Marital Conflict Communication Over the Life-Span: A Test of the Socialization,
Different Cultures, and Same Culture Theories of Gender Difference in Communication

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This study will investigate the conflicting explanations for apparent gender differences in communication behavior. Support has been found for several competing theories, yet no study has pitted the theories against one another in a single experiment in order to test their explanatory powers. To that end, I intend to investigate interpersonal conflict cognitions of individuals ranging in life stage from the college years through post-retirement.

I propose this area of inquiry for four reasons:

(1) Conflict is a communication area where many researchers have found varied gender differences in communication behavior (Billingham & Sack, 1987; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Wood, 1986).

(2) Communication research in the past has focused on the behaviors and perceptions of young adults (e.g., college students), leaving a large knowledge gap in the areas of middle-age and elderly communication ( Huston & Ashmore, 1986; Sillars & Wilmot, 1989). Future research needs to examine the ongoing development of couple communication over the life span.

(3) The limited research that has been conducted indicates that the elderly engage in less couple conflict (Argyle & Furham, 1983; Stinnett, Carter, & Montgomery, 1972; Suitor & Pillemer, 1987; Swensen, Eskew & Kohlbeppe, 1981; Ward, 1993), use fewer tactics than young couples (Zietlow & Sillars, 1988), and view different areas of conflict as being salient at their life stage (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). These findings suggest life-stage differences may be apparent and important.

(4) Many researchers state they have found a link between conflict communication behavior and cognitions (Burggraf & Sillars, 1987; Burrell & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Fitzpatrick, 1987, 1993; Kelley et al., 1978, Lavin, 1987; Lloyd & Cate, 1985; Noller, 1993; White, 1989; Yelsma, 1984).
I will begin with a brief overview of the schools of thought that seek to explain the
finding of gender differences in communication. One approach maintains that men and women
are from two totally different cultures (Gray, 1992; Gumerez, 1982; Maltz & Berkler, 1982;
Tannen, 1990). Thus, differences in communication styles can be studied from the perspective
of cross-cultural communication. Essentially proponents of this approach propose that we should
understand the other’s culture and try our best to communicate with them, recognizing that we
will always be different, as we are from different cultures.

Tannen (1990) explains how coming from two different cultures leads to frequent
miscommunication between men and women: “there are gender differences in ways of speaking,
and we need to identify and understand them. Without such understanding, we are doomed to
blame others or ourselves -- or the relationship -- for the mystifying and damaging effects of our
contrasting styles” (p. 17).

She asserts that men react to the world based on a hierarchical social order, whereas
women see the world as a network of connections.

If women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and
hear a language of status and independence, then communication between men and
women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles.
Instead of different dialects, it has been said they speak different genderlects. (Tannen,
1990, p. 42)

The different cultures viewpoint emphasizes the effect of peers, explaining adult
differences as being rooted in early childhood play development. They note that boys frequently
rely on status and rules during play. On the other hand, girls tend to be more intimate and
community oriented in their play groups. Thus, “if adults learn their ways of speaking as
children growing up in separate social worlds of peers, then conversation between women and men is cross-cultural communication" (Tannen, 1990, p.47).

She suggests that understanding differences can lead to better communication.

"Understanding the other’s ways of talking is a giant leap across the communication gap between women and men, and a giant step toward opening lines of communication" (Tannen, 1990, p. 298).

In a comparable work, Gray (1992) has described the different culture perspective through the suggestion that we imagine men are from Mars and women are from Venus:

Both the Martians and Venusians forget that they were from different planets and were supposed to be different. In one morning everything they learned about their differences was erased from their memory. And since that day men and women have been in conflict . . . Men mistakenly expect women to think, communicate, and react the way men do; women mistakenly expect men to feel, communicate, and respond the way women do. We have forgotten that men and women are supposed to be different. As a result our relationships are filled with unnecessary friction and conflict. (p. 10)

If this is the case, we need to determine how culture can be studied; for example, by examining interpersonal interactions. Cole explains (1996, p.62):

There is no doubt that culture is patterned, but there is also no doubt that it is far from uniform and that its patterning is experienced in local, face-to-face interactions that are locally constrained and, hence, heterogeneous with respect to "culture as a whole" . . . the consequent differences among individuals in relation to the cultural medium associated with different chronological ages, combined with social divisions of labor, are important in shaping how minds interact at different points in the life span. (p.66)

A second school of thought claims that men and women are members of the same culture, but have been socialized differently with regards to power and dominance (Chafetz, 1980; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Fishman, 1978; Kelley et al., 1978; Peplau & Gordon, 1985; Rausch, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974; Uchida, 1992; West & Zimmerman, 1977; Winstead & Derlega, 1993). Children develop their self-concept, particularly their ideas of
sex-appropriate behaviors within their gender schema, from interaction and information
gathering from their environment (Fagot & Leinbach, 1994).

We are inherently the same, yet differ in communication styles, because of the way we
are socialized. Gender differences are described, even in the basics of human development:
"whereas separation, differentiation, and autonomy have been considered primary factors in male
development, the values of caring and attachment, interdependence, relationship, and attention to
context have been primary in female development" (McGoldrick, 1988, p. 32). As we age,
according to McGoldrick (1988), it is women who are called upon to adapt. They must adapt to
their husbands career needs, and take on most of the household responsibilities when children
enter the family.

In her description of the "launching children and moving on" stage, McGoldrick (1988)
points out that there are still gender differences in response to this stage:

This is the longest phase in the family life cycle, lasting often 20 years or more. There is
a tendency for men and women to be going in opposite directions psychologically at the
point where their children move out into their own lives. Men perhaps realizing that they
have missed most of the intimacy of their children's development, may begin to seek
closeness whereas women, after years of focusing on caring for others, begin to feel
energized about developing their own lives, careers, friendships outside the family, and
other activities. (p. 32)

Gender differences in behavior are thought to be the cause of communication problems in
marriage. Succinctly stated by Gilgian (1984):

That heterosexual relationships are beset by problems of transference and social
structures of dominance and subordination is the ground from which I begin. That
communication is essentially problematic, given the ambiguity of language and the
shifting contexts of interpretation is an additional anchor I regard as built-in. . . . amidst
the confusions and the realities of gender differences in power and status, marriage
appears an heroic attempt at connection in the face of psychic loneliness and social
stratification. (p. 28)
These theorists suggest that we should change the socialization process to encourage equality. For example, McGoldrick (1988) writes that men, as well as women, should be socialized as nurturers.

Recently a competing theory was advanced: "the same culture perspective." This theory maintains that "although differential socialization experiences (along with, perhaps, biological factors) lead to some variation in the ways men and women approach the social world, similarities between the sexes far outweigh differences" (Burleson, Kunkel, Samter, & Werking, 1996, p. 206).

This may explain why several researchers conducted studies of communication gender differences, only to find that the genders were far more similar than different. For example, men and women do not differ in rule endorsement behavior (Honeycutt, Woods & Fontenot, 1993). Further, men and women do not exhibit differences in their capacity to express intimacy, but do differ in their frequency of being intimate (Reis et al., 1985). Men and women engage in relatively the same conflict situations (Kelley et al., 1978). Finally, men and women both value the affective communication skills of their partner over their instrumental skills (Burleson et al., 1996). These findings come from diverse areas of communication behaviors.

Even when sex differences in behavior are found, research findings have not been consistent. For example, according to Berndt (1994), during adolescence, friendships of girls are characterized as being intimate, while the friendships of boys are described to be more competitive. Berndt acknowledges that even these sex differences are not consistently found. In fact, research findings are mixed concerning actual behavior related gender differences in adolescence.
What then is the explanation of previous findings of gender differences? Perhaps, as Ragan (1989) suggests, stereotypes of male and female communication styles affect perception and lead researchers and participants to report perceived sex differences instead of describing actual communication behaviors. Being watchful for stereotypes and reporting on actual observed data are suggested to help clarify future research of sex differences.

For years, studies have found support for both the different cultures and different socialization sets of arguments. As a consequence, there is a need for an investigation into why men and women differ in their communication behavior that specifically tests these dueling explanations, focusing on the conflict behaviors and cognitions of couples at different life stages.

By trying to examine social influence and cultural influence, communication researchers search to explain present communication behaviors by looking at past, present and future interactions. Filipp and Olbrich (1986, p.352) explain the life-span perspective's referral to this process of inquiry as investigating "diachronic interactions" (i.e., interactions between "former and later behaviors and processes"). They continue to explain:

at any point in time, an individual's behavior is conceptualized not only as the result of their synchronic interactions between present biological, social, and psychological factors, but also as a result of their diachronic interactions with earlier experiences and processes. (p. 352)

The key here is time. Increasing evidence of changes in communication behaviors and cognition over the life span indicate that life stage is highly relevant to communication studies, especially those involving marriage. Simply stated by Filipp and Olbrich (1986), "the developmental perspective in other research domains has probably gained greater consideration, because many researchers have come to realize, what can simply be summarized in the statement 'time makes a difference'" (p. 353).
In order to account for the effect time may have on the development of conflict cognitions, this study will compare and contrast the communication of young newlywed, and elderly couples. Studying cognition at different life stages will provide a preliminary test of the explanatory powers of these theories. If we find a main effect for the two variables gender and marital longevity, but no interaction between these two variables, we will have established evidence for the different culture theorists. Because of these different cultures, men and women have different cognitions about conflict, and maintain these differences throughout their relationship.

If, in contrast, we find an interaction such that there is a convergence for number of conflict scenes reported by newlyweds and long-married couples, we will have found evidence for the socialization theorists. Because of their initial socialization, men and women begin their relationships with different cognitions about conflict, but gradually socialize each other until these cognitions eventually converge.

