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Argumentative and Aggressive Communication in Relational and Family Contexts

The study of argumentative and aggressive communication in interpersonal relationships has commanded more attention from scholars than other communication contexts. This chapter will focus on the influence that argumentative and aggressive communication has on a variety of interpersonal relationships. More specifically, we will discuss research on argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness in (a) general interpersonal relationships, (b) friendships, (c) dating relationships, and (d) family relationships. The findings from studies that have been conducted within each of these relationships will be discussed and conclusions will be drawn.

Argumentativeness and Verbal Aggressiveness in General Interpersonal Relationships

Assessment of argumentative and aggressive communication at the interpersonal level has been primarily concerned with specific relationships (e.g., parent–child, marital, siblings). There are, however, a few studies that focused on more generic interpersonal relationships. For example, Myers and Johnson (2003) assessed the relationship between verbal aggression and

liking in a variety of interpersonal relationships (e.g., friend, romantic partner, classmate, instructor, or colleague). Participants completed the 10 negatively worded items of the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale to assess the level of verbal aggressiveness as well as a measure of interpersonal liking. The results indicated that the more people are seen as verbally aggressive, the less liked they are. At first glance, you may think that these findings are intuitive. However, this type of research is critical for developing a body of knowledge and for theory building, as we cannot rely on anecdotal (i.e., "Because I said so!") kinds of evidence. We must rely on sound research methods to test important social scientific research questions.

In an attempt to assess argumentative prototypes and their willingness to engage in a relationship, Waggenspack and Hensley (1989) asked students to review either the 10 argument approach items or the 10 argument avoidance items contained in the Argumentativeness Scale. The respondents were asked to picture a person who exhibited either an argument approach or an argument avoidance profile. The participants were then asked a series of questions reflecting a variety of social situations, such as whether they would associate with this person in a (a) utilitarian-proponent situation (i.e., a task in which the other person is acting on your behalf), (b) utilitarian-opponent (i.e., a task in which the other person is acting as an opponent), (c) cooperative (i.e., joint goal orientation), and (d) judgmental (i.e., evaluative situation in which the other person gives an evaluation).

Among the most interesting findings of this study was that people prefer a nonargumentative person when in nonaggressive or nonconflict situations. The results suggest a moderating effect of the situation on the desirability of an argumentative person (see Chapter 3). That is, in situations that call for advocacy or conflict, highly argumentative people are seen as being desirable. However, in nonconfrontational situations or situations that require socioemotional support, there appears to be a preference for the low-argumentative person.

Friendship Relationships

The notion of friendship is often difficult to operationalize, as this definition rests on a myriad of factors including type of social support, amount of social support, frequency of contact, quality of contact, resources exchanged, and the amount and use of argumentative and aggressive communication. There is an old adage that states familiarity breeds contempt. This statement can be applied to just about any relationship where there is a bond between two people. Imagine driving down the street with your windows open. Suddenly

and unknowingly, you run a stop sign. Another driver shouts out to you, "Nice going, idiot!" Most people would give little credence to this person's verbally aggressive message. However, it would be a different story if you walk into your home, accidentally knock over a vase, and the person with whom you share a relationship says "Nice going, idiot!" The difference in the reaction to the verbally aggressive message lies firmly in the expectations people have about these relationships.

One study explored the relational aspect of sending and receiving verbally aggressive messages. Martin et al. (1996) asked students to report their trait verbal aggressiveness and asked them to attend a presentation that defined and provided examples of different types of verbally aggressive messages. Referencing a friend, the students completed measures concerning justifications for sending verbally aggressive messages and indicated the degree of psychological hurt they feel from receiving these aggressive messages. The respondents then repeated this process while referencing an acquaintance. Martin and his colleagues believed that receiving verbally aggressive messages from friends would be seen as more hurtful than receiving them from acquaintances and the results supported this. Character attacks, competence attacks, background attacks, physical appearance attacks, maledictions, ridicule, threats, swearing, and nonverbal emblems were seen as more hurtful when delivered by friends. Further, and regardless of the relationship stage, people high in trait verbal aggressiveness also reported more justification in using verbal aggression. This study suggests that the closer or more developed the relationship, the greater the negative impact of receiving verbally aggressive messages.

The research discussed thus far has been concerned with people's perceptions rather than actual behavior. In an effort to link actual behavior to argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, Semic and Canary (1997) investigated argumentative and aggressive messages spontaneously exchanged between friends. Using a coding scheme developed in earlier research (see Canary, 1989; Canary, Tanita-Ratledge, & Siebold, 1982), Semic and Canary coded these messages as either starting points (i.e., assertions and propositions), developing points (i.e., elaborations, amplification, and justification), convergence markers (i.e., agreement and acknowledgment), prompters (i.e., objections, challenges, and responses), delimiters (i.e., framing, forestall/secure [stall the discussion by finding common ground], forestall/remove [stall the discussion by preventing conversation]), and nonargument (i.e., messages or behaviors that serve no function for the argument). The study, which used 31 dyads engaging in an argument, revealed that trait argumentativeness was not significantly related to argument behavior. However, verbal aggressiveness was found to be inversely related to proportion of arguments generated (i.e., the greater the verbal aggressiveness, the fewer the number of

arguments generated). This study provides evidence contrary to the assumption of a linear relationship between argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and actual interpersonal behavior, especially in arguments that are minimally rational (i.e., the way people give the appearance of logical argument as opposed to that of expert data, or specific argument forms).

