

Demand–Withdraw Communication in Severely Distressed, Moderately Distressed, and Nondistressed Couples: Rigidity and Polarity During Relationship and Personal Problem Discussions

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This study investigated demand–withdraw communication among 68 severely distressed couples seeking therapy, 66 moderately distressed couples seeking therapy, and 48 nondistressed couples. Self-report and videotaped discussions replicated previous research, demonstrating that greater demand–withdraw during relationship problem discussions was associated with greater distress and that overall, wife-demand/husband-withdraw was greater than husband-demand/wife-withdraw. Results extended the conflict structure view of demand–withdraw by indicating that this gender polarity in demand–withdraw roles varied in strength and direction depending on who chose the topic for discussion, distress level, and marriage length. Further, in videotaped personal problem discussions, typical gender patterns of demand–withdraw were reversed. Across the relationship and personal problem discussions, a pattern of gender polarity emerged when husbands held the burden of changing.

Keywords: demand–withdraw, marital communication, gender differences, support, marriage

Extensive research has shown that couples' communication around areas of conflict is associated with, and predic-

tive of, marital satisfaction and stability (Noller & Feeney, 2002; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). One salient pattern of communication in the marital interaction literature is the demand–withdraw pattern, in which one member (the demander) criticizes, nags, and makes demands of the other, while the partner (the withdrawer) avoids confrontation, withdraws, and becomes silent. This pattern has strong empirical support and is particularly interesting because it takes us beyond the simplistic investigation of positive and negative communication to more specific communication behaviors. Indeed, recent factor analytic work suggests that demand–withdraw communication is distinct from global negativity (Caughlin & Huston, 2002).

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Across varying methodologies, investigators, and samples, the demand–withdraw pattern is consistently associated with concurrent relationship dissatisfaction (see Eldridge & Christensen, 2002, for a review). In addition, demand–withdraw communication accounts for variability in relationship satisfaction that is not explained by affection and negativity (Caughlin & Huston, 2002). Further, research has demonstrated that demand–withdraw is associated with several central aspects of marriage, such as power differences and violence (Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999), differences in desire for closeness and independence, femininity–masculinity, gender roles, and division of labor (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). Cross-cultural research demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of this pattern (Christensen, Eldridge, Catta-Preta, Lim, & Santagata, in press).

One of the most interesting questions about the demand-withdraw pattern is the extent to which demanding and withdrawing behaviors are gender linked. Although both genders can be in each role, research on this topic consistently demonstrates that women are more often in the demanding role and men more often in the withdrawing role. This gender polarity has been demonstrated in a wide range of samples, including dating couples, cohabiting couples, married couples, violent couples, clinic couples seeking therapy, and divorcing couples (see Eldridge & Christensen, 2002, for a review).

However, research also indicates that role assignments depend on the specific topic being discussed. The conflict structure view of demand-withdraw (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993) suggests that the roles men and women take during conflict depend on the specific characteristics of that conflict, namely, who wants change and who has the burden of change. If the discussion is one in which the wife desires change from the husband, wife-demand/husband-withdraw is most likely. However, if the topic is one in which the husband wants change in the wife, husband-demand/wife-withdraw is most likely. This pattern arises because the person who desires change must rely on the partner's compliance to induce change, must engage in behaviors to elicit change from the partner, and therefore may complain, demand, and pressure. Conversely, the partner who has the burden of making change may find these demanding behaviors aversive and may resort to withdrawal and avoidance to reduce conflict and avoid change. Because women are more often seeking change in marriage (Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, 2000; Margolin, Talovic, & Weinstein, 1983), women are more often in the demanding role and men are more often in the withdrawing role.

To test the conflict structure view by experimentally manipulating which spouse wants change in a discussion, Christensen and Heavey (1990) introduced a two-topic protocol in which couples discuss one wife-desired area of change and one husband-desired area of change in their relationship. Of the studies using this two-topic protocol, some have found a symmetrical pattern of results in which there is a complete reversal of roles based on who chooses the topic (Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998; Klinetob & Smith, 1996). These findings suggest that there is no significant gender difference in demanding and withdrawing roles and that instead these roles are based primarily on the structure of the conflict (i.e., which spouse chose the topic for discussion and thus wants change that the other must implement). Others, however, have found a pattern of results in which the demand-withdraw roles do not completely reverse depending on who chooses the topic (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993; Walczynski, 1998). These studies have found that when couples discussed the wife's issue, wife-demand/husband-withdraw was significantly more likely than husband-demand/wife-withdraw, but when discussing the husband's issue there was no significant difference in the likelihood of either pattern. In this asymmetrical pattern, there is a significant

discrepancy in gender roles during discussions of wives' topics but not husbands' topics.

