Couple Observational Coding Systems

Edited by

Patricia K. Kerig
Donald H. Baucom

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

LEA
LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS
2004 Mahwah, New Jersey London

15

Coding Intimacy in Couples' Interactions

Marina Dorian and James V. Cordova
University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign

Studying intimacy in marriage is both practically and theoretically important. Lack of intimacy is one of the most frequent complaints of couples seeking therapy and is central to the personal goals of most people. At the heart of intimacy are the ways in which partners manage the emotionally challenging vulnerability inherent in close relationships. However, marital interaction research has focused almost exclusively on the behaviors that spouses exchange when attempting to resolve conflict (see Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Studying problem solving has proven to be remarkably productive. Research has consistently found that partners' problem-solving behaviors differentiate distressed from nondistressed couples (Gottman, 1994; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Although problem solving appears essential to healthy marriages, recent research indicates an only modest association between such behaviors and changes in marital satisfaction, implying that other interpersonal domains may contribute substantially to marital health (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The field, however, has limited knowledge of other domains of marital interaction (see, however, Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Theoretically, intimacy processes should contribute substantially to marital health (Cordova & Scott, 2001). However, few efforts have been made to observe intimacy processes in marriage, and little is known about how these processes may differ between distressed and nondistressed couples.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Despite widespread agreement that intimacy is an essential facet of marriage (e.g., Prager, 1995), researchers have found it a difficult phenomenon to define. Most thinking in the area has focused on defining the boundaries between what is and what is not intimacy. However, a comprehensive list of necessary and sufficient features differentiating intimacy from other constructs has proven to be elusive. In response, intimacy has been conceptualized as a "natural concept" in which the boundaries separating category members from nonmembers are necessarily "fuzzy" (Prager, 1995, p. 14). Scholars have lacked consensus about what the definition of intimacy is, in part, because it is difficult to specify the features of a natural concept. Intimacy has been referred to in terms of the proverbial elephant where "some researchers must feel some parts of the creature, whilst others probe other areas" (Acitelli & Duck, 1987, p. 306). Intimacy has been variously studied as self-disclosure (e.g., Jourard & Lasakow, 1958), as an interaction (Reis & Shaver, 1988), as an emotion (e.g., Sternberg, 1988), and as a type of relationship (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). Yet these categorical conceptualizations have (a) failed to resolve the structural fuzziness of intimacy, (b) divided the phenomenon of intimacy into several disparate parts lacking cohesion, and (c) failed to clearly postulate the process by which intimacy develops over time.

Our contention is that attempts to study intimacy as a category defined by its formal characteristics have resulted in a premature focus on the products of an interpersonal process, and have missed the forest for the trees. Alternatively, we view intimacy as a process in which behavior vulnerable to interpersonal punishment is reinforced by the response of the other partner. Thus, one shifts the epistemological focus from the problem of "fuzzy boundaries" between categories to the process of development over time. The goal of a unifying theory of intimacy should be to explicate a process, grounded in empirically verified basic psychological phenomena, that integrates all the facets of intimacy into one developmental whole.

Intimate Events

Cordova and Scott (2001) conceptualized intimacy as a process emerging from events in which behavior vulnerable to interpersonal punishment is reinforced by the response of another person. This two-component sequence is called an intimate event. Interpersonally vulnerable behavior is defined as behavior that has been associated with response-contingent punishment by others in a similar interpersonal context. A person learns what classes of behavior will likely result in punishment by (a) engaging in that behavior and being punished, (b) observing someone else being punished for engaging in that behavior, (c) being told that the behavior will be punished, or (d) experiencing punishment for a related behavior.

Vulnerability can be placed on a continuum, from behavior associated with only rare or mild punishment, to behavior associated with frequent or severe punishment. The vulnerability of any specific behavior will vary from person to person depending on their individual history.

