt by...
6.	I worry about...
7.	I want...
8.	I appreciate you for...
9.	I realize...
10.	I hope...

Adapted from Gordon (2008)

### ***2.3.3 Daily Temperature Reading***

The final tool I will discuss in the PAIRS curriculum designed to improve communication is called the daily temperature reading (DTR). The DTR is not designed expressly for managing disagreements but is designed to improve disagreement discussions indirectly. The DTR is a discussion tool meant to create closeness and facilitate bonding by encouraging positive talk between partners. Partners are instructed to sit facing each other, preferably making affectionate contact of some kind (e.g., holding hands), and discuss six topics beginning with identifying behaviors or ways of being they appreciate about their partner (e.g., “I appreciate the wonderful meal you cooked last night,” or “I appreciate how you make me laugh so much”). The next topic involves sharing information to update each other about life in the family (e.g., “I made a doctor appointment for Tommy for Thursday”, “We are having dinner at your mother’s house Sunday”). The third step involves asking each other questions they have about day-to-day activities (e.g., “What day is my mom coming for dinner?” or “Does Tommy have his homework finished for the night?”). The fourth step is a light version of the FFFC in which very minor concerns are identified with recommendations for change (e.g., “You forgot to pick up butter from the grocery, maybe we should keep a list so we don’t forget things like this in the future”). Finally, the couple identifies wishes, hopes, and/or dreams they have for their family (“My hope is to someday take that romantic vacation to Lugano like we’ve always dreamed about”, “My wish is for Tommy to learn Spanish so he can talk to my father”). PAIRS instructors emphasize the importance of doing the DTR together as often as possible (preferably, daily). The DTR can include the children if they are old enough to understand and participate. The DTR builds goodwill and helps to reconnect couples who often lose a degree of bonding and connection as the everyday grind of managing a job and family wears people down. Improving goodwill may not decrease disagreements, but research shows that having a strong and satisfying relationship built on a friendship reduces negativity in arguments when they do occur (Gottman and Silver 2015). The DTR is designed to create goodwill so when an argument does occur, spouses are more likely to approach the disagreement with an open mind.

### ***2.3.4 Initiation and Conclusion of PAIRS Communication Tools***

Beyond specific communication tools, PAIRS has two design features common to all of their communication tools that are key to their functionality. The first feature is that the use of any tool requires an invitation. The spouse who wishes to use a communication tool must ask the other if she or he is ready (e.g., “I would like to do a fair fight for change, are you ready for that?”). The “invitation rule” is important because partners are not taken by surprise and cannot be ambushed into engaging in

a conversation when they are not emotionally ready. Research clearly indicates that fatigue, alcohol use, and other issues influencing a person's mood or emotional state can influence the trajectory of a disagreement (e.g., Canary and Weger 2015). The requirement that all of the communication tools conclude with couples stating appreciate for each other or some other positive sentiment forms the second design feature of the PAIRS tools. Difficult conversations such as disagreements or discussions of emotions can engage the hypothalamus–pituitary–adrenal axis elevating heart rate and releasing stress hormones with potentially lingering effects on people's psychological and physiological experiences of each other (Kiecolt-Glaser et al. 2005). Including a final step that helps bring people back to a calm and relaxed state potentially softens any lingering negative affect brought about by the discussion. This also helps people feel safe in using the tools with the knowledge that engaging the partner will likely result in a positive conclusion.

## 2.4 The PREP Approach

The PREP program was originally founded by Markman and is based on more than 30 years of research by Markman and his colleagues (e.g., Markman et al. 1984) as well as a large volume of social science research conducted and published by marriage and communication scholars. According to the founders of the program, “PREP is based on the cognitive-behavioral tradition of change, with significant influence coming from the field of behavioral marital therapy. Therefore, the focus is on ways of thinking (attitudes and expectations) and behavior (communication and conflict management) that are associated with marital success and failure” (Stanley et al. 1999, p. 280).

The PREP program is designed to help couples reduce interaction patterns that produce distress as well as increasing behaviors that promote commitment and intimacy. Chief among the behaviors tied to both creating distress and to eroding commitment and intimacy are connected to the way couples argue. The PREP program can be configured as a weekend type workshop or a longer multi-week course. In all versions the PREP program, like PAIRS, addresses behaviors directly related to couples arguments as well as behaviors that create goodwill, friendship, bonding, and intimacy, all of which have indirect associations with how couples handle disagreements. Interestingly, the two main tools designed to handle disagreements were created by researchers unaffiliated with PREP but refined by Markman and his associates specifically for improving marital interaction.