These discrepant findings lead to questions about which variables are moderating the impact of conflict structure on demand-withdraw communication. In other words, which variables determine whether couples will reverse roles on the basis of which spouse chose the topic of discussion? The conflict structure view suggests some potential moderators. In the conflict structure view, demand-withdraw comes about when one person desires change in the other and engages in behaviors designed to bring about change because the partner on the receiving end, who has the burden of change, prefers the status quo and prevents change by withdrawing from efforts to produce change. If the receiver not only is resistant to change but is unable to change, feels helpless to change, or is overwhelmed by the demands, then that person is even more likely to withdraw. In turn, the person desiring change must continue or increase behaviors to bring about change, prompting further withdrawal in a mutually exacerbating pattern. The more change is desired, and the greater is the difference between partners in desiring change, the higher is the likelihood of demand-withdraw. In more distressed marriages, the desire for change is naturally higher, raising the probability of demanding and thus withdrawing behavior. Further, because demanding and withdrawing are each triggers for and responses to one another, creating polarized roles over time, longer marriages are likely to experience greater polarity and rigidity in demand-withdraw roles. Consistent with this developmental and systemic notion of demand-withdraw, perhaps the novelty of the topic itself also determines how polarized couples become, as topics that have been discussed more often may have generated greater polarization. In sum, the conflict structure view suggests that proximal variables such as topic novelty and distal variables such as marriage length and distress level would be associated with how couples respond to changes in conflict structure. In other words, higher distress, longer marriage length, and less topic novelty may reduce couples' ability to completely reverse roles, leaving them more rigidly stuck in polarized demand-withdraw roles that are less flexible and less responsive to changes in the topic of discussion.

Distress level and marriage length are also supported as potential moderators by the sample characteristics of the studies producing the discrepant findings. For example, couples in the Klinetob and Smith (1996) study, who demonstrated a more flexible, symmetrical pattern of demand-withdraw (complete crossover of roles depending on who chose the problem for discussion), scored higher on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (i.e., were more satisfied) than the couples in Christensen and Heavey (1990) and Heavey et al. (1993). Also, the couples investigated by Klinetob and Smith (1996) had not been married as long as the couples investigated by Christensen and Heavey (1990) and Heavey et al. (1993). On the basis of the length of marriage reported, it is possible that gender asymmetry in demand-withdraw (difference in roles during wife-chosen but not husband-chosen problems for discussion) may not develop until after the first 5-6 years of marriage.

Until now, research on demand–withdraw has been entirely in the context of relationship problem discussions as described above. In such discussions, the conflict structure perspective suggests that the person who chooses the topic for discussion generally desires change in that issue (wife wants more affection from husband), whereas the other person experiences the burden of changing (the husband will have to be more affectionate). Therefore, one person desires change, and the other experiences the burden of changing, fostering the demand–withdraw polarization. Of particular interest, then, are discussions in which the person desiring change (the husband wants to exercise more) is also the person experiencing the burden of change (the husband will have to exercise). In these personal problem discussions, unlike the relationship problem discussions, we would expect less demand–withdraw. Polarization in demand–withdraw roles would be less likely, and the person choosing the topic (the person wanting change) may not be in the demanding role. In fact, the roles could presumably reverse, and the “supporting” partner may push for change if it is a change he or she would also like to see (wife also wanting the husband to exercise more). By studying these personal problem discussions, we can better understand how demand–withdraw roles occur when the person wanting change and holding the burden to change are different people (relationship problem discussions) versus the same person (personal problem discussions). Further, research has demonstrated the utility of studying supportive behaviors in marriage, particularly because of the ability of supportive behaviors to predict marital outcomes over and above conflict behaviors (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Dehle, Larsen, & Landers, 2001; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997).