The second component of the intimate event is the reinforcing response. By definition, the reinforcement of vulnerable behavior increases the probability of that behavior occurring again in similar contexts. The probability of interpersonally vulnerable behavior occurring again increases principally in relation to those contexts that are functionally or formally similar to those within which the behavior was previously reinforced. For example, if Jack confided to Jill about his insecurities regarding his future career, and Jill reinforced that behavior by validating and normalizing his fears, then Jack should become more likely to engage in that behavior with Jill (and similar others) in the future. Intimate events, therefore, beget the probability of future intimate events between specific pairs of actors. The occurrence of the first intimate event sets in motion a process that, unless derailed, will inevitably develop into an intimate partnership.

Suppressive Events

Interpersonally vulnerable behavior can also be punished. If Jill mocks Jack's insecurities, Jack will be less likely to confide in her and others like her in the future. Such suppressive events interfere with the process of intimate partnership formation by maintaining a low probability of future vulnerable behavior. Our contention, however, is that suppressive events are an inevitable aspect of any developing partnership. As vulnerable behavior increases in frequency and variety, inevitably some vulnerable expressions will be punished, whether intentionally or accidentally.

The development of an intimate partnership involves the accumulation of both intimate and suppressive events. As each event occurs, it is added to the couple's history, which can be represented at any point in time as a ratio similar to Gottman's (1994) positivity–negativity ratio. The more heavily the ratio is weighted toward intimate events, the more likely that vulnerable behavior will continue to occur and that the intimate partnership will be maintained. The more heavily the ratio is weighted toward suppressive events, the less likely that vulnerable behavior will continue to occur and the more likely that the intimate partnership will deteriorate.

Intimate Safety

Intimate partnerships with different ratios of intimate to suppressive events result in different affective climates. If the ratio consists of significantly more intimate than suppressive events, then the partners should describe their relationship as safer and more comforting than if the ratio consists of more suppressive than inti-

mate events. We refer to the feeling of safety and comfort behaving vulnerably as intimate safety, and it is also assumed to be the principal feeling associated with the process of intimacy (encompassing related feelings such as closeness).

The current conceptualization of intimacy allows for the integration of the various components of intimacy through a developing operant process. Intimate events set a process in motion that leads to developing intimate partnerships characterized by an accumulating ratio of intimate to suppressive events and resulting in self-reportable feelings of safety or discomfort.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CODING SYSTEM

We are interested in how spouses display intimacy through their interactions around issues that make them feel vulnerable. The initial challenge in studying intimate interactions was designing an interaction that would elicit interpersonal vulnerability. We settled on a task inspired by the work of L'Abate (1977) in which each partner was asked to share with the other a particularly salient time when that partner hurt his or her feelings. The sharing of hurts is consistent with the conceptualization of intimacy posited by Cordova and Scott (2001) in which vulnerable behavior is characterized as interpersonal behavior that, due to the individual's particular history, risks punishment by others. We propose that the quality of a couple's interaction around emotionally vulnerable topics has important implications for the overall quality of the relationship and for the depth of intimacy experienced by both partners.

The Intimacy Coding System (Dorian & Cordova, 1999) was created to code couples' behavior during the Hurt Feelings Interaction. We chose to develop a global rating system because, although the nature of intimate and suppressive events is sequential, it is unlikely that such real-world sequences occur in the precise behavior–behavior sequences sought in traditional sequential analyses. Instead, reinforcement of interpersonal vulnerability most likely emerges out of the ongoing transaction between partners as the conversation evolves. Essentially what should emerge is a sense that one partner's expressions of vulnerability were ultimately tolerated and validated versus a sense that they were rejected and invalidated. Traditional sequential analyses might miss this more qualitative character of the interaction by focusing too blindly on the search for one type of behavior immediately following the other at greater than chance levels. Our contention is that such tightly contingent sequences do not accurately represent the complex ways in which partners' interactions develop into those that genuinely reinforce vulnerability versus those that genuinely suppress it.