Alternately, the results may indicate no, or very few, gender differences in conflict cognitions, regardless of life stage. Such a finding would lend support to the "same culture" approach. Simply stated, men and women would perceive conflict in much the same way.

In support of this argument, I will review the current findings in several relevant areas: communication behavior; age and marital issues; conflict and cognition; and the application of Schank's (1982) theory of dynamic memory to the study of communication.

Evidence of Gender Differences in Communication Behaviors

Although gender differences have been found to influence many types of communication behaviors, I will briefly summarize only those relevant to the conflict and marriage context. For example, research has determined that females use reasoning and verbal aggression more than
males (Billingham & Sack, 1987). Similarly, wives are more often seen to demand, while husbands withdraw (Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). Husbands spend less time engaged in relational talk than their wives (Acitelli, 1992). Further, husbands are more defensive in their behavior, yet they are also more neutral listeners than their wives (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995).

Tannen (1990) writes that conflict is an area where gender differences particularly emerge. “Since the meaning of conflict, and the means that seem natural to deal with it, are fundamentally different for women and men, this is an arena where men’s and women’s styles are especially likely to come into conflict” (p. 187).

In order to develop a complete picture of a communication situation, it is important to consider not only behaviors, but perceptions as well. Evidence has emerged through various studies that disparities in perceptions of conflict behaviors may be explained by gender differences. For example, women value relational talk at all stages of satisfaction in their relationships; however, husbands value it most during times of conflict (Acitelli, 1988). On the whole, women are more likely to make attributions about their partners’ behaviors than men (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobsen, 1985). In like manner, men and women perceive differing sources of relationship crises, as well as preferring differing conflict management tactics (Wood, 1986). Moreover, women engage in more imaginary communication than do men (Edwards, Honeycutt, & Zagacki, 1989). Finally, women use more abstract concepts to describe their relationships (Martio, 1991). In sum, we can conclude that researchers coming from many perspectives have found gender to be related to the perception of communication behaviors.

When are gender differences most evident in marital communication? Gender differences come to the forefront during times of dissatisfaction in marriage. Wives seek closeness, whereas
husbands seek distance (White, 1989). Also during dissatisfied times, wives are more emotional than husbands (Cunningham, Braiker, & Kelley, 1982; Gottman & Kroff, 1989). We may infer that during times of stress, men and women rely on tactics and perception that are culturally approved and gender stereotyped.

Age and Marital Communication Issues

Researchers have conducted limited studies regarding the relationship between age and marital communication issues. Although there is a gap in the research of marital communication in later life stages, there is enough preliminary evidence to posit to the existence of changes in marital communication throughout the life span. For instance, retired couples often use one confrontation style during an entire conflict; whereas, young couples change styles during conflict (Zietlow & Sillars, 1988). Additionally, couples report less arguing in old age (Argyle & Furham, 1983; Stinnett, Carter, & Montgomery, 1972; Suitor & Pillemer, 1987; Swensen, Eskew & Kohlhepp, 1981; Ward, 1993).

Adapting to the changing stages of the family life cycle seems crucial to the survival of a marriage. Carter and McGolrick (1988) particularly emphasize the effect that children have on marriages. The introduction of children seems to heighten the occurrence of typical sex-role behaviors of each partner. They emphasize the fluidity of the family life cycle. Members are constantly entering and or exiting the family. Besides adapting to others, ones individual roles change from parent to grandparent, wage-earner to retiree. They draw a constantly changing picture of the family life cycle, with couples facing the challenge of staying married and adapting with each change in the life stage. Each stage places unique demands on the communication skills of the couple in order to survive as a unit. Thus, when examining the behavior of a couple, it is important to consider their stage within their family life-cycle structure.
Marriage can be described as participation in the "co-development of joint life-plans" (Smith, 1996, p. 242). Smith proposes that "both the cognitive activities and social interactions involved in life planning may change over the life span" (p. 245). She further describes conflict as "an important dynamic in either facilitating or hindering planning processes over time" (p. 266).

The Relationship Between Conflict Communication and Cognition

Many researchers have found a relationship between conflict communication behavior and cognition (Burggraf & Sillars, 1987; Fitzpatrick, 1987, 1993; Kelley et al., 1978; Lavin, 1987; Lloyd & Cate, 1985; Noller, 1993; White, 1989; Yelsma, 1984). This link will be discussed more fully in the following chapter. To examine the influence of age and gender on conflict cognitions, I will employ Schank's (1982) theory of memory and information processing. Schank asserts that we organize our thoughts into domain-specific memory organization packets or "MOPs." Useful to this study is an explanation of Schank's (1982) concepts of scripts, scenes and MOPs. MOPs are the highest order structure of these three. MOPs explain how and why we access information in memory and how the accessed structures influence behavior.

Explanation of MOPs and Their Subordinate Structures

MOPs organize scenes in memory around domain-dependent goal achievement. MOPs create expectations about how things relate to each other in the world in which we operate. Knowing how the world is structured helps us to make predictions about the future behaviors of others, as well as to better understand the past. For example, when we walk into a doctor's office, we access the memory organization packet containing behaviors that occur in a doctor's
office. Having done so, even if this is our first interaction in this particular office, we would expect certain actions to take place: e.g., fill out forms, wait, see doctor, pay, and leave.

Schank (1982) divides MOPs into three categories: physical, societal, and personal. Physical MOPs are organized around the location of events and the physical actions that occurred; for example, a MOP for a beauty parlor. Societal MOPs are organized around goal-related communication in social relationships between two people; for example, a MOP for making a beauty appointment. Personal MOPs are totally idiosyncratic. They contain "any planned behavior that is entirely self-motivated and self-initiated, without regard to how others may make plans for similar goals" (p. 97). A personal MOP could for example contain information regarding goals for overall beauty improvement.

Kellermann (1995) extends Schank’s work on dynamic memory theory by providing her definitions and explanations of many of the theories’ concepts. Our understanding is assisted by considering her definitions:

(1) Scene: “a grouping of generalized actions with a shared instrumental goal; it is a collection of events whose common features have been extracted” (Kellermann, 1995, p. 183).

(2) Scripts: “sequences of actions that take place within scenes, involving very specific behavioral variations that provide added detail to the general actions contained in a scene . . . scenes hold what is general about scripts, whereas scripts hold specific actions that detail the general actions of scenes” (Kellermann, 1995, p. 183).

(3) MOP: “describes how scenes are linked together in order to accomplish a higher order goal . . . MOPs describe combinations of scenes that frequently co-occur in a person’s experiences . . . scenes are the basic building blocks of MOPs and are limited in number” (Kellermann, 1995, p. 184).
Kellermann (1995) also discusses the updating of relational knowledge:

Dynamic memory theory allows for (a) adding new structures (scripts, scenes, MOPs, meta-MOPs, etc.), (b) eliminating old structures, and (c) modifying existing structures. New structures are added when new functions need to be performed (a new or different goal is being pursued) or when an event is unrelated to present structures. Old structures are eliminated when they no longer serve a useful purpose, often determined by repeated failures of expectations generated by the structures. (p. 206)

Combining that idea of MOP modification with the finding that older people argue infrequently (Argyle & Furham, 1983; Stinnett, Carter, & Montgomery, 1972; Suitor & Pillemer, 1987; Swensen, Eskew & Kohlhepp, 1981; Ward, 1993) and use few tactics (Zietlow & Sillars, 1988), leads to the hypothesis that conflict MOPs of older couples will contain fewer scenes than the conflict MOPs of young newlywed couples.

Past Research Findings Regarding MOPs

Evidence for the existence of MOPs is slowing emerging, primarily through the study of discourse processes. Findings have included support for an informal initial conversation MOP (Kellermann, Broetzman, Lim, & Kitao, 1989). This is a Memory Organization Packet that contains information about expected general behaviors that occur during an initial conversation with a stranger. Expected behaviors include greeting, exchange of names, statement of occupations and discussion of hometowns.

Kellermann and Lim (1990) also applied Schank's (1982) theory of memory structures to the movement through discussion scenes in initial interactions. They proposed that differences in moving through discussion scenes can be explained by considering the interaction goals of the participants. For example, a participant with little desire to become acquainted spent most of the conversation time in the early scenes that are less personal. In contrast, a participant with a great deal of desire to get acquainted, moved through the scenes quickly, hopped from topic to topic,
and discovered/shared a lot of personal information. Results indicated support for a universal conversation scene. We tend to utilize a fixed structure, but vary it based on the length of time spent on each topic or in each scene.

**Meta-MOPs.**

Yet another group of researchers have focused their study of dynamic memory theory on the structures that organizes MOPs into more general categories: meta-MOPs. Meta-MOPs enable us to search memories of past behavior and extrapolate general concepts to apply to new situations. Schank (1982) explains: "meta-MOP: organize entities that organize scenes. Thus it is a kind of template by which MOPs in general are constructed . . . they describe ordered progressions of abstract generalized scenes" (p. 99-106).

Applying that definition of meta-MOPs to relational escalation proved to be fruitful for Honeycutt, Cantrill, and Greene (1989). Their research indicated the use of a cultural meta-MOP, or idea, of the typical actions that occur during relational escalation. In a follow up study, additional evidence emerged to support the use of a meta-MOP for the actions that occur during relational decay (Honeycutt, Cantrill, & Allen, 1992). Clearly, Schank's (1982) theory is applicable to many levels of cognition. I will not discuss meta-MOPs further in this study. Due to their abstract nature, I believe that the investigation of meta-MOPs in interpersonal conflict communication would be best conducted subsequent to an investigation of interpersonal conflict MOPs.