This study is designed to replicate and extend research on demand–withdraw. Consistent with prior studies, we predict that demand–withdraw will be associated with distress. Second, we expect that women will be overall significantly more demanding and men significantly more withdrawing during relationship problem discussions. To extend research, we examine three variables, distress level, marriage length, and topic novelty, that may moderate the impact of conflict structure on demand–withdraw communication. We expect that during relationship problem discussions, couples in nondistressed marriages will exhibit less demand–withdraw and more flexibility and symmetry in demand–withdraw roles (complete crossover of roles depending on who chose the topic) than couples in distressed marriages. Distressed couples are expected to exhibit greater demand–withdraw and an asymmetrical pattern of demand–withdraw roles across topics (discrepancy in roles during wife-chosen but not husband-chosen topics). Because all studies have reported polarized roles during wife-chosen topics whereas the direction and extent of polarization during husband-chosen topics has varied across studies, we expect that marriage length and topic novelty will predict the extent to which couples reverse roles or maintain them during husband-chosen relationship problem topics.

We also extend understanding of demand–withdraw by studying it within the context of personal problem interac-

tions that are designed to foster supportive behaviors. In personal problem discussions, the person who chooses the topic desires change (similar to relationship problem discussions) but also experiences the burden of changing (unlike relationship problem discussions). Therefore, less demand–withdraw and possibly even a reversal of roles is expected.

Method

Participants

Participants were 182 married couples. One hundred thirty-four of these couples were distressed couples seeking marital therapy (63 recruited at University of Washington, 71 at University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA]). Forty-eight were nondistressed couples (25 recruited at University of Washington, 23 recruited at UCLA). All participants were recruited using newspaper advertisements, public service radio announcements, flyers, or brochures.

Distressed couples met the following inclusion criteria prior to being admitted to the study: (a) They had scored in the distressed range on three different measures of marital satisfaction administered at three different times (as described below); (b) they spoke fluent English, had a high school education or equivalent, and were 18–65 years old; and (c) they were legally married and living together. Couples were excluded if the husband met criteria for battering or if either spouse met certain psychiatric diagnostic criteria (see Christensen et al., 2004). Nondistressed couples met all of these criteria except had marital satisfaction scores in the normal range. See Table 1 for demographics. Ethnicity of the entire sample was 79.4% Caucasian, 4.7% Asian American or Pacific Islander, 6.6% African American, 4.9% Latino, 0.5% Native American or Alaskan Native, and 3.8% other.

Procedure

Couples completed a three-stage screening process. All procedures were approved by the review boards at each university, and participants consented at each step. First, couples who phoned the project were asked a series of questions, including a phone measure of relationship satisfaction (described below). Second, eligible couples were mailed questionnaires that assessed marital satisfaction and domestic violence. Third, eligible couples were invited to the local university for an assessment, which included two initial questionnaires to confirm that the couple was still in the appropriate range of marital satisfaction. If so, couples completed two videotaped interactions in counterbalanced order: (a) a husband-chosen relationship problem topic and (b) a wife-chosen relationship problem topic.¹ Partners then independently completed a questionnaire about the two interactions. After individual diagnostic interviews, couples completed two more videotaped discussions in counterbalanced order: (a) a husband personal prob-

¹ Two couples, one nondistressed and one severely distressed, did not have pretreatment interactions to rate owing to malfunctioning video equipment. They are not included in the analyses of behavioral data.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Group	Distress		Satisfaction		Age		Education ^a		Income ^b		Years married		Children	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Severe														
Husband	72.10	5.31	76.11	14.68	43.87	9.11	17.12	3.33	4,391	2,332	10.05	7.08	1.19	1.03
Wife	67.68	4.21	75.78	12.25	41.60	8.67	16.92	3.62	3,121	2,784				
Moderate														
Husband	65.38	4.06	93.14	9.31	43.09	8.40	16.93	3.02	4,911	4,900	9.86	8.15	1.00	1.04
Wife	61.91	4.48	93.89	8.73	41.64	8.59	17.02	2.79	4,248	4,998				
None														
Husband	45.08	6.52	121.19	8.98	42.04	10.50	17.90	2.96	4,011	1,408	11.16	9.24	0.98	1.23
Wife	43.73	5.53	122.73	8.36	39.83	8.96	16.96	2.42	2,334	2,069				

^a Kindergarten through 12th grade = 13 years. ^b Monthly.

lem topic and (b) a wife personal problem topic.² Each independently completed a questionnaire about these interactions. Partners then independently completed remaining assessment questionnaires. Nondistressed couples were paid \$150; distressed couples were not paid for the pretreatment assessment but were provided therapy free of charge (see Christensen et al., 2004, for the procedures and outcomes of the clinical trial).