In addition, developing a coding system based on the assumed function of the observed behavior presents the sticky problem of assuming function based on form. In other words, what functions as vulnerable behavior and what functions to

reinforce or suppress that behavior can theoretically vary from individual to individual. Ideally one would have observed the interpersonal history of each partner to determine which behaviors had been made vulnerable. In addition, the reinforcing or punishing function of a sequence of events would be determined by observing an increase or decrease in the target behavior over time within each individual couple. However, such ideals can never be met within the constraints of practical research. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, we made the concession of assuming function from form and defined our coding categories to capture those observable behaviors that one might reasonably assume to be vulnerable, reinforcing, or punishing.

Codes for the Intimacy Coding System were constructed through collaboration between the two authors. Initially, a sample of Hurt Feelings Interactions were observed to determine which behaviors could be reasonably defined as fitting the conceptualization of vulnerability, reinforcement of vulnerability, suppression of vulnerability, and intimate safety. An iterative process was followed in which definitions and examples of each code were developed, informally applied to subsequent tapes, modified, and then re-applied to subsequent tapes until both authors were satisfied with their utility for capturing the phenomena.

TASK AND SETTING

The setup of the Hurt Feelings Interaction required both partners to choose an instance in which the other hurt his or her feelings. Partners were given 15 min to talk about the first partner's hurt and then were given an additional 15 min to talk about the remaining partner's hurt. The order in which partners shared hurt feelings was chosen randomly. The partner whose hurt feelings were being discussed was labeled the speaker, and the other partner was labeled the listener. Speakers were coded for degree of vulnerability. Listeners in turn were coded for degree of reinforcement of vulnerability and degree of suppression of vulnerability. Finally, the couple as a whole was rated for overall level of emotional closeness (i.e., intimate safety).

As noted, to assure that interpersonally vulnerable behavior would occur during the interaction, we developed a task in which each partner was asked to remember a particularly salient time that his or her feelings had been hurt by the other partner. In keeping with the theory's focus on interpersonal vulnerability, the task was specifically designed to require partners to engage in behavior that risked punishment by the other partner. Topics for discussion ranged from hurt feeling about a partner going out with friends while the other was at home sick with the flu to a discussion about a past affair. The task presented a challenge to both the speaker and the listener, as the speaker was required to engage in interpersonally vulnerable behavior, and the listener was presented with a stimulus that could evoke either a suppressive

response (e.g., defensiveness) or a reinforcing response (e.g., compassion). The task allowed observation of the comfort with which the speaker engaged in vulnerable behavior, as well as how that behavior was consequated by the partner.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CODING SYSTEM

Partners' interactions were rated for the discloser's degree of vulnerability, the responder's reinforcing response to that vulnerability, the responder's suppressing response to that vulnerability, and the overall closeness between the partners at the end of the interaction. Each variable was rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*extensive*).

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is defined as behavior that risks punishment by the partner. Vulnerable behaviors include such soft expressions as hurt, sadness, love, loneliness, insecurity, shame, disappointment, and so forth. Note that when one partner expresses his or her hurt in a hostile way, then he or she is less vulnerable than a partner who expresses his or her hurt in a soft way. Note that both the frequency and intensity of the expressed vulnerability is taken into account in the rating. Ratings are not based on the listener's response to the speaker's vulnerability.

Reinforcing Response to Vulnerability

When expressions of vulnerability are not responded to in a harsh manner, then we say that they are reinforced. Sometimes the mere absence of expected punishment can be reinforcing. But often, vulnerable behavior is reinforced positively. Examples include validation ("It's ok to feel that way"), apology, sympathizing, support, normalization ("I do that sometimes too"), active listening, admitting fault, clarifying the situation, and acceptance. Note that in this interaction, we are asking one partner to talk about the last time his or her feelings were hurt by the other partner. The listener may often interpret this disclosure as an accusation and initially respond defensively, only to soften up and apologize later. It is not necessary for a reinforcing response to occur directly following the vulnerable expression. The listener can respond in a punishing way at first and then as the interaction progresses, or he or she can become reinforcing of the initial vulnerable expression. Reinforcement and suppression are rated independently.