**Rationale**

This study will provide a much-needed test of the explanatory powers of the conflicting schools of thought regarding the causes of apparent gender differences in communication behaviors. To date, these theories have not been tested simultaneously in predicting the results
a single investigation. The context of examining interpersonal conflict behaviors over time allows for an application of the explanation of each school. Interpersonal conflict is an area that has been frequently investigated. Researchers have repeatedly found gender differences in this communication area, causing theorists to forward schools of thought in order to explain these mixed findings.

Further, communication scholars have left many questions open to investigation. We are just beginning to examine how communication behaviors may change over time. Family therapy researchers have looked at elderly marriages, but they did so from a counseling perspective. Communication scholars need to investigate marital communication over the life span.

This study will investigate whether there exists a memory organization packet containing expectations about communication behaviors that occur during interpersonal conflict with a spouse. Gender differences in conflict communication may be explained by each gender operating with differing conflict MOPs. Looking at what MOPs we have for conflict will hopefully explain why men and women seem to approach conflict from different points of view, and why they exhibit differing behaviors during conflict.

Kellermann’s (1995) explanation of the updating of relational knowledge can be extended to possible changes in MOPs for marital conflict over time. As husbands and wives are newlywed, they face many marital issues for the first time. This should be a time of adding new structures to their memories. As they progress into parenthood, further changes regarding their roles and negotiation of goals occur, requiring the addition of yet further structures. As time passes, fewer new issues and goals to negotiate emerge. As the children age, negotiations regarding child-rearing goals probably lessen. As the need for frequent negotiation decreases, so would the salience or necessity of certain cognitive structures that are no longer needed to attain
goal achievement. Hence, young husbands and wives should be found to have more cognitive structures, and older husbands and wives should be found to have fewer cognitive structures. Because these older couples have eliminated structures over time, that are no longer useful.

Conflict cognition will be conceptualized through the MOP perspective. By investigating the cognitions held during conflict by men and women at different life stages, we will be able to examine the possibility that gender differences regarding conflict behavior may change over time. As I stated earlier, if we see gender differences in MOP’s decrease over the life-cycle, support for gender differences being a result of socialization would be obtained. This would indicate that as couples spend time together and become the dominant socializing factor in each other’s lives. As a result, behaviors that used to be very gender specific have become more similar over time. When they enter the social institution of marriage, the man and woman, over time, will socialize each other.

Cupach and Canary (1995) found similar gender differences in conflict behavior. They commented on and agreed with Wool (1982):

Consequently, idiosyncratic standards and expectations for behavior are negotiated and developed over time, and these displace more general sociocultural influences on behavior. In short, the partner and relationship become relatively more important influences in relationship behavior than socially driven stereotypes. (p. 248)

More studies over time may bear this out.

If we do not see gender differences lessen over the life-cycle, or instead increase over the life-cycle, support for gender differences being due to men and women living in two different cultures could be advanced. If men and women are intrinsically, culturally different as the popular book title: *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992), would have us
believe then regardless of time spent in a marriage, men and women would still remain culturally different.

Lastly, if we see that men and women are more similar than different, the same culture theory would be the most likely explanation. If men and women produce highly similar conflict MOPs at both the newlywed and married over 20 years stages, then we may conclude that men and women are more similar than previously thought. Such a finding would indicate that future research should examine factors other than gender when explaining communication differences.

I turn now to a review of the literature regarding gender differences in conflict communication, changes in communication behavior over the life-span, the link of conflict behavior and cognition, and the application of Schank's (1982) dynamic theory of memory to communication research.
Gender Differences in Communication Regarding Conflict and Romantic Relationships

Gender Differences in Conflict Strategy Choices

Evidence for the existence of gender differences in conflict communication is widespread throughout the communication literature. Previously, I mentioned evidence that men and women used different conflict tactics. Canary, Cunningham, and Cody (1988) surveyed 434 college students to determine their locus of control. They further asked participants to describe a recent conflict and indicate how often they would use the 47 conflict strategies that were described to them. Results indicated that females demonstrated anger and engaged in criticism more than did males. Males were more likely than females to deny that a problem existed.

Conflict styles have been grouped into two categories: destructive and constructive. For example, destructive styles would include insulting, yelling, and having the last word. Constructive styles would include ascertaining feelings, listening, and saying nice things. Husbands have reported using less destructive styles than their wives, indicating that they used constructive conflict styles. Whether this is true in reality, or due solely to husbands' perceptions of themselves, is not clear (Oginski, Veroff, & Leber, 1993).

A "folk taxonomy" of types of conflict events that people perceive in their romantic and friendly relationships was recently reported (Baxter, Wilmot, Simmons, & Swartz, 1993). Participants identified 12 types of conflict events: Mock Conflict, Deja Vu, Third-Party Intervention, Indirect, Silent-Treatment Conflict, Time-Out Conflict, Escalatory Conflict, One-Sided Conflict, Blowup Conflict, Sarcastic Sniping, Civil Discussion, and Tacit Conflict.
Of particular interest to this study is the discussion of Deja Vu Conflict. As described by Baxter et al. (1993):

Deja Vu Conflicts are serious conflicts characterized by predictable repetition. The parties enact the same conflict over and over again, as if they are the proverbial "broken record." A female respondent who discussed conflict enactments in her romantic relationship identified this form by labeling it their "predictable conflict." The informant indicated that she and her partner "know in advance" that they will (a) enact the conflict on a certain topic or issue, (b) know how the conflict enactment will play itself out, and (c) know that the enactment will never end in genuine resolution. The parties have the sensation of enacting something that they have enacted before in exactly the same way. (p. 97)

Because participants completed the questionnaires separately, it was possible to note that females greatly outnumbered the males in reporting the perception of this type of conflict in their romantic relationships. Perhaps this indicates that females are more likely to recognize conflict communication patterns than males. This could lend support to my argument that females will have more developed or complex MOPs for conflict in their intimate relationships.

To continue this discussion of gender differences in conflict tactic choices, Billeingham and Sack (1987) investigated the conflict tactics of unmarried students. These researchers used a slightly altered form of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, as cited in Billeingham & Sack, 1987) to assess how much they and their relational partners engaged in reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence. Participants also completed a seven-level scale (casual dating to being engaged) to indicate their level of emotional commitment. The resulting scores indicated that females used reasoning and verbal aggression more than males. Further, the more emotionally involved the couple was, the more likely each partner was to engage in verbal aggression and reasoning.

In a similar study, Falbo and Peplau (1980) also reported that women and men differed in their reported use of conflict strategies in interpersonal relationships. Women reported frequently using unilateral strategies and preferred that partners in an interpersonal relationship
have equal power. Conversely, men reported frequently using bilateral strategies and preferred feeling that they had the balance of power in their interpersonal relationships.

In their discussion of these findings, Falbo and Peplau (1980) theorized that women used unilateral tactics because unilateral tactics are effective without the cooperation of the "partner." Men, on the other hand, used bilateral strategies because they saw themselves as having power in the relationship and thus expected cooperation.

Rauh, Barry, Hertel, & Swain (1974) also found gender differences in conflict behavior that could be explained by a power differential operating in the relationship. They reported that husbands made more attempts at reconciliation than their wives. Further, wives put more pressure on their husbands and were more likely to engage in personal attacks and coercion than their spouses.

Our studies of newlyweds suggest that interactive styles of husbands and wives in handling conflict are in general much alike. Where differences occur they are in directions that imply a complementary power relationship: the husbands in the male tradition, are independent and supportive; the wives, in the female tradition, coerce and appeal to their husbands from a position of weakness. An interpretation in terms of the power differential-actual or perceived-between men and women also helps explain results of questionnaire studies of marital "spouse" and some experiments on male-female differences. (p. 154)

The balance of power in interpersonal relationships was further investigated by Chafetz (1980). Over recent history (the last 50 years), women's access to resources has increased, thus shifting the patriarchal balance of power to a more egalitarian one. Marital conflict can be viewed as disagreement over allocation of scarce resources.

Chafetz (1980) stated that spouses can use authority, control, influence, and manipulation to achieve their goals. She asserted that males have used authority in the past because females were socialized to respect them. Accordingly, as spouses grow more similar in power, their
conflict tactic choices become more similar as well. Men used authority less and women
decreased their use of manipulation. Instead, they seemed to meet in the middle of the spectrum
and both used influence. Chafetz (1980) concluded that this tactic was very costly in time and
energy and may possibly lead to an increase in the likelihood of divorce. She set forth this
theory to explain the increase in divorce rate as influenced by changes in conflict resolution
choices by spouses.

Bell, Chafetz, and Horn (1982) investigated the use of power strategies in marital
relationships and their effect on conflict resolution outcomes. They found more gender
similarities than differences regarding strategy choices. Men and women reported using the
same tactic; however, more often than not, men won the conflict (attaining the outcome they
wanted). Further, men were just as likely to use manipulation as women. Past researchers
discussing power have thought that men, having more power in the marriage relationship, would
be less likely to choose manipulation as a tactic. Bell et al. (1982) concluded that husbands not
only used manipulation as often as their wives, but also, that husbands were more likely to be
successful when using manipulation than their wives. Further investigation is needed to
determine an explanation for this finding.