Measures

Marital satisfaction. Three self-report instruments were used: (a) the phone Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), a widely used and validated 9-item self-report measure of marital satisfaction; (b) the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976, 1989), a 32-item self-report measure of global marital functioning with good reliability and validity (Spanier, 1989); and (c) the Global Distress Scale (GDS) of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory—Revised (Snyder, 1997), a 22-item scale with high reliability and validity (Snyder, 1997; Snyder, Wills, & Grady-Fletcher, 1991). Distressed couples were stratified into moderate ($n = 66$) and severe ($n = 68$) distress groups based on a median split of their combined scores on the DAS and GDS. This combined score was used in analyses as a continuous measure of distress level.³

Demand-withdraw communication. The extent of demanding and withdrawing was assessed with both self-report and behavior observation. The Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) is a measure of the patterns exhibited during three phases of a conflict: when the problem arises, during discussion of the problem, and after discussion of the problem. It contains 35 items rated on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 9 (*very likely*). Three subscales of the CPQ were used. The Wife-Demand/Husband-Withdraw (WD/HW) subscale consists of three items casting wife in the demanding role and husband in the withdrawing role (e.g., woman tries to start a discussion while man tries to avoid a discussion; woman nags and demands while man withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further; woman criticizes while man defends himself). The Husband-Demand/Wife-Withdraw (HD/WW) subscale consists of three complementary items casting husband in the demanding role and wife in the withdrawing role. *Demand-withdraw communication* is the sum of these six items. The CPQ has shown adequate reliability and validity as a measure of the demand-withdraw interaction pattern (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). In the present study, reliability for the CPQ subscales was .74 for husband report of WD/HW, .74 for wife report of WD/HW,

.68 for husband report of HD/WW, and .64 for wife report of HD/WW.

Demand-withdraw communication was also assessed using behavior observation of the four 10-min discussions. For the relationship problem discussions, each spouse was asked to choose the area of the marriage he or she had rated as most dissatisfying on a questionnaire containing common couple conflict areas. For the personal problem discussions, each spouse was asked to choose a topic he or she was personally concerned about or wanted to work on or change but that was not a problem in the marriage.

Demand-withdraw behaviors within these discussions were coded by undergraduate researchers trained in the Couples Interaction Rating System (CIRS; Heavey, Gill, & Christensen, 1996). The CIRS is a global rating system that contains 13 dimensions, 5 of which were used in this study. Each dimension is rated on a scale of 1 (*none*) to 9 (*a lot*) after observing an individual spouse through the entire discussion. Raters underwent training until they demonstrated that they coded each dimension reliably with other raters.⁴ Rating took place over 4 years with nine team member combinations. There was considerable continuity in raters across teams, and teams contained 3–4 members. Team members independently rated the same discussions as others on their team. For each of the four interactions, the following composites were computed from ratings: *demand*, the average sum of blame and pressures for change; *withdraw*, the average sum of avoidance, with-

² Many couples at the University of Washington did not complete the personal problem interactions, and so the sample sizes for analyses of these interactions are as follows: 45 nondistressed, 50 moderate distress, and 46 severe distress.

³ Twenty-four of the distressed couples in the study were part of our pilot phase. These couples followed the same protocol as later couples, with one exception. Pilot couples completed the DAS and GDS in the mailed screen but not again at the university pretreatment assessment. Nonpilot couples completed the DAS in the mailed screen and the DAS and GDS in the university pretreatment assessment. Therefore, the marital distress data reported, and used to determine whether a couple was moderately or severely distressed, came from the mailed screen for pilot couples and from the pretreatment assessment for the later couples.

⁴ Coders were blind to the conditions and predictions of the study. The different types of interactions were randomly intermingled as they were coded. Although raters independently coded interactions, they continued to attend weekly training meetings designed to prevent coder drift and maintain high reliability.

draw, and the reverse score of discussion; *wife-demand/husband-withdraw*, the average sum of the wife's demand composite and the husband's withdraw composite; *husband-demand/wife-withdraw*, the average sum of the husband's demand composite and the wife's withdraw composite; *demand-withdraw communication*, the average sum of the wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw composites. Interrater reliability (α) was computed within each team, and the weighted average alphas, based on how many interactions were coded by each team, were .91 for demand and .82 for withdraw. (See Sevier, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004, for additional details on the coding procedure.)