Suppressive Response to Vulnerability

If vulnerable behavior is punished, it decreases the chances of the speaker expressing such vulnerability in the future. A suppressive response is usually an expression of negative emotions such as being defensive, critical, invalidating, dominant, and intolerant. Other examples include anger, hostility, sarcasm, contempt, denial, blame, or counterblame. The listener can also be suppressive by withdrawing from the conversation. Note that a punishing response does not necessarily have to be delivered in an angry tone.

Closeness at the End of the Interaction

This code measures how close the couple appears at the end of the interaction compared to how close they appear at the beginning. In other words, coders make a judgement about the degree to which the interaction resulted in increased closeness between the partners.

CODER TRAINING

During the initial study, ratings were conducted by three trained female undergraduate psychology students and the first author (Dorian & Cordova, 2001). Ideally, the coding team should consist of both men and women to have input from both genders; however, only female coders were available for the initial project. Coders should be blind to couples' distress group. Coders are initially trained on a sample of pilot interactions. Coders practice rating sample tapes until they obtain reliability scores as measured by intraclass correlations above $r = .60$ calibrated against the first author's ratings. The training period lasts approximately 7 weeks and consists of weekly 2-hr coding meetings, with coders rating two 15-min sample interactions each week. Coders require approximately 45 min to rate each interaction. Overall, coders spend about 4 hr a week learning the coding system. Once coding begins, weekly calibration meetings are held to maintain consistency. A coding manual is available by request from the authors. Other lab groups should be able to train themselves simply using this manual. "Gold standard" tapes have yet to be developed, however; therefore, there is some risk that different labs will develop somewhat different rating standards.

CODING PROCESS

A typical coding session consists of first viewing a Hurt Feelings Interaction in its entirety. During this first viewing, the coder writes down whose hurt feelings topic is being addressed and what is the subject of the discussion. During the second viewing, the coder notes the behaviors being coded by jotting down quotes from the interaction. The coder then completes his or her rating by marking the single number on the scale best reflecting both the frequency and intensity of the behaviors. Rating each 15-min interaction takes approximately 45 min.

RELIABILITY

Inter-rater reliabilities were assessed on 25% of the interactions that had been randomly selected from a group of 32 distressed and nondistressed couples recruited through newspaper advertisements to participate in a marriage checkup (Cordova, Warren, & Gee, 2001; Dorian & Cordova, 2001). Coders were unaware of which tapes were used to calculate reliability. Intraclass correlations indicated acceptable inter-rater reliability (intimate event: $r = .64$; suppressive event: $r = .63$; closeness: $r = .61$; vulnerability: $r = .77$).

VALIDITY

Criterion validity was assessed by calculating correlations between the intimacy behavior ratings and the partners' self-reported intimacy (Dorian & Cordova, 2001). Two measures of intimacy were used. Intimate safety was assessed with the Intimate Safety Questionnaire (ISQ: Cordova, Gee, Warren, & McDonald, 2002) and a broader definition of intimacy was assessed using the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR; Schaefer & Olson, 1981).

The ISQ is a 14-item self-report scale specifically designed to measure intimate safety. Items include the following: "When I am with my partner, I feel anxious, like I'm walking on eggshells," "I feel like I have to watch what I do or say around my partner," "I feel comfortable telling my partner things I would not tell anybody else," and "I feel comfortable telling my partner my likes and dislikes while we are making love." Respondents rate each statement on a 5-point scale from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Factor analyses support a single-factor interpretation of the ISQ. Internal reliability has been found to be adequate with alphas of .93 and .96 for men and women, respectively, and test–retest reliabilities over a 1-month period of .83 and .92 for men and women, respectively. On a sample of 60 married Midwestern couples, the ISQ has been found to be significantly correlated with the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships Questionnaire (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), particularly with the Intellectual Intimacy subscale (rs = –.78 and –.73 for women and men, respectively) and the Emotional Intimacy subscale (rs = –.82 and .80 for women and men, respectively), suggesting that the ISQ and PAIR are measuring very similar constructs. In addition, the ISQ is significantly correlated with the Global Distress Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (Snyder, 1979; rs = –.72 and –.68 for women and men, respectively), the Marital Status Inventory (Weiss & Cerreto, 1980; rs = –.54 and –.43 for women and men, respectively), and partners' attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; rs = .42 and .43 with secure attachment for women and men, respectively). These results provide preliminary support for the ISQ's construct and criterion validity.