While investigating the choice of influence tactics at work and at home of 60 dual career
professional couples, Steil and Weltman (1992) hypothesized that when access to resources is
similar for both parties, the typical gender-based sex differences in strategy choices will not be
apparent. Generally, this was supported. Participants responded that they used strategies such as
withdrawal and doing things on their own at home. While at work, participants tended to use
strategies such as making suggestions and smiling.
When attempting to influence others at work, men and women were perceived differently. Gender differences included that women, on the whole, tended to smile and make suggestions more than men, and were perceived negatively for doing so. Men, on the other hand, were rewarded by their peers for using direct strategies and were not perceived negatively when they use indirect strategies (Steil & Weltman, 1992).

Relationship Satisfaction as it Relates to Gender

This discussion would not be complete without considering the situation which seems to elicit the most gender differences in communication behaviors; namely, behavior during times of dissatisfaction with the relationship. Men and women responded differently to dissatisfaction with their marriage. White (1989) studied the relationship between coercive/affiliative behavior and levels of marital satisfaction. The couples discussed "a topic of mutual concern that was personal in nature, and about which they were in disagreement" (p. 92). Participants also completed the Marital Adjustment Test to indicate their level of satisfaction with their marriages.

Transcripts of the audiotapes were then made and coded using the Coding System for Interpersonal Conflict (Raush et al., 1974).

White (1989) explained the results:

Females became more affiliative during times of dissatisfaction, while males respond coercively. Husbands and wives had a nearly equal rate of affiliative speeches. Wives, however, had a higher rate of coercive speeches (32.6) than husbands (25.4) . . . Unsatisfied couples, however, had lower rates of cognitive behaviors (48.2) than did satisfied couples (57.0). Thus, satisfied couples appear to use less coercion and more reasoning in solving disagreements than do unsatisfied couples. (p. 95)

Concluding, White (1989) suggested that females wanted to affiliate so that the conflict could be resolved; males preferred distance to gain perspective on the state of affairs.

Paradoxically, "each sex is presenting precisely the behavior that is most threatening to the other."
the male attempting to maintain his autonomy by ending the conflict and his dependency through distancing, the female maintaining closeness with the other by supporting the connection" (p. 104).

Does relational talk relate to relational satisfaction differently for men and women? Acitelli (1992) investigated relationship awareness, defining it as "a person's thinking about interaction patterns, comparisons, or contrasts between himself or herself and the other partner in the relationship" (p. 102). Forty two couples who had been married between 2-5 years were interviewed in their homes. They were asked open-ended questions and their answers were later coded for relational talk (the proportion of time that each speaker spent talking about their relationship as compared to their total time spent talking). They also had to answer questions regarding their marital well-being and general life satisfaction.

The basic finding was that women spent more time talking about their relationships. Overall, men spoke more, but not about the relationship. Acitelli (1992) stated that "when both husbands' and wives' relational talk is taken into account, it is husbands' relational talk only that is related to wives' marital well-being. Wives' relational talk was not significantly related to their own marital well being." Further, "none of the husbands' well-being measures was found to be related to spouses relationship talk" (p. 106).

The less a wife engaged in relationship talk, the more her marital satisfaction was positively related to the amount her husband engaged in relationship talk. Acitelli, however, did not find support for her similarity hypothesis: "the more similar the partners are with regard to relationship awareness, the happier they are expected to be" (p. 103).

In a subsequent study of marital satisfaction, Acitelli, Douvan, and Veroff (1993) explored married couples' use of constructive and destructive conflict strategies. They reasoned
that it was important to study marital conflict because it was one of the settings in which couples created a shared reality. Their 219 dyads all were couples in their first year of marriage with the woman being less than 35 years old. Spouses were interviewed separately in their homes. They were asked to think of a recent conflict and then were asked questions regarding their perceptions of their behaviors as well as their spouses. They were asked to acknowledge if they and/or their spouse had engaged in 12 behaviors:

- constructive: calmly discussing the situation, listening to each other's point of view, finding out what the other is feeling, saying nice things, trying to compromise, suggesting a new way of looking at things... destructive behaviors: yelling/shouting, insulting or calling each other names, threatening, bringing the spouse's family into the argument, bringing up things that happened long ago, having to have the last word. (p. 9)

When they noticed that couples weren't all reporting about the same conflict incident, they compared the results of two groups of respondents. They found that couples reporting on the same conflict did not significantly differ in their data from couples each reporting on a different conflict. "Thus, we decided to use the entire group of 236, and, like Crohan (1992), acknowledge that we were assessing perceptions of behavioral styles in conflictive situations rather than perceptions of behaviors occurring during one incident" (p. 9).

Acitelli et al. (1993) found that couples thought they were much more similar than they actually were. They concluded that wives' marital well-being was positively related to their understanding of their husbands. Interestingly, husbands' marital well-being was not related to their understanding of their wives. "Spouse's perceptions of their own behaviors were more predictive of husbands' well-being" (p. 12). Husbands' well-being was most explained by their perceptions of self and their spouses' perceptions of self.

The possible link between conflict tactic usage and marital satisfaction over time was probed by Gottman and Krokoff (1989). They directed participants to complete marital
satisfaction surveys and then videotaped them for 15 minutes discussing a problem area in their marriage. A few of the sample discussed their problems privately on audiotape at home. The tapes were then coded with regards to demonstrations of emotions. Three years later, participation of subjects was simply limited to completing another round of marital satisfaction measures.

The researchers looked at the correlation between conflict behaviors at Time 1 and satisfaction at Times 1 and 2. Several gender differences emerged. Contrary to popular belief, couples that engaged in conflict at Time 1 were unhappy at Time 1, but their satisfaction improved over time. “In particular, it was revealed that positive verbal behavior and compliance expressed by wives may be functional in the short run, but problematic in the long run” (p. 49).

They found wives who displayed fear or sadness during conflict experienced decreases in satisfaction over time. Conversely, wives who displayed anger and contempt during conflict experienced increased satisfaction over time. Whining was the only behavior for husbands that indicated decreases in satisfaction over time for both partners. For both spouses, the use of conflict tactics that involved defensiveness, stubbornness and withdrawal was correlated with decreases in marital satisfaction over time.

One study investigating quality of marriage and communication patterns prior to marriage and, subsequently, in the first and second years of marriage, indicated that there were no significant changes in communication patterns over time. Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, and Callan (1994) studied 33 couples prior to their marriage, and in their first and second years of marriage. Couples rated the quality of their marriage and completed the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Christensen, as cited in Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994). Couples were then videotaped discussing a conflict area.
Results indicated that all of the typical relationships between strategy choices and satisfaction held true with this sample. Further, dissatisfied couples after the first year of marriage displayed attempts to be more positive and less negative; however, after 2 years of marriage they had reverted back to their old behaviors of the men using more reasoning and the women using more support. This study was a good start; however, extrapolating these findings to other life stages of married couples would be premature.

Often researchers investigate the relationship between one particular conflict pattern and marital satisfaction. Heavey et al. (1993), for example, were interested in studying the demand/withdraw pattern of marital interaction, defined as “one spouse attempts to engage in a problem-solving discussion, often resorting to pressure and demands, while the other spouse attempts to avoid or withdraw from the discussion” (p.15). They further stated that women engage most often in the demanding role, while husbands most often withdraw. They continued using the methods of Christensen and Heavey (1990).

Findings indicated that the demand/withdraw pattern was not a commonly occurring pattern for marital conflict. Rather it was most likely to emerge when a problem issue was important to the wife. When the problem issue was important and most relevant to the husband, typical gender behaviors of women demanding and men withdrawing were not evident.

Heavey et al. (1993) also found that couples differed in behaviors which lead to long term satisfaction. Wives long-term satisfaction increased when their husbands were demanding; however, satisfaction decreased when they were the one being demanding. The more a couple engaged in the gender typical behaviors of female demand-male withdraw, the more likely they were to experience long-term lower levels of marital satisfaction.
Is there a relationship between commitment type, conflict, and marital satisfaction?

Swensen and Trahaug (1985) investigated this issue by dividing marriages into two categories: intrinsic couples who were committed to each other as a person; and instrumental couples who were committed to the institution of marriage. This typology was based on the prior work of Cuber and Haroff (as cited in Swensen & Trahaug, 1985). The results indicated that couples committed to each other as persons had lesser amounts of conflict and trouble problem-solving. Yet another variable to consider when investigating marital conflict. A more contemporary approach might be to broaden this commitment typology to include other possibilities, better reflecting marriage in the 90’s.

In this section, we have noted that men and women differ in what conflict tactics lead to their long-term marital satisfaction. Additionally, men and women respond with different behaviors when they are unsatisfied. The work of Aciessi et al. (1993) concluded that couples report on styles of behavior, rather than particular incidents of behavior; a finding that should be quite useful to note for future studies. The research findings discussed in this section clearly show that marital conflict has far reaching repercussions in long-term satisfaction, and that men and women react differently during times of marital distress.

Gender Differences in Perceptions of Conflict

Gender may also be a factor in the perception of conflict. Men and women seemingly perceive differing sources of relationship crises. They also value differing conflict management tactics (Wood, 1986). Finally, men and women hold different views on the sources of conflict in interpersonal relationships.

Wood (1986) applied Gilligan’s (1982) theory of moral development to interpersonal conflict, asking how men and women define relationship crises and to whom or what do they
attribute the source of conflict. She also asked what conflict behaviors are valued by each
gender. Fourteen men and 20 women completed a two-page questionnaire that asked them to
describe conflict areas in their relationships. They then supplied their thoughts and feelings
regarding their management of the conflicts.

Results indicated that 60% of the women in this study (12) perceived their relational
problems were due to relationship issues, such as decreased communication. In contrast, only
29% of the men reported relational issues to be problematic. Rather, men saw the source of the
majority of their relational problems to be their partner’s qualities (50%) and external
circumstances (64%). Only 35% of the women reported partner’s qualities and 25% of women
reported external circumstances.