Novelty of topic. After couples completed the discussions, they independently completed the Marital Discussion Questionnaire (Christensen & Jacobson, 1997), which includes an item asking how often each topic is discussed with the spouse, rated on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*often—once a week or more*).

Results

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to compare demographics between the two sites (UCLA and University of Washington) and among the three distress groups (none, moderate, and severe). No differences were found between sites. Between distress groups, no significant differences were found in age, education, years married, children, and husbands' income. However, a statistically significant difference was found in wives' income, $F(2, 139) = 3.43, p < .05$. Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that moderately distressed wives reported a significantly greater income than nondistressed wives ($p < .05$). To examine the importance of wives' income, it was correlated with each of the dependent variables involved in the study. Of 18 correlations, only husband report of wife-demand/husband-withdraw was significant ($r = .18, p = .035$), so analyses using this variable were done with and without wife income as a covariate. The one difference in findings using the covariate is noted in the results.

Two $3 \times 2 \times 2$ repeated measures ANOVAs, one using self-report data (CPQ) and one using observer ratings from relationship problem interactions, were conducted. Both analyses included a distress between-groups factor (none, moderate, and severe) and a demand-withdraw roles repeated measures factor (wife-demand/husband-withdraw, husband-demand/wife-withdraw). The self-report analysis contained a gender-of-reporter repeated measures factor (wife, husband). The analysis of observer ratings included a spouse topic repeated measures factor (wife topic, husband topic). In both analyses, wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw were the dependent variables.

Two additional ANOVAs were conducted with the observational data from relationship problem interactions to separate demand and withdraw. These contained the same factors as explained above, except the demand-withdraw roles repeated measures factor was instead demand roles (wife demand, husband demand) or withdraw roles (wife withdraw, husband withdraw), and the dependent variables were either husband and wife demand or husband and wife withdraw, respectively. Descriptive statistics are presented

in Table 2. These ANOVAs test our replication and our hypothesis about distress level. They are followed by regressions to test our hypotheses on marriage length and topic novelty. All analyses are focused solely on relationship problem discussions, until the *Personal problem discussions* section.

Replication of Previous Findings

Demand-withdraw and distress. There was a main effect of distress group in the self-report data, $F(2, 179) = 131.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .60$, and behavioral data, $F(2, 177) = 38.98, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$, replicating the association between distress and demand-withdraw during relationship problem discussions. This main effect was also found for demand, $F(2, 177) = 37.08, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$, and withdraw, $F(2, 177) = 6.40, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .07$.

Gender differences in demand-withdraw. There was a main effect of demand-withdraw roles in the self-report data, $F(1, 179) = 56.42, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$, and behavioral data, $F(1, 177) = 20.83, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$, replicating greater wife-demand/husband-withdraw than husband-demand/wife-withdraw during relationship problem discussions. In addition, wife demand was greater than husband demand, $F(1, 177) = 16.53, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$, and husband withdraw was greater than wife withdraw, $F(1, 177) = 10.81, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$.

There was also a Distress Group \times Demand-Withdraw Roles interaction during relationship problem discussions in the self-report data, $F(2, 179) = 3.69, p = .027, \eta_p^2 = .04$, and behavioral data, $F(2, 177) = 3.93, p = .021, \eta_p^2 = .04$, indicating that wife-demand/husband-withdraw was greater than husband-demand/wife-withdraw in the two distressed groups, but there was no significant difference in these two patterns among nondistressed couples. Including wife income as a covariate, the self-report interaction is reduced to a trend, $F(2, 138) = 2.83, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = .04$. This same interaction was significant for demand, $F(2,$

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Demand-Withdraw Variables

Variable	Distress level					
	None		Moderate		Severe	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Demand-withdraw						
Self-report	17.09	5.98	29.84	4.74	31.46	4.47
Observed	10.91	0.42	14.41	0.36	15.69	0.35
Demand (observed)	5.13	0.35	8.06	0.29	8.94	0.29
Withdraw (observed)	5.78	0.21	6.35	0.18	6.75	0.17
Wife-demand/ husband-withdraw						
Self-report	19.00	7.94	34.59	8.61	36.91	8.90
Observed	11.14	2.31	15.21	4.35	17.20	4.52
Husband-demand/ wife-withdraw						
Self-report	15.19	6.10	25.09	9.50	26.01	9.94
Observed	10.68	3.20	13.61	3.17	14.17	4.15

177) = 3.21, $p = .042$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, and in the expected direction but not significant for withdraw, $F(2, 177) = 1.93$, $p = .149$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

Impact of conflict structure on demand-withdraw. Several topic interactions (wife- or husband-chosen topic) were significant in the observed relationship problem discussions. A Topic \times Demand-Withdraw Roles interaction, $F(1, 177) = 103.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .37$, replicates the asymmetrical results. Among wife-chosen topics, wife-demand/husband-withdraw was greater than husband-demand/wife-withdraw, but among husband-chosen topics, there was no significant difference between the two interaction patterns. This interaction was also true for demand, $F(1, 177) = 84.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$, and withdraw, $F(1, 177) = 48.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$.