Much of the research discussed in this text treats argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness as independent or moderating variables in a variety of communication contexts. One exception is a study conducted by DiCioccio (2000) that sought to explain verbally and physically aggressive outcomes in friendship relationships. This model of friendship relationships focuses on how other factors contribute to an aggressive outcome. More specifically, DiCioccio argued that the perceived stage of the relationship, information processing, and the social skills of the friends will influence the degree of aggressiveness. Although this model awaits empirical testing, its utility lies in the novel way communication constructs such as social support are factored into the explanation of aggressive communication outcomes.

Although the next few studies do not exactly fit into the topic of friendship, it seems appropriate to include them here. Many of you reading this text will go home to someone with whom you are not romantically involved with and yet share the same living space. Having a roommate is a relationship that we, for the most part, willingly and legally (i.e., by lease or rental agreement) engage in for short periods of time. You may have had the pleasure of roommates seemingly from heaven and the pain of having roommates from somewhere much farther south. Some research has focused on the impact of argumentative and aggressive communication in the roommate relationship. Martin and Anderson (1995) assessed people from 15 to 57 years of age concerning communication competence, willingness to communicate, and verbal aggressiveness regarding their roommates. Both roommates agreed to complete the questionnaire. Comparisons of the roommates' self-reports revealed that the lower both roommates were in verbal aggressiveness, the more satisfied they were in the relationship and the more liking they expressed for their roommate. Argumentativeness, however, was not found to be related with communication satisfaction or social attraction toward a roommate (Martin & Anderson, 1997b).

Dating Relationships

For most dating relationships, we tend to use relational markers as indicators of the health or functionality of the relationship. One of these markers is the first fight. Interestingly, we often make judgments about our relational

future by witnessing how our partner engages in interpersonal conflict. There is nothing more ugly than witnessing one partner swear or threaten another. In this section we will examine the use of argumentative and aggressive communication during and at the end of dating relationships.

Venable and Martin (1997) assessed young adults on both their own and their dating partners' verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness. The results revealed that self-reports of both verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness were positively related to reports of partner verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness respectively. Further, only self-reported and partner verbal aggressiveness showed a significant and negative relationship with relational satisfaction. Argumentativeness, whether for self or partner, was not related to relational satisfaction in dating partners. Although the large body of research does advocate the constructive relational outcomes associated with argumentativeness, Venable and Martin suggest that "one should be careful in advocating the use of argumentation in interpersonal relationships until support is provided for the constructiveness of this type of communication" (p. 961). Other situational factors may temper the relationship between argumentativeness and constructive relational outcomes.

Focusing specifically on the disengagement process in dating relationships, Sutter and Martin (1998), using the same self- and dating partner report procedure used in the previously mentioned study, analyzed specific disengagement strategies and the use of verbal aggression. Results indicated that dating partners who were high in verbal aggressiveness were likely to use more relational disengagement strategies overall than people low in verbal aggressiveness. Further, relationships were observed between verbal aggressiveness and use of verbally aggressive messages during relationship termination and between reports of participants' perception of partner verbal aggressiveness and use of verbally aggressive messages during relationship termination. In addition, a reciprocity effect between self- and partner reports of using verbal aggression was observed. This suggests that the use of verbal aggression begets verbal aggression. This cycle of reciprocal escalation of verbally aggressive communication has been suggested by Infante and his colleagues for over 20 years.

Although there have been only a few studies conducted to investigate the role of argumentative and aggressive communication in dating relationships, the findings of these studies are not typical for other relational dyads and, as such, remain a unique and understudied area of research. Researchers interested in argumentative and aggressive communication have concentrated their efforts on relationships primarily in the marital realm. Given this, we will now turn attention to family communication and emphasize the role of argumentative and aggressive communication within specific familial dyads.

Family Relationships

One of the most socially compelling manifestations of argumentative and verbally aggressive communication is within the family unit. Every day we are bombarded with messages on how to raise our children, satisfy our mates, and regain our own identities. If you have any doubt about this focus on family interactions and marital relationships, simply turn on the television, read the newspaper, or speak with a neighbor. Whether it is Oprah, Dr. Phil, or your neighbor Pete, chatter about family and family interaction is ubiquitous.

One of your authors recalls numerous occasions of being in a public area such as a shopping mall or grocery store and hearing verbally aggressive messages being sent by "bad parents" to their "innocent and exploited" children. Hearing only one sentence from this stranger often conjured up the frightful image of (a) their home life, (b) the history of their relationship with their children, and (c) the broken child services department. After some thought about how these conclusions were derived, he realized that it was the use of verbal aggression, and more importantly, the severity of the verbal aggression that led to the creation of this perception of the bad parent.

Logic suggests that the more you study something, the better you can explain it. However, this logic might be best suited for inanimate objects. Scholars in all of the social sciences have struggled to explain the epidemic of dysfunctional family interaction. Yet, it seems that incidents of child abuse and domestic violence continue to increase. For example, Jacobson and Gottman (1998a) report that at least 1.6 million women in the United States are beaten by their husbands. According to the Centers for Disease Control's (n.d.) National Center for Violence and Control Web site, each year more than 10 million children witness interpersonal violence in their family. Shockingly, husbands, ex-husbands, and boyfriends perpetrated 30% of all female murders. On the face of it, our inability to alter these statistics seems illogical given the amount of resources government and institutes of higher learning expend on attempting to explain and reduce these sad and disturbing outcomes. However, when we are dealing with familial dynamics, there are so many facets and factors that influence dysfunctional and violent outcomes that there is probably no magic fix to all the social ills in the contemporary family.