The PAIR was chosen as an alternative measure of intimacy because it is one of the most frequently used measures of intimacy. It is a 36-item measure designed to assess intimacy within five relationship areas (emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational). Items are assessed on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*) and are summed to yield a total score with lower numbers indicating greater intimacy. Schaefer and Olson (1981) reported good split-half reliability ($r = .70$ to $r = .77$) and internal consistency (alphas >= .70).

For observed reinforcement of vulnerability, husbands' reinforcement of their wives' vulnerability was correlated with husbands' intimate safety and with both husbands' and wives' general intimacy. Wives' reinforcement of their husbands' vulnerability was correlated only with their own intimate safety (Dorian & Cordova, 2001). In general, it appears that observer ratings of partners' reinforcement of each other's vulnerability correspond to their self-reported feelings of intimacy. This should be the case if these types of intimate events genuinely result in greater feelings of intimate safety.

For suppression of vulnerability, the only correlation was between wives' suppression of their husbands' vulnerability and their own level of intimate safety, with greater degrees of suppression being related to lower levels of intimate safety. Thus, wives who reported feeling less safe with their husbands were also more likely to respond negatively to his vulnerable expression.

With regard to emotional closeness, the level of couple closeness observed following the wives' interactions was associated with both wives' and husbands' level of intimate safety and general intimacy The level of couple closeness observed following the husbands' interactions was associated only with wives' levels of intimate safety and general intimacy. Observed closeness appeared to be fairly robustly associated with both husbands' and wives' self-reported intimacy, suggesting that some significant component of partners' private experience of intimacy can be reliably observed in their public behavior.

With regard to level of observed vulnerability, the only association was between husbands' vulnerability and husbands' intimate safety. Contrary to prediction, however, this was a negative association. In other words, husbands who were seen to be engaging in more vulnerable behavior also reported experiencing less intimate safety. Interpretation of this finding is provided later in the chapter.

The strength of the correlations among the intimacy behaviors vary. The strongest appear to be (a) negative correlations between reinforcement and suppression, (b) positive correlations between wives' reinforcement of husbands and the observed closeness of both husbands and wives, and (c) a negative correlation between wives' suppression of husbands' vulnerability and observed closeness during husbands' interaction. Thus, as expected, partners who reinforce vulnerability more tend to suppress it less, and how close partners appear to be corresponds with whether they are generally reinforcing or suppressing of each other's vulnerability.

GENERALIZABILITY

The sample used to create and test the Intimacy Coding System was relatively homogenous in terms of ethnicity (92% White) and socioeconomic status (mostly

middle class), limiting generalizability to more diverse populations. In general, the system should generalize well across populations as the principals of reinforcement and punishment of vulnerability are universal. However, it is likely that exactly which behaviors are interpersonally vulnerable and which responses are reinforcing or punishing will vary to some degree from individual to individual and from population to population. It remains an open question, however, to what degree such individual variability will result in lawful differences between ethnic or socioeconomic groups.

CLINICAL UTILITY

The Intimacy Coding System consists of a few well-defined codes that can be assessed in real time. The setup for the Hurt Feelings Interaction can be done either formally outside of a regular session or informally as part of an ongoing session. Therapists can make their own ratings relatively quickly. Current and future research should inform therapists about aspects of the couples' interaction that are particularly clinically relevant. For example, it appears that husbands who can easily think of and discuss incidents in which their feelings have been hurt tend to have higher levels of relationship distress. It may be that incidents where their feelings are hurt do not become particularly memorable to husbands until they become genuinely unhappy in the relationship. Therefore, therapists should consider that couples in which husbands readily talk about past hurts may be particularly vulnerable and that resolving those hurts may be particularly important to the couple's continued stability.