### 2.4.1 *Speaker–Listener Technique*

The *Speaker–Listener Technique* (SLT) (e.g., Stanley et al. 2000) was originally identified as a specific communication skill by Gordon (1975) and has its roots in Rogers’ humanistic psychology (Orlov 1992) (see also *active listening*, as a close synonym, e.g., Weger et al. 2014). The SLT is a designed interaction tool couples can use to reduce heated escalation, negative interpretations of the other’s intentions, and premature withdrawal from disagreements.

The technique is designed around “the floor” and the rules for holding the discussion. The floor determines the partners’ roles with the person holding the floor taking on the role of the speaker and the partner taking on the role of the listener. The training program encourages partners to use a physical object to designate the person who has the floor. Partners must share the floor during a discussion so both partners take turns in each role. The speaker can communicate any grievance, disagreement, or complaint she or he wishes, but must follow four rules. The speaker can only raise one complaint at a time. The speaker must discuss the partner’s behaviors without attributing (especially negative) motivations or intentions to the partner (called “mind reading”), although, the speaker is allowed to say what he or she believes to be the listener’s intention but only in tentative terms, for example, “I feel like you think I’m a bad driver and that’s why you don’t want me to drive the kids to school.” The speaker must keep statements brief and finally, the speaker must stop frequently to allow the listener to paraphrase the speaker’s message. The rules for the listener are, first, to paraphrase the speaker’s message, and second, to do so without disagreeing or rebutting the speaker’s message. To paraphrase means to restate the speaker’s message in one’s own words (e.g., “You’re saying you don’t like it when I yell at the kids”). Adding information about how the listener believes the speaker feels is acceptable because the speaker’s feelings are a dimension of the message as communicated but the listener should express this in a tentative way to avoid mind reading (e.g., “I think you’re saying that you don’t like me watching so much television because you feel like I’m choosing television over spending time with you?”). The listener will have a chance to express any disagreement with the speaker when the floor changes and the listener takes on the speaker role. The person holding the floor should change often, usually after the speaker has communicated two or three important messages.

Below is an example of an actual argument taken from observational study data, followed by my own rewriting of the dialogue as if the couple used the SLT. Authentic examples of actual married couples using the technique are difficult to find because they occur in the context of training sessions that are not recorded or exist as copyrighted training materials. In Example 1, the wife complains that the husband tends to drink more than he should before driving. We come into the conversation where the wife calls the husband selfish and stupid to drink and drive



or to ride with someone who has been drinking and driving. The husband in the next turn becomes defensive and minimizes her complaint by claiming he only drinks one beer. This pattern of attack defend in marital argument associates with divorce and dissatisfaction (e.g., Markman et al. 2001). As the interaction unfolds, the couple is gradually escalating negativity until the husband unilaterally declares the conversation over, another warning sign for conversation and marital stability (e.g., Gottman 1994).

**Example 1** Naturally occurring argument between spouses

Speaker	Message
W	Getting into the car irresponsibly with people that drink: Not only is that stupid, it is selfish to be like that, because you are hurtin' me and everybody else that's close to you if something happens. It's stupid! And it is illegal for you...
H	One beer does nothing to me
W	Yeah, but then you wanna go...
H	So that is not putting your life in danger
W	Then you want to go someplace else and have another beer with somebody else
H	Yeah. What is wrong with that?
W	And therefore it's <u>two</u>
H	It doesn't make any sense
W	Yeah, because you're addin' on
H	NO I'm NOT, because I've sat down at home or anywhere else and had one beer. That's it

In my experience as a PREP trainer, the structure of the SLT allows people to voice grievances with optimism that their partner is listening and will understand their perspective. Arguments do not always need to be resolved to have a positive relationship outcome. Feeling understood by spouse is associated with satisfaction with the conversation even without a definitive resolution of the issue. Below is an example of what the conversation above might look like if the couple had followed the SLT. Complaints are stated in behavioral terms without ad hominem attacks. The lack of attacks reduces the likelihood of defensiveness and unilateral dismissal of the conversation. The listener can concentrate on understanding the speaker's grievance without having to simultaneously plan a rebuttal. The listener understands that she or he will have an opportunity to communicate their position and feelings with the expectation that the partner will likewise focus on their messages.