Assisted by research, we feel comfortable asserting that within the family context, the consequences of verbal aggressiveness are most often destructive and the consequences of argumentativeness are most often constructive. The research, similar to most done on the family, focuses on specific family dyads. Part of this is due to the fact that most researchers have focused their investigation of argumentative and aggressive communication in the interpersonal realm. Another reason for this dyadic focus is the inability of the scholar to

answer the question, "What is a family?" Galvin (2003) argued, "Families are defining themselves for themselves through their interactions at the same time that longevity, legal flexibility, personal choice, ethnicity, gender, geographic distance, and reproductive technology impact traditional biological and legal conceptions of family" (p. 676). Given the definitional difficulties of answering the question "What is a family?" we will present the research findings by the varied familial categories of the marital relationship, the sibling relationship, and the parent–child relationship.

Marital Relationships

As your authors can attest, marital communication is an art! Have you ever gone out to a restaurant with another couple only to witness that couple engaging in an embarrassing diatribe of verbal aggression directed at one another? If you have been unlucky enough to witness this you know it is not a pleasant experience. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2002), the probability that marriages will fail within 10 years is 48% for people under the age of 18, 40% for people 18–19 years old, 29% for people 20–24 years old, and 24% for people above age 25. Some of the major explanations and factors for the ending of marital relationships are communication related.

In this regard, researchers have asked the question, "What is the role of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness in marital satisfaction?" In one attempt to answer this question, Rancer, Baukus, and Amato (1986) studied married couples to examine the relationship between argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and marital satisfaction. Their efforts were an attempt to see if symmetrical (i.e., balanced) traits of spouses' argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness contributed to marital satisfaction. Each couple completed measures of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness as well as a measure of marital satisfaction. Surprisingly, verbal aggressiveness was not found to be a predictor of marital satisfaction, although argumentativeness was. More specifically, couples who were asymmetrical (i.e., complementary) in trait argumentativeness (e.g., one spouse high and one spouse low) reported significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction than couples who were symmetrical in argumentativeness (both reporting similar level of argumentativeness). They attempted to explain this by suggesting that since more husbands reported higher levels of argumentativeness than their wives, the participants may have been more reflective of traditional couples where marital roles are more prenegotiated (Fitzpatrick, 1977; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Redmon, 1983). Interestingly, Fiztpatrick suggests that traditional couples are less likely to experience marital conflict.

In a similar study but with different results, Payne and Chandler-Sabourin (1990) used a known-groups comparison of nondistressed couples to examine the relationship between argumentativeness and marital quality. A known-groups comparison is when researchers go out and recruit a sample of people who have particular characteristics that are central to the research. In this case, they sought out couples who were nondistressed for participation in the study. Overall, the findings indicate that a wife high in argumentativeness (as assessed by self-report and other-report [i.e., her husband's report]) was the best predictor of marital satisfaction. In addition, verbal aggressiveness was also found to be a significant predictor of marital satisfaction. In short, husbands' self-report of verbal aggressiveness as well as the wives' report of the husbands' verbal aggressiveness were inversely related to marital satisfaction. That is, as the husband's level of verbal aggressiveness increases, marital satisfaction decreases.

The difference between these two studies might be attributed to several factors, including sample selection and the wives' level of argumentative skill. The Payne and Chandler-Sabourin (1990) study used only those couples who were in nondistressed relationships and focused on explaining the findings through the argumentative skill deficiency of the wife. The Rancer et al. (1986) study did not distinguish between distressed and nondistressed couples and chose to explain their findings through the marital relational typology and societal expectancies of marital roles that were gender based rather than through the argument skills deficiency model.

Those of you who have taken a few social science classes probably have drawn the conclusion that researchers are especially interested in discovering what makes people happy, in marriage and in life in general. However, communication scholars have recently begun to explore the dark side of interpersonal relationships. Instead of focusing on what makes us happy, some scholars have focused on what makes us miserable and even psychologically and physiologically threatened. Unfortunately, the ubiquity of verbally aggressive communication in marriage has served as a stimulus for researchers interested in the dark side of marriage. This line of research has commanded the majority of studies on argumentative and aggressive communication in marital interaction, and the reason for this will become clear as we discuss the destructive nature of verbally aggressive communication in marital relationships.

Most research focusing on argumentative and aggressive communication in married couples has, in one way or another, distinguished couples based on patterns of communication or the perceived volatility status of the relationships. For example, in a study investigating demand and withdraw patterns (i.e., a conflict pattern in which one spouse complains while the other

spouse shuts down or withdraws), Caughlin and Vangelisti (2000) speculated that spouses who are high in argumentativeness will report greater levels of demand patterns, whereas spouses reporting lower levels of argumentativeness will report more frequent withdrawal patterns. The study found that argumentativeness is one factor that influences spousal conflict patterns. In fact, regardless of the model that these authors tested (i.e., the self-influence model or the relational influence model), argumentativeness (as well as several other predispositions) emerged as meaningful factors in conflict patterns.

When moving into more pathological or dysfunctional relationships, we find that argumentative and aggressive communication exerts a not-so-obvious influence in the marital dyad. In a study exploring verbal aggressiveness and depression, Segrin and Fitzpatrick (1992) assessed couples on the Relational Dimensions Inventory, a method used to classify couple types. In their sample, 62 couples were classified as traditionals (i.e., they held more conventional assumptions about marriage), 33 couples were classified as independents (i.e., they held more contemporary or individualistic assumptions about marriage), 12 were classified as separates (i.e., they held more conventional values toward marriage yet at the same time valued individuality), and 69 couples were classified as mixed (i.e., couples whose members defined their relationship differently from one another).