STUDIES USING THE CODING SYSTEM

In the initial study (Dorian & Cordova, 2001), the coding system was used to examine the intimacy interactions of distressed and nondistressed married couples. Thirty-two married couples participated in The Hurt Feelings Interaction and completed questionnaires measuring intimacy and marital distress as part of a study on the effectiveness of a brief couples intervention (Cordova et al., 2001). Husbands' mean age was 42 years (sd = 12.2), and wives' mean age was 39 years (sd = 10.3). Mean length of marriage was 11.3 years (range = 6 months to 40 years, sd = 11.5). The mean number of children was 1.2 (sd = 1.2). Husbands had completed an average of 16.9 years of education, and wives had completed an average of 16.3 years.

Marital distress was measured using the 43-item Global Distress Scale (GDS) of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI; Snyder, 1979). Scores are based on provided T-scores (Snyder, Wills, & Keiser–Thomas, 1981) such that individuals can be classified as moderately distressed, severely distressed, or nondistressed. Partners scoring below 50 were placed in the nondistressed group, and those scoring over 50 were placed in the distressed group.

Gender Effects

Husbands and wives were classified as distressed or nondistressed separately, given that partners sometimes did not agree on their distress status. T-tests revealed that wives exhibited more interpersonally vulnerable behavior than husbands.

Intimate Events

Although theoretically it is the ratio of intimate to suppressive events that determines the couple's intimate safety, our analyses consider these variables separately because a ratio could not be constructed from what is essentially an ordinal rating scale. Given that all between-group hypotheses were directional, one-tail tests were conducted. Analyses were conducted separately for husbands and wives. T- tests revealed that nondistressed husbands reinforced their wives' vulnerable behavior more than did distressed husbands. In addition, the wives of nondistressed husbands reinforced vulnerable behavior more than the wives of distressed husbands. Thus, intimate events occurred more frequently in the interactions involving nondistressed husbands than in those involving distressed husbands.

T-tests between distressed and nondistressed wives revealed that nondistressed wives reinforced their husbands' vulnerable behavior more than distressed wives. The husbands of nondistressed wives, however, did not reinforce their wives' vulnerable behavior more than did the husbands of distressed wives.

Suppressive Events

The wives of distressed husbands suppressed more of their husbands' vulnerable behavior than did the wives of nondistressed husbands. Distressed husbands themselves, however, did not suppress more of their wives' vulnerable behavior than did nondistressed husbands.

Distressed wives suppressed their husbands' vulnerable behavior more than did nondistressed wives. However, distressed wives did not have their own vulnerable behavior suppressed more than did nondistressed wives.

Emotional Closeness

Nondistressed husbands and their wives demonstrated more closeness than did distressed husbands and their wives. Similarly, nondistressed wives and their husbands demonstrated more closeness than did distressed wives and their husbands.

Interpersonal Vulnerability

There was no difference between the vulnerable behavior of nondistressed and distressed husbands. There was also no difference in vulnerable behavior between the

wives of nondistressed and distressed husbands. Similarly, there was no difference in the vulnerable behavior of nondistressed and distressed wives, or between the husbands of nondistressed and distressed wives. It is possible that the demands of the hurt feelings tasks resulted in equivalent levels of vulnerability in both groups. In other words, because partners in both groups were required to talk about hurt feelings, the amount of observable vulnerability was roughly the same regardless of distress level. However, it is also possible that genuine differences do exist in the levels of naturally occurring vulnerability of distressed and nondistressed partners when they are free to choose whether to expose vulnerabilities to each other.

Intimate Safety

Nondistressed husbands reported greater intimate safety than did distressed husbands. Nondistressed wives also reported greater intimate safety than did distressed wives.

Taken together, these results suggest that studying intimacy processes in marital interactions can contribute to our knowledge of marital distress. In general, intimate and suppressive events appear to reliably distinguish between distressed and nondistressed partners. Nondistressed partners appear to reinforce their spouses' interpersonal vulnerability more readily, thus theoretically ensuring high levels of intimacy in the relationship. Distressed partners, however, appear to more consistently suppress their spouses' interpersonal vulnerability, ensuring low levels of intimacy and the continued erosion of marital quality.