**Example 2** Reconstructed argument as if spouses use SPT technique

Conversation starts with the wife having the floor and role of the speaker	
Speaker	Message
W	I'm concerned with you when you drink and drive because if something happens I would be upset. It makes me angry that you risk hurting yourself and others or going to jail when you do this
H	(paraphrasing the wife's message) You're saying that you are angry because you're worried about me getting arrested or getting hurt
W	Yes, and I really want you to either drink less or find another way to get home
H	(again, paraphrasing wife) Ok, so you don't mind if I drink, but you mind if I have more than one or two and then drive?
W	Yes, that's it. Ok, your turn to have the floor
(The husband now becomes the speaker and the wife the listener)	
H	I want you to know that even if I'm out a while it doesn't mean I have been drinking too much to drive. I have one beer one place, sit and talk and hang out, then I go to another place and have maybe one or two beers. But I spend a lot of time in between
W	(paraphrasing husband's message) You're saying that you really don't drink too much to drive and that it is as much socializing as anything else
H	Yes and I feel bad that you worry because I always assumed you knew I wouldn't do anything to put me or our family in danger so I don't want you worry because I'm really not drinking very much
W	(again, paraphrasing husband) Ok, so you're saying you didn't know how much stress this was causing me and that you wouldn't put yourself or others in danger on purpose

**2.4.2 Problem Solving Discussion Structure**

The PREP program's second disagreement management tool is a structured problem solving discussion procedure based upon a structure originally developed for managing labor negotiations (Walton and McKersie 1965). This procedure focuses on solving problems collaboratively rather than as adversaries. After years of working with couples and observing marital arguments, the curriculum designers found that attempting to integrate a discussion of feelings about a problem with a discussion of a solution to a problem typically produces poor results. Gottman (1976) indicates that marital arguments often begin with a partner identifying a problem and proposing a solution followed by argumentation about the proposed

solution. Often, setbacks occur in solving the problem because of the emotional reactions of partners to the problem itself. The desire to feel understood by the partner and identity attack and defense can derail the discussion of the problem. This can result in complicated mixed disagreement in which the couple attacks and defends their positions regarding both the problem itself and the proposed solution making an organized and effective discussion less likely.

PREP's solution to this issue is to separate talk about the problem from problem solving. So when a couple faces a tough problem to solve, they are instructed to first use the SLT to talk about their feelings about the problem. The second reason PREP separates talk about the problem and talk about the solution is to refocus the couple's attention from the problem, in which each is likely to be the other's antagonist, to jointly working out a solution as teammates rather than opponents. The PREP version of the problem solving discussion procedure involves four steps, *agenda setting*, *brainstorming*, *agreement/compromise*, and *follow-up*. Agenda setting involves identifying a specific problem the couple will solve. For example, following the Example 2, the couple might decide to find a way for the husband to go out for drinks with his friend without having to drive after having more than one or two. The more specific the problem, the better the outcome is likely to be. The next step involves the couple, as a team, generating solutions to the problem. At this phase, the couple does not evaluate any of the proposed solutions. Any solution either partner generates is written down for later consideration. This allows each person to feel safe from criticism in proposing solutions as a way to reduce self-censorship. It also allows playful conversation and a sense of fun by allowing couples to sometimes be silly or to joke with each other as they come up with ideas. One person writes down the potential solutions.

The next step is agreement/compromise. Easier said than done, the couple at this phase identifies their most preferred solution. Couples are encouraged to compromise by blending ideas from each person's preferred solution by choosing what they are willing to try and under what conditions. It is possible each person will have negative feelings about a particular solution proposed by the partner and at that time, the couple is urged to use SLT to talk through their feelings if one partner insists on a solution that is disagreeable to the other. The final step in the problem solving discussion structure is to plan a follow-up discussion. If, for example, the solution involves some behavior that occurs weekly, a follow-up might be scheduled for 2 weeks. If the behavior is daily, the follow-up might be scheduled for one week. In the follow-up discussion, the couple discusses their perceptions of the utility of the solution and any adjustments that they want to make. It is possible the solution has worked perfectly or that the solution needs to be thrown out and a new solution identified.