The results showed clear differences in verbal aggressiveness based on couple types. Verbal aggressiveness was most prevalent in separates, mixed, independents, and traditionals, respectively. Earlier we presented research that indicates men are higher in both argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness than women (see Infante & Rancer, 1996). The results of the Segrin and Fitzpatrick (1992) study show that levels of verbal aggressiveness are also tempered by the type of marital relationship. More specifically, husbands' verbal aggressiveness was significantly lower for traditionals than for any of the other marital types (i.e., separates, mixed, or independents). Interestingly, wives' level of verbal aggressiveness was not influenced by marital type. In fact, across all marital types, wives' level of verbal aggressiveness was lower than that of husbands. Further, although there were significant relationships between verbal aggressiveness and depression for both marital partners, only husbands' depression was linked to the wives' level of verbal aggressiveness. The wives' level of depression was not related to the husbands' verbal aggressiveness.

The differing levels of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness based on couple types speak to the situational influences that affect predispositions toward argumentative and aggressive communication. To further exemplify this point, we will review a series of studies conducted to explain the role of these two traits in marriages in which physical aggression has occurred.

Argumentativeness, Verbal Aggressiveness, and Interspousal Violence

In one of the most comprehensive efforts designed to understand the role of argumentative and aggressive communication in marriage, Infante and his colleagues conducted a series of studies examining violent and nonviolent couples. Infante, Chandler, and Rudd (1989) proposed a model of interspousal violence that was based on the argumentative skills deficiency explanation. This model suggests that verbal aggression, along with other societal (e.g., socioeconomic status), situational (e.g., drug or alcohol use), and predispositional characteristics (e.g., esteem and self-worth), can contribute to physical violence in marital and other intimate relationships. The model does not suggest that verbal aggression is a causal factor as much as a necessary one in promoting physical aggression in couples. That is, relationships in which verbal aggression is present will not necessarily lead to physically aggressive behavior; however, where physical aggression is present in marital relationships, verbal aggression is almost always present. This latent hostility is triggered by the multitude of factors mentioned above.

The concept of an argumentative skills deficiency is based on various social learning theories and assumes that a major cause of verbal aggression is the lack of effective conflict resolution skills and primarily weaker skills in arguing. That is, when one or both of the spouses are unskilled argumentatively, family conflict over even a relatively innocuous issue may result in physical aggression because the verbal attacks, rather than being directed toward the other's position on the issue, are misdirected toward the other person's self-concept. This inability to defuse potentially explosive situations serves to fuel the latent hostility and thus increases the probability of a physically aggressive encounter.

When we cannot effectively invent and present arguments and offer an effective rebuttal during a conflict situation, whether because we are not motivated to or we simply do not have the ability to do so, we tend to protect our position through other means. This may include first verbally, and then physically, lashing out at the other person (Infante, 1987a). It is believed that this type of behavior is reciprocal in that verbal aggression begets verbal aggression. This cycle, once engaged, is believed to bring out latent hostility (Infante, 1988).

Infante et al. (1989) surveyed women who were physically assaulted by partners and who were residing in a shelter, men attending group therapy for spousal battery, women in nonviolent marriages, and men in nonviolent marriages. The participants completed self-report measures of argumentativeness

and verbal aggressiveness as well as other-report measures about their spouse's argumentative and aggressive communication. The findings indicated that there was more verbal aggressiveness reported in violent marriages than nonviolent marriages. Further, the spouses' level of verbal aggressiveness (as assessed through the other-report) accounted for the most variance whereas the participants' self-reported argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness contributed, but to a lesser degree. Perhaps the most striking finding supporting the argumentative skill deficiency model comes from the results showing violent marriages more likely being comprised of one spouse lower in argumentativeness while perceiving the other spouse as being highly verbally aggressive. It was suggested that

> a communication model provides a basis for implicating one form of communication, verbal aggression, as a catalyst in the circumstances which surround interpersonal violence. It also suggests . . . that another form of communication, argumentation, may serve a constructive function in family conflict situations. (Infante et al., 1989, p. 174)

A series of related studies furthered this line of inquiry. Utilizing different samples, that were similar in composition (i.e., couples experiencing violent and nonviolent marital disputes), Infante, Chandler-Sabourin, Rudd, and Shannon (1990) examined the types of verbally aggressive messages used in marital verbal disputes (as opposed to only engaging in interpersonal violence). They hypothesized that people in violent disputes will not only perceive a greater amount of verbal aggression than those in nonviolent disputes, but will also be similar or more symmetrical in their reports of verbally aggressive behavior.

Instead of using the traditional Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986), the researchers had abused women and nonabused women provide written accounts of the most recent disagreement that resulted in physical aggression (for the abused sample) or the most recent important disagreement (for the nonviolent couples). All participants were then asked to indicate the frequency with which they used specific verbally aggressive messages during the dispute. This taxonomy (e.g., character attacks, competence attacks, threats, profanity, teasing, ridicule, maledictions, nonverbal verbal aggression) was developed by previous research (Infante, 1987a; Infante & Wigley). As expected, more verbal aggression was evident in the violent couple disputes (an average of 18.75 messages) as compared to nonviolent couple disputes (an average of 4.5 verbally aggressive messages). Further, the relationship between husband and wife verbal aggression in violent couples was strong and significant. Again, this finding speaks to the reciprocal nature

of violent disputes. Another finding of this investigation is that wives in violent disputes categorically use character attacks and to a lesser degree swearing and competence attacks. Almost all of the explained variance in the violent marital disputes was accounted for through these three types of verbally aggressive messages. In terms of wives' reports of husbands' aggressive messages, the use of character attacks, profanity, and threats best distinguished violent and nonviolent couple disputes.

Efforts examining the role of verbal aggression in marital couples have also considered more strategic communication and more traditional relational outcomes. For example, Sabourin et al. (1993) expanded their distinction of marital couples to include violent, distressed but nonviolent (i.e., couples originally identified as nonviolent but determined via questionnaire to be violent), and nondistressed couples in their study of marital satisfaction. In their study, violent couples reported significantly more verbally aggressive messages than either nonviolent or distressed but nonviolent couples. Further, nondistressed couples reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than either the distressed but nonviolent, or the violent couples. These findings extend the Infante et al. (1989) study discussed earlier but at the dyadic level (i.e., self-reports from both husband and wife).