The conflict management results were also different between the genders. Women were
proud of showing care for others, showing attention to the conflict process, and “meeting
responsibilities to self” (p. 288). Men, on the other hand, were proud of upholding abstract rules
or principles, such as the marriage vow, and “meeting responsibilities to self” (p. 291).

Subjects also indicated sources of regret in their conflict management. Women regretted
not giving enough attention to process, caring too little for others, and for not being responsible
for self. Men regretted their lack of attention to conflict process, lack of caring for others, and
not being responsible for self. These different views of conflict sources and conflict management
may explain why couples engage in so much interpersonal conflict. In any case, these general
findings do support the idea that men and women think and communicate about conflict in
different ways.

Males and females differed in their expectations for behaviors during times of conflict
(Kelley et al., 1978). This study was designed to examine gender stereotypes for conflict
behavior. In part one, 54 male and 54 female undergraduates heard hypothetical problems of
dating couples in conflict. They then rated the likelihood of an unhappy male or unhappy female
performing certain conflict behaviors. In part two of the study, 56 undergraduate couples heard
the same hypothetical couple problems. They then put themselves in the situations and tried to
predict what they and their partners would be likely to say.

Results indicated that the majority of conflict behaviors performed by males and females
were similar. However, there were a few minor differences:

The female member is expected and reported to cry and sulk and to criticize the
male for lack of consideration of her feelings and insensitivity to his effect on her.
The male shows anger, rejects the female’s tears, calls for a logical and less
emotional approach to the problem, and gives reasons for delaying the discussion.
(Kelley et al., 1978, p.487)

The gender differences Kelley et al. (1978) found indicated that women were stereotyped
as being more emotional and males were stereotyped as being more logical and more likely to
try to delay the delay of conflict discussions. Reports of actual behaviors concurred with these
stereotypes. They noted that these differences may be explained by considering the routine
concerns and duties of the individual. They stated that:

From this point of view, the conflict behavior of the female is, in part, a reflection of her
general concern for attitudes and feelings within the couple. Similarly, the conflict
behavior of the male reflects his usual technical approach to problems as well as the
reasons provided by his outside responsibilities for giving the issue little importance and
setting it aside. (p. 491)

Now, well over 15 years later, more couples are dual-wage earning, thus increasing the
responsibilities of females outside the home. Therefore, we may question the relevance of these
findings today.

Further, women and men have different attitudes about the importance of talking during
times of conflict. Acitelli (1988) asked forty-two married couples to read either a happy or an
upsetting story about couples who either do or do not engage in relational talk. The participants then rated the satisfaction levels of the characters in the stories. Overall, men chose not to talk during happy times in their relationships; however, men did find talk important in conflict times. Conversely, women liked to engage in relational talk at all stages of satisfaction in their relationships.

The possible relationship between length of time spent in a relationship and similarity of partners' communication values has been examined by looking at young dating couples. Burleson, Kunkel, and Birch (1994) obtained data from 135 couples who had been dating for an average of 15 months and whose mean age was 20 years old. Relevant to this discussion, participants completed surveys in which they rated the value of their romantic partner possessing the following communication skills: ego support, conflict, management, comforting, persuasion, referential or informative skill, regulative skill, narrative skill, and conversational skill.

On the whole, the results did not provide support for their hypothesis that couples' evaluations of importance of communication skills would be moderately and positively related. There were only mild indications that conflict management and narration skills were equally valued by romantic partners. "Interestingly, similarity in evaluations of conflict management and skill were significantly associated with all attraction and satisfaction indices" (p. 268).

These authors found that couples did not rate the value of communication skills similarly enough to be significant. They concluded that length of time in relationship did not correlate with similarity of communication values. I would argue that looking at early dating relationships is not enough to draw this conclusion. A cross-sectional and/or a longitudinal study may reveal that similarity in communication values, as well as in other cognitive variables, is achieved over many years.
Husbands and wives agree that wives most frequently express emotions. However, they differ in their perceptions of who most frequently problem-solves (Honeycutt, 1993). When rating communication behaviors regarding how likely they or their spouse would be to display them, wives expressed that spouses engage equally in problem-solving, whereas husbands attributed that behavior to themselves.

On the whole, women tended to make more attributions about their partner’s behavior than did men, regardless of their satisfaction with their marriage. On the contrary, when men were unhappy with their marriages, they made more attributions than men that were happy (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobsen, 1985). Men seemingly engaged in relational thought most frequently during times of distress, whereas women thought about their relationships on a much more frequent basis regardless of their satisfaction level.

Verbal displays of aggressiveness were not perceived the same by men and women (Malitz & Borker, 1982). Men perceived it to be a means of organizing discourse, while women perceived it as “personally directed, negative and disruptive” (p. 213). Clearly, here is an opportunity for miscommunication.

Burleson et al. (1996) investigated the communication skills that were valued by men and women in same-sex friendships and romantic relationships. They studied the valuing of communication skills because learning what people value helps to describe their culture.

On the whole, men and women were more similar than different; however, a few gender differences were reported. Women, to a greater degree than men, valued affective communication skills; however, men and women both valued affective skills over instrumental skills. Also, men, to a greater degree than women, valued instrumental skills. Men placed more value on persuasion skills than did women. On the other hand, women placed more value on
conflict management, comforting, and ego support. They concluded that "on the basis of these data, then, it certainly appears that men and women do not constitute separate cultures" (Burleson, et al., 1996, p. 218). Further, they recognized the limits of their sample and call for further research with different age and ethnic groups.

Men and women identified differing sources of conflict in their relationships. Cunningham et al. (1982) investigated 50 married and 50 unmarried cohabiting couples that were under the age of 30 and without children. Couples were interviewed together in their homes. They discussed four problem areas in their relationships. Next, they independently rated how important each problem was in relation to their happiness with the marriage.

From the results, they developed a conflict source taxonomy with 12 categories encompassing 55 sub categories. I will list them in order from most frequently reported to least frequently reported: decision conflicts, failure to give attention/reward, division and fulfillment of responsibility, sloppiness/impulsive/careless behavior, criticism-hostility, inadequate communication, dominance/influence attempts/nagging, independence/drawing away from partner, embarrassment with partner in social situations, dependence on partner, behavioral interference, and moodiness.

A few gender differences emerged, regardless of marital status. Men frequently reported that they were unhappy that their partners were too dependent and too sloppy/impulsive/careless. For married couples, wives largely reported that their husbands did not give them enough attention/reward. Interestingly, when individuals saw themselves to be the aggrieved partner, married females were the most upset, married males the least upset and cohabiting couples were similar in how much they were upset. Overall, when women were the aggrieved party, both they
and their partners rated them to be sadder, angrier and more vulnerable than the "offending male."

This study adds to those that have found women to be more emotional and conflict to be more salient to them. When the married husband was the aggrieved partner, he was upset by a lesser degree than the wife. Is this because he had the power in the relationship and felt secure? Cunningham et al. (1982) suggested that as an explanation.

Accounts of reasons for divorce have also been investigated. Men and women reported different reasons for the occurrence of their divorces. Also, men gave fewer reasons for divorce than did women. Predictably, the majority of reasons given by participants involved high levels of conflict/tension and poor communication in the marriage (Gigy & Kelly, 1992). Men and women not only differ in behavior during their relationships, but also in their later accounts of relationship dissolution. The finding that women provide more reasons for termination may further indicate that they spend more time thinking about relationships than their male counterparts.

Looking back, we see that the genders identify different sources of conflict in their relationships. Men and women take pride in and regret different conflict behaviors. Further, women report that they frequently express emotions and monitor the feelings in their relationships. Men report that they are more rational in their approach to conflict. At this juncture, we are well on our way to getting a clear picture that cognitions regarding conflict certainly influence conflict behavior.
Life-Stage Differences in Communication about Conflict

Life Stage Research Considerations

I have already discussed the need to consider life stage when investigating interpersonal communication. Tamir (1984) provides an excellent synopsis of life-stage influences on communication, beginning with the young adult:

The young adult structures his or her life around new beginnings in work, family, and the attainment of prestige. This requires attention to detail and planning for the lifetime that lies ahead. These unique concerns plus the social statuses in line with their age and social position dictate the content of communication behavior. Presuppositions held by young adults include a future orientation, the utility of an analytic strategy, and an appreciation for new beginnings, responsibilities, and commitments. (p. 34)

In contrast, Tamir (1984) describes old age communication as influenced by "the concerns and predispositions of the older adult that are likely to filter through the communication setting. They fall under three basic headings: the need to review one's life, maintenance of self-concept and competence; and cognitive functioning" (p. 36).

Maintenance of self-concept and competence may be detected in the conflict communication patterns of older couples. This is not a time of negotiating and trying new strategies; rather, it is a time of asserting and maintaining competence. With different issues and goals being salient at different stages of life, it follows that communication patterns of cognition and behavior would also differ according to life stage.

Additionally, as relationship length increases, shared background increases, lessening the need for extensive explanations of statements between communicators (Tamir, 1984). This can lead to efficient, more effective communication. From this study we can infer that older couples' MOPs should be smaller than those of young couples due to their extensive shared experiences.
Regarding changes in cognition over the life-span, Birren (1969/1980) investigated the long-range planning behavior of middle-aged professionals.