### **2.4.3 *Friendship and Commitment***

Just as PAIRS treats managing disagreements as only one element of a happy and stable marriage, the PREP curriculum includes behavioral approaches to maintaining commitment, friendship, and trust. Interestingly, PREP endorses using the SLT to help with these elements as well rather than introducing particular talking tools for achieving each of these goals. For example, the SLT can be used to help provide sensitive social support. In addition, PREP encourages couples to use the brainstorming activity to identify ways they can connect and create enjoyable activities to nurture their relationship. In the training sessions, couples spend time talking like friends would talk and are encouraged to avoid arguing during their friendship/intimacy building activities. As noted above, couples who have a strong friendship as part of their marriage avoid destructive argument behaviors to a greater extent than couples who have not nurtured their friendship.

## **2.5 Evaluating Designed Marital Argumentation Interventions**

As Jackson (2015) suggests, taking a design approach to evaluating argumentation involves examining the larger systems that produce, and are reproduced by, the arguers who are embedded within the system rather than focusing critiques of particular examples of the arguers' product. By studying designed marital intervention systems like the ones taught in the PREP and PAIRS curricula, we gain new insight into argumentation in marriage. In this section, I will present and examine three design hypotheses and their implications for argumentation research.

### **2.5.1 *Design Hypotheses 1: Marital Interaction is a Designable Activity***

It seems clear now with many intervention programs operating that marital interaction is designable. Once more, we can reconstruct these designs as normative models for conducting marital disagreements. Each of them provides rules for people to follow in conducting discussions. They identify behaviors that are out of bounds and that are not allowed in the discussion. They both have underlying theories about what constitutes good and bad argumentation in marriage as well as theorizing about what constitutes a good or bad outcome in a disagreement (more on this below). One difference between these models and others, such as pragma-dialectics involves the amount of structure each provides to the arguers. Admittedly not created to provide prescriptions for actual behavior, most normative approaches to argumentation simply define which behaviors are out of bounds

rather than providing concrete steps in resolving a dispute. Talking tips, FFFC, SLT, and the problem solving structure all provide arguers guidance on both what not to say but also stipulate the form of argumentative messages should take at different points in the conversation. It is likely easier to follow message stems and other structured message construction than to keep in mind all of the things to avoid during a discussion.

The main criticism of communication tools like SLT or talking tips centers on the artificial feel of these structures, people just do not talk like this in real life. This is true, but it is also true that the sorts of argumentation involved in the built up design of the legal system are equally unnatural. In addition, PREP and PAIRS offer these structures as alternatives to couples whose natural interactions result in dysfunctional outcomes. Although both curricula suggest that using their tools improves any couples' communication, they realize that many couples have designed their own unique approaches to handling their disagreements in more productive ways. The data clearly show, however, that couples who attend the intervention courses and use the communication tools regularly experience improvement in their relationships (e.g., Carroll and Doherty 2003; Durana 1996; Stanley et al. 2005).

### ***2.5.2 Design Hypothesis 2: Marital Argumentation Involves Multiple Goals that are Best Managed Individually Rather Than Simultaneously***

Both PAIRS and PREP communication tools reflect the assumption that arguments between intimates require substantial emotional and cognitive resources. Resolving the disagreement itself requires one set of cognitive skills while managing emotional responses and identity needs requires a complimentary but still different set of skills. Some people have developed the ability to integrate these activities to a greater extent than others making resolving marital disagreements less troublesome. For others, separating these activities by using multiple structured argumentation procedures seems to ease the burden and produces better outcomes. For example, the SLT helps people identify the problem itself including their feelings and identity concerns while the problem solving activity helps the couple work together on a resolution. In PAIRS, talking tips helps people confide their feelings about their partner's behavior while the FFFC provides scaffolding for talking about a solution. PAIRS, as discussed above, has multiple tools for talking about feelings. One not discussed above is called "empty the jug" and allows partners to vent their feelings, fears, and hopes to their partner. What we learn from these intervention strategies is that when people try to manage the disagreement itself and the affective experiences tied to the disagreement simultaneously they create conditions that foster digressions, stonewalling (withdrawing communicatively and emotionally from the disagreement), personal attacks, and attributing intentions or positions that are

mistaken. Strategies that separate the discussion into affective and instrumental elements of arguments aim to reduce the problematic consequences of trying to do too much at once.