Reports of reciprocal message exchange also discriminated among the couple types. More specifically, reciprocal verbal aggression patterns differentiated violent couples from distressed nonviolent and nondistressed couples. The authors contend that the reciprocity and escalation of verbal aggression is a strong indicator of potential marital violence in relationships experiencing relational problems.

In Chapter 9 we will discuss the research concerning the influence of argumentative and aggressive communication on persuasion and compliance-gaining efforts. Persuasive messages have also been researched in relation to argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness within the family context. Rudd, Burant, and Beatty (1994) studied women temporarily living in a shelter for battered women. Participants completed a measure of interpersonal compliance gaining (that was developed from a variety of previous compliance-gaining taxonomies) and measures of trait argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness. Results indicate that battered women used *ingratiation* (e.g., "I said or did something nice"), *aversive stimulation* (e.g., "I did or said something that let him know how angry or hurt I was"), *explanation* (e.g., "I tried to give him an explanation or reason for accepting my ideas"), and *promise* (e.g., "I promise to do something") in disputes with their partner. Further, battered women who were higher in verbal aggressiveness and lower in argumentativeness use strategies of *guilt* (e.g., "I made him feel guilty"), *bargaining* (e.g., "I offered to make a trade or strike a deal with

him"), *debt* (e.g., "I reminded him of all the things I have done for him"), *threat* (e.g., "I threatened that I might do something that he would not want me to do"), *aversive stimulation,* and *warning* (e.g., "I warned him that other people would criticize him").

Battered women who reported higher argumentativeness and lower verbal aggressiveness reported using strategies of *allurement* (e.g., "I explained how agreeing would make other people respect him or what he is doing"), *hinting* (e.g., "I hinted at what I wanted without really asking him"), *direct request* (e.g., "I asked him simply to agree with my suggestion or solution") and *aversive stimulation.* Overall, the authors suggest that battered women seem to rely heavily on indirect compliance-gaining strategies or strategies with an indirect power base. This may be attributed to battered women's sense of perceived helplessness, in which they feel the need to resort to secondary or indirect strategies to get the husband to comply.

In recent years, the flurry of research activity regarding argumentativeness and verbal aggression in the marital dyad has abated somewhat. However, Infante and his colleagues' efforts have provided a comprehensive framework from which training, counseling, and behavior modification strategies may be derived. Training programs such as those we will discuss in Chapter 10 will show how properly executed argumentative and aggressive communication modification programs could have meaningful and positive consequences for relationships in trouble.

Sibling Pairs

The sibling relationship is unique from other family dyads in that it has a greater probability of lasting longer than any other relationship (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994; Vangelisti, 1994). For some, this is an unfortunate fact of life; others, however, see this as a wonderful fact of sibling friendship. "Love 'em or hate 'em," there are few relationships over the course of a lifetime that undergo such dramatic changes and role negotiation as the sibling relationship. Although Noller and Fitzpatrick (1993) suggested that sibling dyads, when compared with other family dyads, had largely been ignored by family communication researchers, scholars have provided some findings regarding argumentative and aggressive communication between siblings.

One of your authors has two older brothers and one older sister. When they were young, he would often catch his brothers engaging in a variety of childhood shenanigans. Being the baby of the family, he put forth the most cogent argumentative message that he could muster: "I'm telling Mom!" His older brothers would respond with another potent but verbally aggressive

message, "You do, and we'll kill you!" Needless to say, his sibling's verbally aggressive message prevailed and Mom never discovered what the brothers were up to. Today, as adults, the brothers rarely walk around threatening each other with those types of utterances. Instead they use other more strategic messages but with the same type of implications. As this stroll down memory lane indicates, sibling relationships can change over the life cycle. Researchers have long acknowledged the influence of time on the sibling bond (Newman, 1991). As we age, the sibling relationship becomes one of choice rather than one forced upon us and gives us the opportunity to increase or decrease the level of intimacy as well as the amount of interaction time with one another (Allan, 1977; Leigh, 1982).

There are a myriad of factors that influence our decisions to keep sibling relationships alive or not when we enter adulthood. One such factor is that of sibling violence. Some researchers suggest that sibling violence is reaching epidemic proportions and is more prevalent than any other form of intimate violence (Gelles, 1997). In fact, being antagonistic to our brothers or sisters is often seen as typical or normative behavior (Roscoe, Goodwin, & Kennedy, 1987). Recall the comprehensive studies into marital violence conducted by Infante and his colleagues that showed the level of verbal aggressiveness was far greater in violent marriages and often served as a catalyst for conflict escalation that eventually led to physical violence. Although research has yet to confirm this outcome in sibling relationships, several indicators suggest that these findings could emerge. The argumentative skills deficiency model contends that the better people can formulate and present arguments and refute the arguments of another person, the less likely that people will resort to messages involving personal attacks (i.e., verbal aggressiveness) and physical aggressiveness. The notion of ineffective communication patterns leading to physical violence is widely acknowledged by the social sciences and could hold true for any familial dyad (Cahn, 1996; Lloyd & Emery, 2000).

While research on aggressive communication between siblings is sparse, the research that has been conducted shows interesting patterns that support a conclusion presented throughout this book: Argumentativeness is constructive to relationships, whereas verbal aggressiveness is destructive to relationships. Martin, Anderson, Burant, and Weber (1997) investigated verbal aggression along with pro-social relational constructs such as interpersonal trust and relational satisfaction in sibling relationships. Students completed questionnaires while referencing a specific sibling. With researchers controlling for sex of the participant as well as sex of the sibling, the findings indicated a strong negative relationship between self-reported verbal aggressiveness and relational satisfaction (i.e., the higher sibling verbal aggressiveness, the

lower sibling relational satisfaction). Further, perceptions of sibling verbal aggressiveness were also related to the participants' relational satisfaction. Another important finding of this study concerns the role of teasing, as those higher in verbal aggressiveness engage in more teasing of their siblings.