Extension of Previous Research

Distress as a moderator of the impact of conflict structure. In the same analyses of observational data from relationship problem discussions as above, a three-way interaction, Topic \times Demand-Withdraw Roles \times Distress Group, $F(2, 177) = 5.92$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, indicated that distress level did moderate the impact of conflict structure on demand-withdraw communication (see "relationship" topics in Figure 1). The difference in roles was greater during wife-chosen than during husband-chosen topics for all distress levels, but couples who were more distressed demonstrated less reversal in roles as they switched topics than couples who were less distressed. In other words, nondistressed couples came closer to a symmetrical pattern across

topics (complete reversal of roles) than distressed couples, who demonstrated more asymmetry across topics. This interaction was also significant for withdraw, $F(2, 177) = 10.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$, but not demand.

Marriage length as a moderator of the impact of conflict structure. Two hierarchical regressions, one for wife-chosen and one for husband-chosen relationship problem discussion, were conducted. Distress level was entered as a control variable, followed by marriage length and then the interaction of distress and marriage length, predicting the difference between wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw. For wives' topics, only distress level significantly predicted discrepancy in roles ($\beta = .262$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .07$). For husbands' topics, the interaction term was the significant predictor of discrepancy in roles ($\beta = .172$, $p = .023$, $R^2 = .03$). As expected, marriage length interacted with distress level to determine the extent to which couples reversed roles when discussing the topics chosen by husbands. Among shorter marriages, couples of all distress levels reversed roles. Among longer marriages, only severely distressed couples failed to reverse roles.

Topic novelty as a moderator of the impact of conflict structure. Two hierarchical regressions, one for wife-chosen and one for husband-chosen relationship problem topics, were conducted. Distress level was entered as a control variable, followed by topic novelty and then the interaction of distress and topic novelty, predicting the difference between wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw. In both analyses, only dis-