Following the implications of this hypothesis provides insights into broader issues in argumentation scholarship. It should now be clear that the distinction between logic and emotion is fuzzy at best. Damasio and his colleagues' research indicates that logic and emotion are linked in cognitive processing (e.g., Damasio 1994; Saver and Damasio 1991). For example, damage to brain areas associated with processing emotions interferes with people's ability to arrive at reasonable and socially appropriate conclusions. Neuroanatomy research also points to the lack of independence between emotion and logic. Neurological pathways to the part of the brain tasked with logical deduction intersect with the ventromedial prefrontal area, which involves emotional processing (Houdé et al. 2001). Yet, at the very least, most models of argumentation undersell the importance of managing emotional expression in resolving disputes. People's affective experiences occupy cognitive space which reduces capacity for systematic processing of claims and reasons. What is more, the very act of arguing potentially threatens participants' identities to the extent that people will defend clearly defeated standpoints if only to avoid losing face by admitting their mistaken belief. One reason people go to such great lengths to defend their identity involves the emotional attachment people have for maintaining image with others as loss of face can result in feelings of shame, embarrassment, and even rage (e.g., Goffman 1956; Retzinger 1991).

This design hypothesis has implications for redesign outside of marital interaction. For example, child custody and other contexts of mediation already reflect mediators' implicit recognition of this second design hypothesis. As Jacobs and Aakhus (2002) suggest, some mediators approach emotional expression by allowing participants to vent feelings before attempting to direct them to bargaining while other mediators take the opposite tack and attempt to avoid discussions of feelings altogether by stopping participants when they express emotions and redirecting them to the problem. Both of these approaches, at least implicitly, acknowledge the problems involved in trying to deal with emotions and seeking agreement simultaneously. One possibility for redesign of mediation, following this hypothesis, would be to implement something like the SLT where participants first talk about their perceptions of the problem before a negotiation phase in which they work toward a solution.

Another redesign implication involves additions to the critical discussion model in pragma-dialectics. Although I have pointed out that following the 10 rules can prevent most of the problematic interaction patterns identified in marital research (Weger 2001), it does not deal with separation of participants' emotions other than to suggest people may express emotions but those expressions have no bearing on the argumentative dimension of the discussion. It certainly seems possible that, at least in the marital argument activity type (Weger 2011), that a redesign of either critical discussion rules or the stages of critical discussion might solve this problem as well. Perhaps in a stage somewhere between the confrontation state and the argumentation stage couples should engage in some sort of expression of their

emotional experience as related to the disagreement. I am not prepared to develop this idea in this chapter, but it does seem something worth at least talking about in the future.

### **2.5.3 Design Hypothesis 3: “Good” Arguments Results in a Resolution of the Problem Without Damaging the Relationship**

This design hypothesis reflects the theoretical bases for interaction designs. One element of theories of argumentation design relates to identifying the desirable products of disagreement talk. Normative theories that originate in the argumentation tradition tend to focus on reasonability, or a resolution based on the merits of arguers’ case. Because marital intervention tools originate psychotherapeutic traditions, their theories favor outcomes that protect the viability of the relationship over finding the “most reasonable” resolution. For example, PREP emphasizes “good enough” solutions to problems. If the couple is happy with the solution to the problem, the solution is good enough, whether or not one partner’s argumentation in favor of a different solution was more faithful to norms of reasonability. However, both PREP and PAIRS build their systems with the understanding that more reasonable solutions are more likely to be effective and to be maintained over time.

There is some reason to believe that marital argument interventions result in more reasonable discussions as well as more satisfying ones. In an earlier essay, I suggest that dysfunctional arguments in marriage can be reconstructed as dialectical fallacies (Weger 2001). For example, research strongly suggests that ad hominem attacks in spousal arguments (i.e., violations of the first rule for a critical discussion) are counterproductive. Disagreements precipitated by personal attacks predict trajectories marked by escalation and associate strongly with reducing marital satisfaction and increasing the probability of divorce (Gottman et al. 1998). Couples whose complaint sequences are characterized by hostility and sarcasm often fail to produce mutual agreement (Alberts and Driscoll 1992). In addition, personal attacks can prompt feelings of shame and rage leading to out of control escalation (Retzinger 1991).

Another example is a pattern called *cross-complaining* (Gottman et al. 1977). Cross-complaining occurs when one spouse responds to their partner’s complaint by raising an unrelated, or only tangentially related, complaint of their own. Cross-complaining is one subtype of defensiveness, a major predictor of divorce (Gottman 1994). In addition, Sillars and Wilmot (1991) found that couples who work through one problem at a time experience better outcomes than couples who raise many topics in a single discussion. Example 3 portrays a cross-complaint sequence from an observational analysis of arguments in romantic couples.