When sex was not held constant, female sibling dyads reported lower self-reported verbal aggressiveness than any other sibling sex combination. Further, females reporting on a male sibling reported higher levels of verbal aggressiveness than any other dyad. Female participants, regardless of the sex of the sibling, reported greater hurt from receiving verbally aggressive messages than any other sibling dyad. The findings of the Martin, Anderson, Burant, et al. (1997) study demonstrate the importance of accounting for sex differences even in specific family dyads, and the research indicates that females report males as being more verbally aggressive than themselves in both marital and sibling dyads.

Teven, Martin, and Neupauer (1998) extended the Martin, Anderson, Burant, and Weber (1997) study to include the specific verbally aggressive messages used in sibling pairs. This study provided participants with 14 verbally aggressive messages and behaviors and then asked respondents to record the frequency that their sibling engaged in these behaviors when interacting with the respondent. The verbally aggressive behaviors presented were (a) attack your intelligence, (b) make fun of your dating or lack of relationships, (c) make fun of your friendships, (d) call you uncomplementary nicknames, (e) make fun of your physical appearance, (f) threaten to get you in trouble, (g) threaten to hurt you physically, (h) make fun of your friends in front of you, (i) complain about something you have done, (j) attack your self-esteem, (k) threaten to abuse or destroy a possession of yours, (l) make fun of you in front of your friends, (m) tease you, and (n) swear at you. The findings revealed that the greater the sibling's use of verbally aggressive messages, the lower the relational satisfaction experienced by the respondent. Interestingly, the only sex difference observed was that women perceive more verbal aggression than men regardless of their sibling's sex.

Although other pro-social communication constructs in the sibling relationship have been studied, including perceived understanding (Avtgis, Martin, & Rocca, 2000), relational maintenance (Myers & Members of COMM 2000, 2001), and relational messages during conflict (Pawlowski, Myers, & Rocca, 2000), this review suggests that argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness in the sibling relationship is still an underresearched area. Researchers have yet to fully explore the underpinnings of argumentative and aggressive communication on sibling relational dynamics. Consider, for example, the application of the argumentative skills deficiency model to

aggression found in sibling dyads. Such an effort, in light of the fact that this relationship is believed to be of the most violent within the family (Gelles, 1997), might produce interesting findings that may lead us to a better understanding of this problem.

Parent–Child Dyads

Many contemporary magazines and current affair shows seem to be obsessed with telling American parents what they should be doing to best raise their children. The proliferation of these popular relationship gurus seems to be conspicuously related to the increase in dysfunctional family dynamics. The authors of this text are currently experiencing very different aspects and stages of parenthood. One author is experiencing the joys of a 19-month-old curious son and the other author is experiencing the joys of his teenage daughter beginning to date and move toward adulthood. Regardless of where we are in the parenting phase, similar questions are being asked. For example, should I use corporal punishment when reprimanding my child? What types of language should be used when I reprimand him or her? Where is the line drawn between using strong language to reprimand and verbal abuse? These types of questions are asked by most parents at various times during child rearing. In fact, pick up any one of the dozens of magazines targeted at new parents, old parents, and everyone in between and you will find at least one article concerning assertiveness and constructive criticism, aggressive and destructive criticism, and the difference between the two.

Few people might realize that the use of parental verbal aggression in other countries is not only considered socially inappropriate, but carries stiff legal consequences. Among the countries to pass laws banning the use of parental verbal aggression are Austria, Denmark, Germany, Israel, and Sweden. The passage of such laws stems from research indicating that verbal aggression is a form of violence that inflicts psychological injury to children.

In a highly publicized article in *U.S. News and World Report,* sociologist Murray Straus of the Family Research Lab at the University of New Hampshire surveyed parents on their use of verbal aggression toward their children. Shockingly, the findings revealed that one half of the parents shouted or screamed at their infants, and 98% of parents reported using verbal aggression with their children as young as age 7. Some of the most common types of verbally aggressive messages used were threats of physical violence and swearing. Recall Straus's earlier work that linked parental use of verbal aggression to a child's depression, antisocial behavior, and eating disorders. Although we are not suggesting that parental verbal aggression causes these maladies,

we are suggesting that the relationship between parental verbal aggression and a child's negative relational, behavioral, and physical outcomes is undeniable.

This next section will dispel some anecdotal findings (e.g., like those presented in many popular parenting magazines) by focusing on social scientific investigations that present the problematic consequences of verbal aggressiveness and the productive outcomes of argumentativeness for parents and children.

Before we distinguish between moms and dads, we will examine the research focusing on parents in general. Bayer and Cegala (1992) investigated the impact of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness on parenting style. Utilizing the maternal behavior work of Schaefer (1959), three major parenting styles of *autonomy–love* (e.g., supporting and encouraging the individuality of the child), *control–hostility* (e.g., highly demanding and nonresponsive to the needs of the child), and *control–love* (e.g., give into the whims of the child, use ridicule, and love withdrawal) were identified. Parents who were high in argumentativeness and low in verbal aggressiveness reported an authoritative parenting style (i.e., autonomy–love behaviors), whereas parents reporting low argumentativeness and high verbal aggressiveness reported an authoritarian parenting style (i.e., control–hostility behaviors). The findings suggest that parental use of verbally aggressive communication is characteristic of potentially destructive parenting styles.