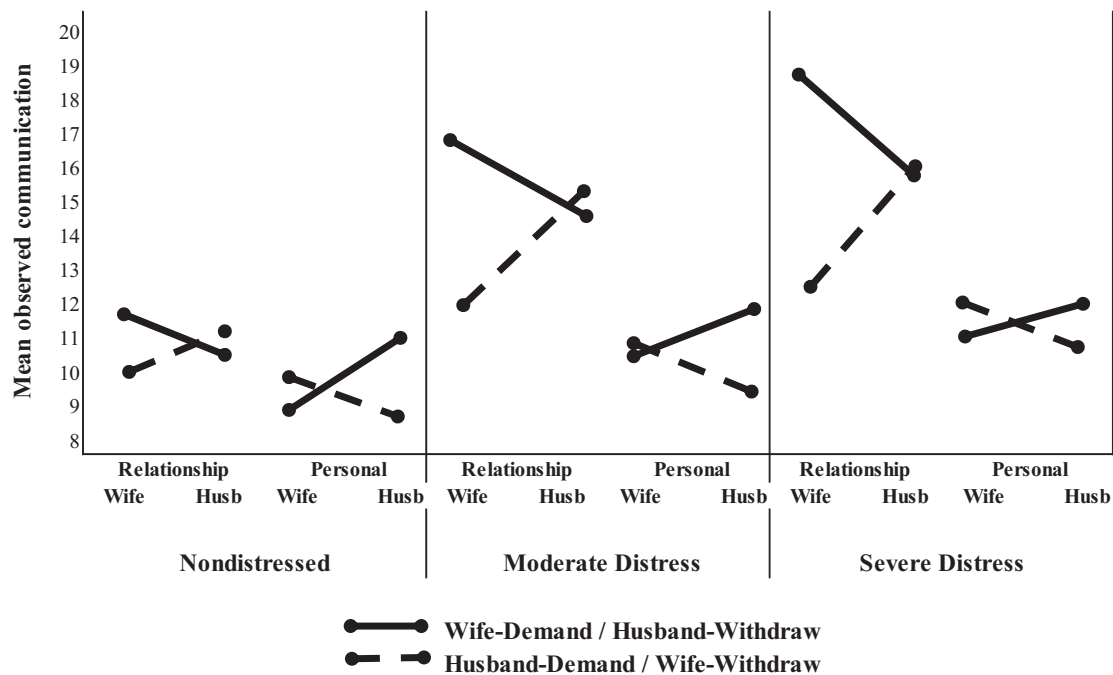


Figure 1. Demand-withdraw communication as a function of discussion structure (wife or husband topic), discussion type (relationship or personal problem), and distress level.

tress level significantly predicted discrepancy in roles (wives' topics: $\beta = .250$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .06$; husbands' topics: $\beta = .252$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .07$).

Personal problem discussions. A $3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ repeated measures ANOVA with the following factors was conducted: distress level (none, moderate, or severe), discussion type (relationship or personal problem), topic (wife or husband chosen), and demand-withdraw roles (wife-demand/husband-withdraw, husband-demand/wife-withdraw). Figure 1 displays each of these factors. Wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw were the dependent variables. There was a main effect as well as several interactions with discussion type (relationship or personal problem discussion). The main effect, $F(1, 138) = 230.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .63$, indicates that, as expected, there was significantly more demand-withdraw during relationship discussions than during personal problem discussions. This was also true for demand, $F(1, 138) = 278.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .67$, but not for withdraw. A Discussion Type \times Distress Group interaction, $F(2, 138) = 18.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$, indicates that this difference in extent of demand-withdraw communication between the two types of discussion was greater for distressed couples than for nondistressed couples. This interaction was significant for demand, $F(2, 138) = 25.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$, but not for withdraw.

A Discussion Type \times Demand-Withdraw Roles interaction, $F(1, 138) = 8.28$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, indicates that there was a greater difference in roles (wife-demand/husband-withdraw greater than husband-demand/wife-withdraw) in the relationship problem than in the personal problem discussions. This interaction was significant for demand, $F(1, 138) = 5.99$, $p = .016$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, and for withdraw, $F(1, 138) = 6.15$, $p = .014$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. However, a Discussion Type \times Demand-Withdraw Roles \times Distress Group interaction, $F(2, 138) = 4.25$, $p = .016$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, further indicates that among the distressed couples, there is a greater discrepancy between roles in the relationship than in the personal problem discussions, but that among nondistressed couples, there is an equivalent discrepancy in roles across types of discussion. This interaction was significant for withdraw, $F(2, 138) = 5.67$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, but not for demand. As can be seen in Figure 1, distress level is indeed associated with rigidity and polarity in the gender-stereotyped demand-withdraw pattern.

Of interest, a Topic \times Discussion Type \times Demand-Withdraw Roles interaction, $F(1, 138) = 102.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .43$, indicates that, as expected, the impact of discussion structure on demand-withdraw roles was actually reversed in response to personal problem discussions. The person who chose the topic was no longer in the role of demander. This three-way interaction was also significant with demand, $F(1, 138) = 151.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .52$, and withdraw, $F(1, 138) = 8.29$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Thus, in husbands' personal problem discussions in which they desire change and also carry the burden of change, wife-demand/husband-withdraw occurred more than the reverse. This suggests that husbands are withdrawn and disengaged

whereas wives are blaming and pressuring when they discuss husbands' personal (nonmarital) issues.

Discussion

Among three samples of married couples (no, moderate, and severe distress), self-report and observational data strongly replicated the association between demand-withdraw during relationship problem discussions and marital distress. Results also replicated the gender linkage in demand-withdraw roles, with men more likely to withdraw and women more likely to demand. The effect sizes for these findings are quite large.

Given these clear relationships it is important to extend our knowledge about this communication pattern. The conflict structure view suggests some moderators, including distress level, marriage length, and topic novelty, that may determine how couples respond to changes in the topic from wife-chosen to husband-chosen relationship problems. Distressed couples were rigidly locked in a wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern and were less responsive to situational changes in the discussion than nondistressed couples. During wife-chosen conflict topics, distress level predicted the difference in demand-withdraw roles. However, during husband-chosen conflict topics, distress level and marriage length interacted to predict the extent to which couples reversed demand-withdraw roles. Only the severely distressed couples in longer marriages were unable to reverse roles when switching topics; those who were severely distressed but married for less time did demonstrate some flexibility in roles across topics.