Middle-aged persons generally report having less energy than they used to have and that the management of time is the biggest issue in their lives. The middle-aged person therefore sees one of his long range strategies or goals as that of self-conservation. To do this, he operates with day-to-day tactics that reduce his cognitive and affective load. (p. 30)

Birren (1969/1980) states that middle-aged and older adults are successful in their careers as they abstract information:

thus although the number of units of information processed per unit time may decline after mid-life, the size of the 'unit' itself may increase. The assumption is that with increased experience the adult forms broader concepts. In this sense, a concept is an organized unit of information rather than an isolated fact. If, in fact, concepts evolve with increasing information, the adult, as he grows older, may be able to deal with his environment on a more abstract basis and thus increase his effectiveness at a time when components of his intellect may be concurrently declining. The view suggests that young persons process more bits of information per unit time, and older adults process fewer but larger chunks of information per unit time. (p. 25)

Cole also describes the advantages of aging. “Even as one’s physical powers decrease, the accumulated experiences of a lifetime, the ‘crystallized’ and ‘pragmatic’ aspects of cognition, provide adults with resources for dealing with life that are completely beyond the reach of the young” (Cole, 1996, p.81).

How does the body change with age? “In addition to arthritis, hypertension, hearing loss, and visual impairment, heart conditions, and arteriosclerosis are the other major chronic conditions that limit the physical mobility of the elderly” (Hess, 1984, p. 52). These physical ailments would also add difficulty to the process of clear communication. This is more clearly explained by Ryan, See, Meneer, and Trovato (1994):

As predicted, younger respondents reported fewer problems than did older respondents with hearing (others speaking too softly and frustration with not hearing), with speed (others talk too fast), and with memory (keeping track of topic, difficulty with long
sentences)... As predicted, younger participants reported fewer problems with memory-related aspects of conversation (keeping track of their topic, words on the tip of the tongue, diversity of vocabulary, and recalling facts) than did older participants. (p. 25)

Most findings regarding learning and memory of the elderly can be explained by laboratory effects or cohort effects (Perlmutter & Hall, 1985). Also, by employing a laboratory situation, the physical and situational tools people often use to remember are excluded from the experimental context. With increased age, accessing information in memory appears to take an increased amount of time. Also, it seems to take longer to process information in order to encode it properly for later retrieval. Creativity also declines with time, peaking at middle-age with numerous famous exceptions.

Given these findings, the field of communication should be leading in the study of behavior changes and development over the life-span. Coupland and Nussbaum (1995) state:

We may age physiologically and of course chronologically, but our social aging - how we behave, as social actors, toward others, and even how we align ourselves with or come to understand the signs of difference or change as we age - are phenomena achieved primarily through communication experiences. (p. xi)

Changing Marital Communication Over the Life Span

Both men and women are living longer, and now that women have increased roles in the workplace, the gender gap in longevity seems to be decreasing (Smith, 1992). Marriages are lasting longer. Therefore, in the future we will be seeing more elderly marriages, increasing the incentive to study marriage in later life.

The need for further research in communication of the elderly is clear. According to Maes and Fitzpatrick (1995), "although the effects of retirement, child rearing status, and length of marriage have been explored, very little research has been done to investigate communication directly" (p. 196).
To date, many researchers have investigated marital satisfaction over the life-span and found a U-curve of marital satisfaction. The curve describes the reported data that marital satisfaction is high when couples are newly wed. As time passes they reach an ultimate low at about 25 years of marriage. Then, satisfaction begins to rise again, reaching similar high levels of newly weds' satisfaction in old age (Adelmann, Chadwick, & Baerger, 1996; Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; Valliant & Valliant, 1993).

I hypothesize that conflict MOPs also go through a change at this time. As couples navigate through this time of change and increased conflict, it is natural to assume that their conflict styles would also go through transition. Certainly changes in life stage and status would impact on couple communication.

Preliminary evidence suggesting that conflict styles of married couples actually vary with their life-stage has already emerged through the work of Zietlow and Sillars (1988). Couples in that study filled out marital satisfaction questionnaires and then discussed eight potential areas of marital conflict. Subjects tape-recorded their discussions in the privacy of their own homes. Coders analyzed the tapes using a seven-category conflict code. Conflict tactics ranged from direct denial to friendly joking.

The results revealed several interesting differences. Retired couples reported that most of the problems were not very salient. Younger couples used more conflict codes during very salient issue discussion than retired couples used. On the other hand, retired couples analyzed low salience topics much more than younger couples. Overall, there were no significant differences between the genders regarding conflict codes; however, wives tended to have a more direct engagement style of conflict than their husbands.
The findings concerning life-stage were also quite significant, with regards to the current study. Young couples preferred to be highly interactive, while middle-aged couples preferred denial and non-commitment to conflict. Retired couples were very confrontational when discussing salient topics and very calm when discussing low salience topics. Retired couples preferred to stick with one confrontation style during an entire conflict. In contrast, young couples changed styles during conflict.

Middle-age marriage was also investigated by Donohugh (1981). He described middle-age as a time of retooling. With children leaving the home, as well as the evolving of husbands' and wives' roles as they have less parental duties, couples should make an effort to rebuild their marriages. He stated that "our relationships in middle age must be a new one. And, like life, this cannot be static—it is a process" (p. 266).

Support for the position that life stage should be considered in marital conflict research is provided by Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman (1993) who compared sources of pleasure and conflict in older and middle-aged marriages. They also looked at differences between satisfied and unsatisfied marriages at those ages. Their results are reported in three separate articles. Their sample consisted of couples aged 40-50 years having been married at least 15 years and couples aged 60-70 having been married at least 35 years. Participants completed several measures which were reported in three separate studies. The couples did not to speak to each other for 8 hours and then reported to the laboratory. They completed marital satisfaction surveys. Also, they were videotaped discussing their activities for the day, ongoing conflict area in their marriage, and a pleasant topic. The videotapes were then coded for positive and negative affects of speakers and listeners.
There were several striking results. As reported in the most recent article, Carstensen et al. (1995), when speaking, older couples were found to be more affectionate than middle-aged couples. Couples did not differ in listening behavior. Middle-aged couples displayed much more negative affect: anger, disgust, belligerence, and whining. However, they also displayed more interest and humor.

Regarding gender, husbands seemed to be more defensive and more neutral listeners than wives, which is an interesting combination. Wives were coded as displaying more total emotion, and being both more negative and more positive listeners than their husbands. Further, they were more likely to engage in joy, contempt, whining, sadness, and anger. The gender differences did seem to covary with couple satisfaction. In happy marriages, spouses displayed similar amounts of emotion, whereas in unhappy marriages, wives were more emotional.

Coders further looked at affective sequences displayed on the videos. The only significant finding regarding age differences was that older unhappy couples were less likely to respond to a neutral affect with a negative affect display. The researchers proposed that those couples who were unhappy, but had stayed together for years, could have been "leaving well enough alone."

More gender differences emerged when looking at affect sequences. Wives were more likely to continue a positive affect. In unhappy marriages, men were most likely to attempt de-escalation, responding to a spouse's negative display with a neutral display. These findings are consistent with research of young couples.

Carstensen et al. (1995) found more gender differences in unhappy marriages than in happy ones. They found no relation between gender and age in their study, but hypothesized the possible reduction of gender differences may occur after retirement. Because no one in their
sample was retired, however, this remained uninvestigated by them. They also stated that
"notably, in older marriages, the resolution of important conflicts was less negatively emotional
and more affectionate than in middle-aged marriages" (p. 147).

Levenson, Carstensen and Gottman (1993) reported that old couples report lower levels
than middle-aged couples in four areas of conflict: money, religion, recreation and children.
However, two areas did seem to increase as a source of conflict with age: recreation and
communication. The authors commented that this was logical due to older couples having more
free time and a narrowing network of people to communicate with. Moreover, older spouses
identified the same sources of pleasure; whereas middle-age couples did not show complete
agreement, disagreeing on 5 out of 10 areas.

Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman (1994) reported on the second phase of their project.
Several days after the video session, participants returned individually to view their videocassettes.
They then reported on how they were feeling during the conversations. Older couples reported
more periods of positive affect. There was no difference in age groups reporting of negative
affect. They stated that "the affective qualities that distinguish dissatisfied marriages from
satisfied marriages in younger couples (i.e., less positivity, greater negativity, and greater
negative affect reciprocity) were also found to typify dissatisfied marriages in later life" (p. 64).

They concluded that "it seems to us most likely that older people, making good use of
their emotional expertise and competence, take a highly active role in designing and optimizing
the emotional environment in their marriages" (Levenson et al., 1994, p. 64).

Copeland, Bugaighis and Schumm (1989) investigated the valuing of regard, empathy
and congruence among couples married over 30 years. They did not discuss gender as an issue,
but did report data split into categories by husband and wife. They found that older couples
valued regard, congruence and empathy, contrary to the belief that older marriages were primarily utilitarian. Interestingly, the findings were similar for both husbands and wives. There were no apparent significant gender differences in the value placed on the three examined variables.

Gender differences were observed by Pickard (1995) regarding conversational styles. Men’s conversation style becomes more feminine with age, and long term marriages have less conflict. Such were the conclusions of Pickard (1995) after interviewing elderly people living in South Whales. After pointing out the negatives of reduced funds and constant togetherness, she discusses the positives of marriage in old age:

There is more time for communication, for long chats, for enjoying holidays together. Where marital relationships had been stormy, there may be less energy and inclination to fight and argue now, and a mutual preference for peace may render the home a more enjoyable setting than ever before . . . This sense of emotional closeness may result in the fact that men learn to become notably more expressive at this point, as they also spent less time with the lads and more in female company, which often leads them to modify their conversational style, to something less loud, swaggering and peppered with vulgarities. It is interesting indeed, how older men’s conversational style becomes more feminine - in tone, volume, gentleness - with increasing advancement in years. (p. 231)

There is increasing evidence that men and women may become androgynous as they age. This can be attributed to changing levels of hormones and changing social roles. As men and women retire and assume the roles of grandparents, their activities become much more similar than when they were actively parenting and interacting in the work force. Men engage in increased domestic behaviors, and women have more time to engage in non-parenting activities (Hagestad, 1994).