In an effort to capture the perspective of children with regard to parenting style, Prusank and Duran (1996) found that adult children who reported that their parents used an authoritative parenting style also reported less argument avoidance with their parents. This finding reinforces the influence of parents encouraging children to think independently and engage in debate, which can serve to increase the child's predisposition to engage in argument.

Moving from parenting styles to more patterned family communication, Booth-Butterfield and Sidelinger (1997) surveyed undergraduate students regarding one parent's traits and communication behaviors. The parent selected by the student was the one the student reported having the most communication with. The participants and the target parent completed the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale, a measure of affective orientation, and a measure of family communication patterns. The findings indicated that the more parents' verbal aggressiveness increased, the less open the family communication was perceive to be. Parents who rated themselves high on verbal aggressiveness had children who saw their family communication as being closed. That is, children growing up in families in which the communication climate was seen as closed were hesitant to discuss issues, hesitant to share opinions, and felt much less free to communicate in the family. This led

the researchers to conclude that "verbal aggression closes the communication between the parent and child" (Booth-Butterfield & Sidelinger, p. 415).

In a self-report assessment of adult children and parents, Copstead, Lanzetta, and Avtgis (2001) investigated the relationship of adult childrens' perceived control over conflict with their verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness toward parents. The results indicated that adult children with an internal conflict locus of control orientation (i.e., seeing outcomes of conflict as being under their control) also reported less verbal aggressiveness, less argument avoidance, and greater argument approach toward their parents. Thus, the perception of control over conflict may serve as a situational trigger influencing the use or nonuse of argumentative or verbally aggressive communication.

Comparing the traits between parent and child has also received attention from communication scholars. One effort examined the influence that parents' predisposition toward verbal aggressiveness has on children's development of the same trait. Recall from Chapter 3 that both biological and social learning factors influence the development of predispositions toward argumentative and aggressive communication. Martin and Anderson (1997a) compared the argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and assertiveness of adult children to that of their parents. Young adults (78 daughters and 82 sons) and their parents (160 fathers and 160 mothers) participated in this study. The findings indicated both sons' and daughters' levels of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness were positively related with their mothers' level of these traits. No significant relationships were observed between sons and daughters with respect to fathers' argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness. The researchers explain the lack of the father's influence on children's argumentative and aggressive communication by suggesting,

> Parents were not asked how much time they spent communicating with their children (either currently or during the children's childhood or adolescence). Sons and daughters may be more similar in communication patterns to the parent with whom they have spent the most time interacting, since frequency and length of exposure influence the modeling process. (Martin & Anderson, p. 310)

In a similar study, Roberto, McClure, and McFarland (2003) discovered that adult children's verbal aggressiveness was predicted by their perception of their same-sex parents' verbal aggressiveness. Further, sons' verbal aggression was actually predicted by mothers', and not fathers', self-reported verbal aggression. Again, research suggests that fathers, although higher in verbal aggressiveness than mothers, may play a diminished role in the development of the child's predisposition toward verbal aggression.

The influence of the maternal predisposition toward aggressive communication has even been found to be related to their children's future romantic relationships. Weber and Patterson (1997) found that as adult children's reports of mothers' verbal aggression increased, the less emotional support and interpersonal solidarity the adult children reported in their current romantic relationships. Thus, being the recipient of verbally aggressive messages from mothers may result in difficulties in interpersonal relationships in later life. In addition, children (both females and males) who were exposed to verbally aggressive messages from their mothers became more verbally aggressive themselves. As these children entered adult romantic relationships, they tended to use more verbally aggressive messages with their own romantic partners. Weber and Patterson suggest that maternal verbal aggression sets up a cycle of reciprocity that leads to less satisfying and less productive adult interpersonal relationships.

Rudd, Vogl-Bauer, Dobos, Beatty, and Valencic (1998) investigated the role of verbal aggressiveness, frustration, and anger in parenting behavior. Parents provided the researchers with written descriptions of a recent interaction they had with their child in which they were unsuccessful in getting their child to do something (or stop doing something). Then, the parents provided an estimate as to how angry and frustrated they were regarding this failed attempt. They found that parents' trait verbal aggressiveness was more strongly related to anger under highly frustrating conditions and that the higher the parents' level of verbal aggressiveness, "the more easily frustration is converted to anger" (Rudd et al., p. 7). This supports the notion that verbal aggressiveness can be triggered and moderated by situational cues.

A series of studies investigated father–son dyads and verbal aggressiveness by focusing on the influence of effectiveness and appropriateness of interaction plans when encountering an oppositional son (i.e., a son who will not behave as told to by his father; Beatty, Burant, Dobos, and Rudd, 1996; Rudd, Beatty, Vogl-Bauer, and Dobos, 1997). In the first study, large effects were observed in the predictability of fathers' trait verbal aggressiveness on interaction plan appropriateness. That is, the higher the fathers' verbal aggressiveness, the lower the social appropriateness of the fathers' interaction plans. This study relied on the sons' perception of fathers' appropriateness and effectiveness.

The second study sought to extend the findings to include the fathers' assessment of the appropriateness and effectiveness of their own interaction plans. In this study, fathers completed the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale and also evaluated the appropriateness and effectiveness of different tactics when interacting with an oppositional son. Results revealed that the higher the fathers' verbal aggressiveness, the lower the rating of appropriateness for fathers' influence

tactics of stressing the importance of school and doing nothing. Further, highly verbally aggressive fathers gave higher ratings of appropriateness for the more aggressive tactics of corporal punishment. For effectiveness of tactics, fathers who were high in verbal aggressiveness also reported low effectiveness for influence tactics of doing homework with the son, talking about school, sending the son to his room, and turning off the television. These same fathers, however, reported that slapping their son was highly effective in gaining compliance. Again, we see that fathers' level of verbal aggressiveness, regardless of who is rating the appropriateness and effectiveness of tactics, is related to behaviors associated with corporal punishment.