These findings suggest that the conflict structure view needs to be expanded to take into account new factors. Demand-withdraw roles during relationship conflicts are not determined solely by proximal variables such as who is seeking change and who carries the burden of change but also by distal variables such as distress level and marriage length. There are likely additional proximal and distal variables that require investigation. For example, it will be important to directly investigate other moderators suggested by the conflict structure view, such as desire for change and feeling burdened by expectations for change, as well as affective and cognitive processes related to demand-withdraw. Demand-withdraw may have different effects on a relationship when it occurs in the context of other behaviors and events. Consistent with this idea, a recent study suggests that the inverse association between demand-withdraw and satisfaction is reduced in the context of a highly affectionate relationship (Caughlin & Huston, 2002). Clearly, demand-withdraw is a multifaceted, complex pattern of communication that has implications for therapeutic intervention and the satisfaction and stability of marriages.

With the inclusion of personal problem discussions, we examined demand-withdraw in a new context in which the person desiring change and the person carrying the burden of change are the same, unlike the conflict-laden discussions in which one person wants change and the other is burdened with changing. Demand-withdraw was present in these personal problem discussions, although in lesser amounts

than in the relationship problem discussions, presumably because the latter discussions are more contentious. Yet the gender difference in roles, with wife-demand/husband-withdraw greater than husband-demand/wife-withdraw, was present across both types of discussion. An important finding is that this gender disparity in roles seemed to be associated with one specific element across both relationship and personal problem discussions: change in husband. When the discussion was centered on the husband changing, whether the change was sought by the wife (wife relationship problem discussion) or by the husband himself (husband personal problem discussion), there was a gender-stereotyped difference in roles. If the discussion centered on change in the wife, there was little or no gender disparity in roles. It is unclear whether the greater disparity is because husbands are more resistant to change than wives, because wives are more insistent on change than husbands, or both. However, clinicians should pay particularly close attention to distressed couples' communication whenever the burden of change is placed on the husband, regardless of which partner is wanting those changes, as these discussions are most likely to foster polarization.

Throughout this study, where applicable, demand and withdraw were analyzed individually to separate the components of the demand-withdraw pattern. The results of these analyses were highly consistent with the demand-withdraw analyses, although demand seemed to produce stronger results than withdraw. Including both levels of analysis, individual behaviors and pattern combination, led to a more stringent and thorough test of our hypotheses.

The current study has two important limitations. First, this research is entirely cross-sectional and therefore does not provide causal, developmental, or predictive information about demand-withdraw. Second, the majority of couples in this study were Caucasian, heterosexual, and married, and so the results may not generalize to a more ethnically and relationally diverse sample. However, there is some generalizability in the two-site design of the study, as couples were recruited in two distinct communities (the greater Los Angeles area and Seattle) and 20.6% of the sample was non-Caucasian.

Despite these potential limitations, there are several contributions of this study. First, it serves as a strong replication of previous research. Replication in the social sciences is much needed, infrequently sought, and rarely accomplished. This study adds further support to prior findings, using a larger sample, both self-report and observational data, and three samples of varying distress levels. Second, this study confirms the importance of using the two-topic protocol when doing research on communication patterns. In this and previous research, aspects of the structure of the conflict significantly affected communication tendencies.

The third contribution of this study is that it extends our knowledge of variables that moderate the association between conflict structure and demand-withdraw roles. These variables include relationship characteristics (distress level, marriage length) and elements of the discussion (who is seeking change or dissatisfied, who has the burden of changing).

Fourth, this is the first study to have combined the growing literatures on observed social support (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Pasch et al., 1997) and demand-withdraw. Similar to Pasch and Bradbury (1998), this study highlights the importance of going beyond the sole focus on conflict behaviors. Assessing support behaviors in this study led to important findings about the polarization that occurs during husbands' personal problem discussions. Of interest, just as Pasch and Bradbury found that newlyweds' support behaviors during husbands' topics were particularly predictive of marital outcome, the current study found that the gender-stereotyped and polarized pattern of demand-withdraw was present during husbands' but not wives' personal problem discussions. Together, these studies suggest that spouses' behaviors during discussions in which husbands are in the support-seeking role and wives are in the support-providing role are particularly important and warrant further examination.

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