Interestingly, it appears that how wives respond to their husbands' vulnerability is reflected in both their husbands' satisfaction and in their own marital satisfaction. On the other hand, although nondistressed husbands facilitated more intimate events than distressed husbands, these behaviors were not related to their wives' marital satisfaction. These results may indicate a genuine phenomenon in which wives' behavior toward their husbands' vulnerability has a more consistent influence on their husbands' marital satisfaction than husbands' behavior toward their wives' vulnerability has on their wives' marital satisfaction. Alternatively, the hurt feelings task may have capitalized on women's greater facility with emotional statements (Gottman, 1994), thus biasing the task toward more consistently detecting wives' roles in the intimacy process over husbands' roles. Husbands may have an impact on their wives' marital satisfaction through facets of the intimacy process occurring primarily outside of verbal conversation. If this is the case, then the verbal nature of the hurt feelings task may preclude our ability to observe those facets through which husbands influence their wives satisfaction and intimate safety. In sum, that wives' behavior differentiated between distressed and nondistressed husbands, but husbands' behavior did not differentiate between distressed and nondistressed wives, may indicate that (a) how wives respond to their husbands' vulnerability is more lawfully related to husbands' relationship satisfaction than how husbands respond to their wives' vulnerability, or (b) the verbal nature of the task may have made wives' contributions to their husbands'. marital satisfaction more readily observable.

The results also suggest that feelings of safety and closeness are integral to marital health. Nondistressed partners not only report experiencing greater feelings of intimate safety than distressed partners, but actually appear visibly closer than distressed partners. Theoretically, that sense of closeness and safety results from being openly vulnerable with the partner and being reinforced for that vulnerability more often than punished for it.

The results also suggest that partners who feel a greater degree of intimate safety are also more likely to facilitate intimate events (to reinforce the other person's vulnerability). In other words, the safer that both husbands and wives felt behaving vulnerably with each other, the more likely they were to reinforce their partner's vulnerable expression of hurt feelings. In addition, it appears that the less safe wives feel being vulnerable, the more likely they are to suppress their husbands' vulnerable expressions. The current data imply that the likelihood that a person will facilitate intimate or suppressive events is itself a reflection of current feelings of intimate safety.

In addition, the current results suggest that even the most private component of the intimacy process (intimate feelings) involves readily observable public manifestations. Results were fairly consistent in suggesting that partners who rated themselves as experiencing greater feelings of intimate safety also tended to be rated by observers as more visibly emotionally close.

Finally, the current results suggest that husbands who feel higher levels of intimate safety may actually have more difficulty talking about hurt feelings with their wives than husbands who feel lower levels of intimate safety. There was a negative correlation between husbands' reported intimate safety and husbands' vulnerability, and a trend for distressed husbands to demonstrate more interpersonally vulnerable behavior than nondistressed husbands. Thus, not only does it appear that husbands in general engage in fewer vulnerable behaviors than wives, it appears that husbands in healthier marriages engage in less vulnerable behavior than husbands in more unhealthy marriages. It appears both from the current data and from informal observation of the videotapes that nondistressed husbands have a remarkably hard time thinking of and talking about a time when their wives hurt their feelings. Speculatively, it may be that talking about hurt feelings is a very vulnerable and consequently rare type of behavior for husbands. Such behavior may therefore only come to strength under unusual circumstances, such as when a relationship has become so distressing that instances of hurt feelings are readily available and profound enough to warrant talking about as a type of problem-solving attempt.

The study has several limitations. First, the sample size was small, and, therefore, the power to detect differences and associations was limited. Second, the

current data are cross-sectional, so the findings do not address the directionality issue. One cannot know if the partners are distressed because they have low intimate safety and more suppressive events, or if their being distressed has led them to engage in more suppressive events and become distant. Finally, the intimacy task did not appear to be as gender neutral as desired. Given these limitations, however, the study provides an initial foray into theoretically driven observational research of the intimacy process that may facilitate further research into this important phenomenon.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was supported in part by the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign Research Board.