Studying both father argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, Beatty, Zelley, Dobos, and Rudd (1994) found that fathers' argumentativeness contributed significantly less than fathers' verbal aggressiveness to the explanation of sons' reports of father sarcasm, criticism, and verbal aggressiveness. Fathers' self-reported verbal aggressiveness accounted for the largest amount in predicting sons' reports of their fathers' sarcasm, criticism, and verbal aggressiveness. Thus, a son's perceptions of his father's sarcasm, criticism, and perceived verbal aggressiveness is firmly based in the fathers' trait verbal aggressiveness. As fathers' use of criticism, sarcasm, and verbal aggression increased, so too did fathers' level of trait verbal aggressiveness.

A few studies have focused on parental use of physical tactics to bring about child compliance. When speaking with new parents, the topic often turns to the type of reprimands that are most effective in correcting behavior. Infante (2005) conceptualizes corporal punishment as communication targeted at social influence and that compliance is the ultimate goal of corporal punishment.

Conceptualizing corporal punishment as a form of compliance gaining has only begun to garner attention from communication researchers. Kassing, Pearce, Infante, and Pyles (1999) surveyed college students about their parents' use of corporal punishment, argumentative and verbally aggressive communication, assault tendencies, anger, and self-esteem and the students' tendency to use corporal punishment with their own children. Respondents were asked to recall examples from their childhood when responding about their parent's behavior. Students who reported that their parents used high levels of corporal punishment also reported their parents being high in verbal aggressiveness. Interestingly, argumentativeness did not emerge as a function of the recall of corporal punishment.

In a similar study focusing on the father–son dyad, Kassing, Pearce, and Infante (2000) measured levels of argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and amount of corporal punishment used as an influence tactic. Results of this study offer support for the application of the theory of independent

mindedness (see Chapter 5) to family communication. More specifically, fathers who were perceived as being low in argumentativeness and high in verbal aggressiveness recalled greater levels of corporal punishment and reported lower levels of affirming communicator style in the relationship. Basically, the higher the perceived levels of independent mindedness in the relationship, the lower the reports of corporal punishment used as an influence tactic. Again, we see the beneficial relational outcomes of parents and children who are high in argumentativeness and low in verbal aggressiveness in the reluctance to resort to physical violence as an influence tactic.

Although an abundance of research on aggressive communication has been conducted in the relational and family realm, the findings of these studies leave several questions unanswered. Research must continue to address both functional and dysfunctional family relationships and the influence of both argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness on these relationships. Taken as a whole, the findings are compelling and show the negative relational outcomes associated with verbal aggressiveness and the positive relational outcomes associated with argumentativeness.

Conclusion

As evidenced throughout this chapter, much of the research investigating the dysfunctional outcomes associated with the use of verbal aggression has been focused on intimate and family relationships. A perusal of this research also reveals that the interpersonal communication context has produced the majority of the studies on argumentative and verbally aggressive communication, as the number of studies presented in this chapter exceeded those in other contexts discussed throughout this book. These research efforts have uncovered links between argumentativeness and constructive outcomes such as feelings of satisfaction, understanding, and support. They have also uncovered links between verbal aggression and destructive outcomes such as spousal abuse, sibling abuse, and overall interpersonal violence. Perhaps the most striking finding in this chapter can be summed up in the following sentence: *Verbal aggression is not necessarily a cause for physical violence, but it is always present when physical violence is present.* If we are to take this link between verbal aggression and physical aggression seriously, social scientists must continue their work toward finding and changing the conditions from which verbal aggression fosters violent and other destructive outcomes.

Regardless of the degree of intimacy (e.g., acquaintances, friends, lovers), length of relationship, or type of relationship (e.g., roommates, siblings, marital couples), the consistent link identified between relational satisfaction and

higher levels of argumentativeness and lower levels of verbal aggressiveness remains constant. When considering the argumentative tendencies of both partners, the findings are somewhat inconsistent. Some research shows that interpersonal partners who are similar in their argumentative traits are more relationally satisfied, while other findings show interpersonal partners who are different in their argumentative traits are more relationally satisfied. More research into this issue needs to be conducted and should consider factors such as the partners' relational expectations, degree of involvement, and relational importance.

Future research must delineate further among the evolving definitions of family and relational partners. For example, do findings gleaned from research on heterosexual couples stand for homosexual couples in terms of interpartner violence, relational satisfaction, and parent–child interaction? Do cultural assumptions about family and marriage influence the appropriateness of verbal aggression and argumentativeness? Do Western concepts of romantic, platonic, parent–child, and sibling relationships apply only to people from individualistic cultures? These and other questions suggest the need for continued investigation into the impact that argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness exert on interpersonal relationships of all types.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 4

1. Why do you think people who are high in verbal aggressiveness see using verbal aggression toward others as justifiable, whereas those people who are low in verbal aggressiveness see any use of verbal aggression as unjustified?
2. Why do you think married couples who are asymmetrical (one being high in argumentativeness and one being low in argumentativeness) report being more satisfied than couples who are symmetrical in argumentativeness?
3. What is the skills deficiency explanation of interspousal violence? Do you agree with this explanation? Why?
4. Why is the authoritative parenting style associated with parents who are lower in verbal aggressiveness and higher in argumentativeness? Do you think this is the most effective parenting style? Why?
5. What is the relationship between parental verbal aggressiveness and the use of corporal punishment? Do you think that there would ever be a situation in which parental verbal aggression would be warranted? When?