Eccles and Bryan (1994) examine gender-role development across the life span. They explain that androgyny, or “gender-role transcendence” is a more mature development stage, as
opposed to traditional gender roles, mostly due to their assertion that androgyny allows for flexibility of behavior.

This can be explained further by Lipman (1962):

Apparently, role differentiation by sex is reduced with increased age and retirement . . . Both men and women who had clearly defined their pre-retirement role in predominantly instrumental fashion that strongly differentiated husband's and wife's activities, now move toward a common area of identity in role activities --- an area that emphasizes sharing and cooperation, where similar expressive qualities such as love, understanding, companionship, and compatibility become the most important things they can both give in marriage. These non-set-differentiated supportive roles that demand expressive rather than instrumental, qualities appear well adapted for the personality system of both the husband and wife in retirement. (p. 484)

Old-age communication is primarily adaptive. In other words, as the body and environment change, the elderly, in order to be successful, need to actively adapt their communication behaviors (Hummert, Nussbaum, & Weimann, 1994).

Continuing this discussion of changing marital communication, we turn now to research primarily focused on long term marriages. Ward (1993) found that couples over the age of 50 report rarely arguing. He analyzed data from the National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, as cited in Ward, 1993), only including data from respondents 50 years of age or older, whose spouses had also completed the questionnaire. This led to the analyses of data from 1,353 couples. Couples reported high levels of marital happiness and infrequent arguing.

Acitelli and Antonucci (1994) investigated gender differences in older marriages. Their sample consisted of 59 married couples whose mean age was 74, with their mean length of marriage being 41.2 years. They were interviewed in their homes individually. Respondents reported on who in their life gave and received the following forms of social support: confiding, reassurance, respect, care when ill, talk when upset, and talk about health. Coders looked for
how many times the spouse was named as giver and receiver. Respondents also completed measures regarding marital satisfaction, general well-being and health.

Acitelli and Antonucci (1994) found perceived reciprocity to be higher than actual reciprocity. They did not find support for the hypothesis that perceived reciprocity is more strongly linked to marital satisfaction than actual reciprocity. This might have been due to complicated correlations of the variables, or the age of the respondents. Further research with younger respondents is called for to clarify this issue.

Interestingly, these authors wondered if they generated so few results for husbands because perhaps husbands had different ideas of what constitutes social support. As social support is seen now, it affects the general well-being of wives more so than husbands. Further investigation into husbands' concepts of social support, as well as a multi-aged sample is needed.

In another study, Stinett et al. (1972) concluded that there were no significant differences in perceptions of long-term marriages due to gender affects. Their study involved 204 couples, average age 65-69, separately completing mail-in surveys. An overwhelming majority were happy or very happy. Fifty three percent reported that their marriages had improved over time. The two most frequently reported “troublesome” areas were “having different values and philosophies of life and lack of mutual interest” (p. 666). However, 36% reported that there was nothing troublesome in their marriages. Many felt that the later years were the happiest time of their marriages.

Evidence that men and women identify the same factors as being important to long-term marriage success resulted from the work of Lauer et al. (1990). That study’s participants (100 couples were married 45 years or more and were at least 65 years old) completed questionnaires regarding what they thought contributed to long-term marital success. Participants reported these
areas to be important: "being married to someone they liked as a person and enjoyed being with; commitment to the spouse and to marriage; a sense of humor; and consensus on various matters such as aims and goals in life, friends, and decision making" (p. 189).

Close to 92% responded that they were happy. Couples reported perceived agreement on a "wide variety of issues." The researchers pointed out that they did not know from the study if the couples were always that similar, or whether they grew into that over time spent together in their marriage.

Hatfield, Traupmann, and Sprecher (1984) investigated the effects of time on feelings of love and resentment in marriage. Two-hundred-forty women aged 50 to 82 were interviewed and divided into two groups: married less than 33 years and more than 33 years. The women reported that both companionate and passionate love declined slightly over time. Passionate love was described as being romantic and companionate love was described as being more friendly.

The women reported perceiving no difference in the amount of depression and resentment/hostility that they and their husbands experienced in the relationships. They expressed that women feel resentment/hostility and depression, to a small degree, throughout marriage. The women perceived that their husbands felt more passionate love than they did, but reported no differences in their perceptions of companionate love.

Widows have identified communication as a vital contributor to the success of their marriages. Malatesta (1989) reported on comments which emerged during a 2-hr group interview with widows who had been happily married for at least 25 years. These widows also remarked on the importance of self-worth and pursuing interests outside of the marriage. At times they experienced negative feelings, regarding their spouses, during their marriages. They
found it best to accept the feelings, rather than ignore them, knowing that they would eventually pass.

Young couples reported engaging in more conflict events, and being less satisfied in their marriages than older couples. Argyle and Furnham (1983) suggested that this indicated conflict has to be worked through early in marriage. They further stated that “we found that a high level of conflict is normal in marriage (p. 492).” Conversely, old couples reported high levels of satisfaction and low levels of conflict occurrence. Many other researchers have found elderly couples to report low levels of conflict (Sussor & Pillemer, 1987; Swensen, Eskew, & Kohlhepp, 1981).

Conversational styles of couples over the life-span, particularly the themes of their conversations, were investigated by Sillars, Burggraf, Yost, and Zietlow (1992). Older couples expressed more togetherness (i.e., communal themes) in their communication. Young couples expressed more individual themes involving separateness and personality. Sillars, et al. argued that “in the absence of sudden change, couples should acquire a more unified and stable identity over time.” This would seem to support research on the evolution of interpersonal conflict MOPs over the life-course. Additionally, adaptation has been theorized as a key to long-term marital success (Ferraro & Wan, 1986).

In summary, research has sketched a preliminary picture of changes in marital communication over the life-span. Young couples engage in more conflict and display more tactics for doing so than do elderly couples. Middle age is described as a time of low satisfaction. This is possibly due to the large amount of change that is required to adapt to new roles in this later period of life. Once those transitions are broached, however, a happier elderly
marriage evolves. Elderly couples report infrequent arguing and having very few sources of conflict.

Conflict and Cognition

How we perceive our world is theorized to be influenced by our individual organizing cognitive structures. Fitzpatrick (1976, 1990) postulated a structure that enables us to organize and to interpret relational information: a marital schemata framework. Using the Relational Dimension Instrument Fitzpatrick (1976) was able to identify three different schemata or organizing views of marriage: traditional, independent, and separate. Since that time, researchers have used this marriage typology to inform and guide their research. Perhaps there are similar schemata at work regarding conflict, which could be considered an interpersonal conflict MOP.

What is the relationship between conflict tactics, communication tactics, and communication satisfaction? Canary and Cupach (1988) directed participants in their study to self-report on a relational conflict they actually experienced. Participants also completed scales that measured partner’s communication competence and communication satisfaction. Trust, control mutuality, intimacy, and relational satisfaction were also measured.

The use of integrative conflict tactics (e.g., negotiating, expressing trust in the other person, and seeking areas of agreement) was reported to increase communication satisfaction and perceived competence of the communication. Conversely, the use of distributive conflict tactics acted to decrease communication satisfaction and perceived competence of the communication. The result of using an avoidance tactic is mixed and seems to be very context bound. Perhaps, the use of integrative conflict tactics results in partners’ being satisfied because they lead to feelings of similarity and agreement.
Crohan (1992) focused on the cognitions of marital couples, asking whether holding the same beliefs about conflict increased happiness, regardless of content, or whether the content was a better indicator of happiness than similar beliefs. Newlywed couples participated in interviews during their first and, subsequently, second years of marriage, providing information on conflict beliefs and marital happiness. Crohan (1992) concluded that the content of the beliefs, not agreement, was the most important contributor to marital happiness. For example, couples who agreed that avoidance of conflict was best were unhappy at Time 1 and Time 2. Further study of the influence of cognitions on marital happiness is necessary.

When examining cognition it is informative to look at the relevant idioms, as idioms may provide insight into the perceptions of those who use and create them. Men made up the majority of idioms utilized in romantic relationships. With that in mind, it was intriguing to learn that women created the idioms that were utilized in romantic relationships to refer to conflict. Bell, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Gore (1987) conducted a study to assess the relationship between a dating couple's use of idioms and their perceived levels of liking, loving, commitment, and closeness. Couples were separated and then filled out Rubin's liking and loving scales (as cited in Bell, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Gore, 1987) as well as Maxwell's Close Relationships Questionnaire (as cited in Bell, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Gore, 1987). They then were asked the probability that they would marry their partner. Lastly, they completed an idiom report form, including the idioms the couples used, the context, frequency and function of the idioms, and which partner had invented the idiom.

Results indicated that men invented the majority of idioms, with the exception of their own nicknames and idioms for confrontation. On the whole, idioms for confrontation were rarely reported; however, friendship idioms were often about conflict. Also, confrontation
idioms were more strongly related to loving, commitment, and closeness for women than for men. We may wonder if women used and invented more idioms for confrontation because they perceived confrontation in relationships more frequently than did men. This may have been due to the relationship between confrontation, loving, commitment, and closeness for women. Whereas in contrast to women, men have been found to report perceiving less conflict and spending less time thinking about their interpersonal relationships. With men being the primary idiom inventors, confrontation idioms are thus not often reported.