Example 3

Speaker	Message
Wife	I just think that it is a problem with us. I think we both need to:: to put our stuff away or whatever. And it's not just who puts things away but as far as the household chores and the cleaning, I think the problem is that I do most of the cleaning and that's why I get annoyed...
Husband	The one thing, and we've talked about it before, why is it O. K. for you to leave things out on the sink in the bathroom?
Wife	It's not O.K. but, as I said, at least the thing is I know I'm going to clean it up, I don't know that you're going to and usually I end up doing it. That's why I get upset when I see your stuff left out

In Example 3, the wife argues the husband does not do his share of the chores around the house. The husband responds by raising a complaint of his own, the wife is allowed to leave things out in the bathroom but he is criticized for doing the same in the kitchen. The wife points out she cleans up her own mess as well as his mess in the kitchen so he has little right to complain. A cross-complaint is more than a mixed dispute in which an antagonist takes a standpoint in opposition to a protagonist. By cross-complaining a spouse presents an altogether different standpoint, although the alternative standpoint is often related in a global way (e.g., Weger and Jacobs 1995). Cross-complaining, during the argumentation stage, represents a violation of the fourth rule in pragma-dialectics by introducing argumentation irrelevant to the standpoint under discussion. Attempting to resolve multiple standpoints simultaneously makes resolving any of the standpoints less likely (Sillars and Wilmot 1991).

To the extent that PREP and PAIRS argument interventions are designed to reduce personal attacks and to limit participants to a single issue (among other design intentions), they also have the potential to reduce dialectical fallacies at the same time. Research examining the effectiveness of the PREP program indicates the conversation structures are successful in reducing the negative interaction behaviors along with raising levels of marital and sexual satisfaction (Markman et al. 1988). The implication that argumentation procedures designed to protect the marriage also have the potential consequence of improving the normative reasonability of discussions suggests an avenue for future research. At this point, little to no research examines the role of reason giving in designed marital interactions. For example, it would be worthwhile to determine whether couples using the FFFC or SLT actually provide more reasons in support of standpoints than couples arguing on their own as well as avoiding additional dialectical fallacies.

One critique of these argumentation designs follows from this analysis and that is they more or less ignore the role of reason giving and the normative quality of interactions related to reasonability. Research clearly indicates that couples who develop arguments with reasons perceive each other more positively and perceive the relationship more favorably (e.g., Canary et al. 1987, 1991, 1994; Canary and Weger 2009). The question is whether it is possible, or even desirable, to redesign



the marital interaction structures in these marriage education programs to include some phase, stage, or talking tool to address reason giving and ought to be the focus of future research. For example, Weger (2011) points out that in the FFFC, couples need not present reasons for their desire for change in the other person, or reasons for and against different proposals. Identifying ways to build reasonability into these systems seems to be an important topic of research for the future.

## 2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I take a design approach to the study of marital argumentation. Following this approach, I identified three design hypotheses underlying two marital education programs' schemes for improving marital arguments. The marital education programs included the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) and the Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS). These programs are built on the assumption that marital relationships begin to deteriorate when bonding, intimacy, and positive regard for the partner decline due to corrosive behavior that emerges in argumentative interactions. Each program has designed communication guides that help couples navigate around obstacles to successful management of disagreement along with providing strategies to build good will and a strong friendship that increase motivation to remain positive even when they are frustrated or angry with each other.

The first design hypothesis predicts that marital interaction is a designable activity. Although somewhat unnatural in execution, research suggests that people can follow the structure of the interventions and that following them produces positive results. The second design hypothesis we can reconstruct is that marital argumentation involves multiple goals that are best managed individually rather than simultaneously. Each program finds ways to deal with people's feelings before attempting to engage in problem solving discussions. One implication of this hypothesis for more general argumentation study is the need to develop theories of emotion in argumentation so we can better understand how emotions and rationality work in resolving disagreements. The third design hypothesis identified defines "good" arguments as those that result in a resolution of the problem without damaging the relationship. The possibility that strategies that protect the relationship also result in a reduction of norms for critical discussion presents interesting possibilities for future research in both argumentation and marital interaction research.

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Professional Contexts

Arcidiacono, F.; Bova, A. (Eds.)

2017, XXII, 223 p. 9 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-59083-7