Aguiinis, Nesler, Hosoda, and Tedeschi (1993) examined the existence of a “persuade package,” defined as a group of methods stored in memory regarding how to influence someone in order to achieve a goal. They further investigated Bisanz and Rule’s assertion (as cited in Aguiinis, Nesler, Hosoda, & Tedeschi, 1993) that “the relative probability of use of various influence tactics is a cognitive invariant and most likely a product of socialization” (p. 430).

The subjects were 154 undergraduates who participated by reading several persuasion vignettes and ranking the likelihood that certain persuasion tactics would be used in each situation. The persuasion tactics were: ingratiation, assertiveness, rationality, and exchange.

Even as the vignette situations varied, participants’ preference order of the influence tactics did not. They concluded, “the subjects’ decision about which tactic to choose was guided by a general schema that was associated with influence situations” (p. 435). They further concluded that “once the schema has been formed and has become implicit, the persuade package could be used without being controlled and with little or no awareness” (p. 436).

Bisanz and Rule (1989, p. 5) argued “that there is a schema shared by individuals in our culture employed to understand events that occur in compliance-gaining interactions whether in real life, the visual media (e.g., TV, film) or as described in a story (Rule & Bisanz, 1987).”
To examine this hypothesis, Bisanz and Rule (1989) had participants read booklets with stories involving either a man or a woman trying to persuade their friend or father to do something. The goals for the persuaders were varied; e.g., acquire information, acquire a physical object, get power or authority to do something, and to get someone to do something for you. Persuasion targets varied among father, friend and stranger. Subjects were asked to put the persuasion strategies in the order that they felt a man in general, or a woman in general, would be likely to use them. Strategy choices ranged from asking to forcing a target. Overall, there were 15 strategies provided to put in order. Participants then ranked how strongly they approved or disapproved of the use of each strategy. Also, they indicated how likely they were to use the strategies themselves.

Not surprisingly, the likelihood of a participant's personal use of a strategy was highly correlated with their social approval rating of that strategy. This was true for both men and women. The results did not indicate any significant gender differences. The researchers attributed this to building evidence that “men’s and women’s personal expectations about the order of strategy use is a cognitive invariant” (p. 16). I do not think, however, that their findings can be extrapolated to apply to the context of persuasion that occurs during conflict with romantic partners. Moreover, social acceptability rankings would likely differ when people consider using strategies to persuade their romantic partners.

Are gender differences in communication relevant to the study of imaginary communication? Edwards, Honeycutt, and Zagacki (1989) defined imagined interactions as “cognitive representations of interactive behavior in which the actor experiences the self to be engaged in communication with another” (p. 263). Participants completed a two section survey, with the first section being a 44 item Likert-scale regarding characteristics of their imagined
interactions, such as frequency and pleasantness. In the second section, participants answered several open-ended questions, including sharing actual lines of dialogue from past imagined interactions.

Many interesting gender differences emerged. Males had greatest variety of imagined interactions; however, females engaged in imaginary interactions more frequently and more pleasantly than males. Further, females reported engaging in more self-talk than males reported.

Relevant to this study, several similarities also became evident. Females and males engaged in imaginary interactions most frequently with a romantic partner regarding dating. Other topics mentioned by both sexes were work/job, conflicts, friends, and activities. Edwards et al. (1989) concluded that "males and females imagined communicating about the same topics and with the same types of partners. They are similar in their imagined levels of retroactivity and self-dominance. In these areas, males and females appear to think about communication in very similar ways" (p. 271).

Martin (1991), after developing the Relational Cognition Complexity Instrument (RCCI), studied its usefulness in investigating the nature of relationship thought. He based his research on the assumption that "there is a domain of social cognition which include all of an individuals thoughts about and understanding of their personal relationship experiences" (p.467).

Briefly, participants were asked to write descriptions of their relationships with a friend, romantic partner, and a family member. Answers were then coded for their level of abstraction and number of constructs. 100 undergraduates participated. Results did not indicate a significant correlation between length of relationships and participants' RCCI scores in describing them. On the average, females scored well higher than males. Martin suggested that gender differences
may have been due to females being socialized to be more in-tune with relationships, and/or that females just spent more time talking about relationships and could express themselves better.

Baldwin (1992) is a considerable advocate of the study of relational schemata. He explained relational schema as "cognitive structures representing regularities in patterns of interpersonal relatedness" (p. 461). Baldwin advocated the research methods of authors such as Bower et al. (1979) who simply ask participants to report the thoughts, feelings, and actions of self and other in a given situation.

Baldwin (1995) again in his later work, urged others to research the area of cognitions regarding interpersonal relationships. He has focused on the study of a relational schemata for attachment. He called for more researchers to use the tool of relational schemata to further integrate findings in this area among the different disciplines. I think that this study of conflict MOPs will certainly advance our knowledge in this area.

Related Communication Findings Regarding MOPs

Since its introduction in 1982, this theory has been used repeatedly as the basis for the examination of the existence of specific types of MOPs. Following is a brief review of the many studies that examine the existence and nature of MOPs.

Schank's (1982) dynamic theory of memory was also applied to the study of discourse structures. Kellermann, Broetzma, Lim, and Kitao (1989) conducted a two-part study designed to investigate the presence of an informal initial conversation MOP, as well as attempting to determine its content.

Initially, 158 surveys were completed that listed at least 20 typical verbal actions that occur in an initial, informal conversation. At least 20% of the respondents had to mention the verbal action for it to be included in the conversation MOP. Results indicated that a cultural
MOP for initial informal conversations does exist, and includes such actions as Greetings, Introduction, Hometown, Persons Known in Common, and Goodbyes. According to Schank, memory organization packets are organized around goals. Accordingly, the initial informal conversation MOP has the goal of “become acquainted by searching for commonalities” (p. 48).

In Part Two, these researchers tested the applicability of the conversation MOP to actual discourse. Does the MOP direct actual discourse behavior? Participants were grouped into dyads and engaged in informal conversations that were videotaped. Coders subsequently assessed the typicality of each conversation and then parsed the conversations into topic specific scenes. Actual conversation behavior highly correlated with the MOPs. This is the hallmark study of MOPs, because it links them to actual behavior. Not only was a MOP for initial conversation produced by participants, it was actually demonstrated to operate during initial conversations. These observations give credence to the importance of studying the further application of Schank’s (1982) theory. With this study, Kellermann et al. (1989) forged the link between memory organization packets and actual, observed behavior!

Kellermann and Lim (1990) further examined the application of Schank’s (1982) theory of memory structures to the movement through initial interactions that differed based on the participant’s interaction goals. Participants who were strangers were grouped into dyads and videotaped while talking. Before conversing, the participants read instruction sheets that varied their expectations for future interaction, need for information from the other, and how self-disclosive they should be. Coders watched the 197 tapes and segmented the conversations into scenes. Also, the lengths of the scenes were timed to determine differences in time spent on particular scenes when goals regarding future interaction were varied. This assumes that interactants utilize a set structure, but vary it based on the length of time spent on each topic or in
each scene. For example, participants with low acquaintanceship goals spent most of the
conversation time in the early scenes. Also, participants who wanted to get acquainted moved
through the scenes much faster and hopped from topic to topic.

The results indicated support for a universal conversation scene. Schank (1982) defined
universal scenes as "generalized action sequences that are role related but context free."
Kellermann and Lin (1990) extrapolated that a universal conversation scene would include the
following activities: getting facts, discussing facts, explaining facts, discussing goals/intentions,
and discussing enabling conditions for those goals/intentions. They contended that such a
structure enables us to engage in conversations when we have no knowledge of the topic.

If acquaintanceship goals of participants in initial informal conversations are varied, does
the ordering of scenes in discourse also vary? Due to normative sequencing of scenes in the
conversation MOP, the answer should be no. To answer this question, Kellermann (1991)
videotaped the interaction of dyads composed of strangers. Before conversing, participants were
given various acquaintanceship goals. These ranged from "find out as much as you can about
your partner" to "anticipate not seeing or talking to this partner again." The conversations were
then watched by coders who parsed them into conversational scenes and structures. The actual
discourse scenes were then compared to the scenes in the conversational MOP.

Results indicated very little variance in the ordering of scenes in conversation due to
different acquaintanceship goals. This supported the hypotheses that there is a universal scene
for initial conversation. Such universal scenes are thought to aid the advancement of
conversation. Clearly knowing what typically happens in a situation helps us to make
predictions about the behavior of others and thus directs our own behavior.
Honeycutt, Caneill, and Greene (1989) described four studies that tested the application of Schank’s (1982) theory of memory structures to the context of relational escalation. Subjects in Study One were asked to list the typical actions that occur as a relationship progresses from first meeting to extended commitment. The results indicated that there was a cultural meta-nop or image of the typical actions that occur during relational escalation. Additionally, women reported a larger number of actions in relationship escalation than the number of action reported by men. This may possibly indicate that women think more about relationships than do men.

Subjects in Study Two ordered 13 note cards that had the typical relationship actions typed on them, thus determining whether there is agreement on the sequence of actions within the relational escalation meta-nop. Results indicated great agreement on the sequence of actions and very minimal gender differences.

Subjects in Study Three were asked to rate the typicality and necessity of the 13 actions in relational escalation. Overall, subjects rated more actions as typical than necessary for relational escalation. Also, women evaluated more actions to be typical than men did. For example, overcoming crises was more typical and necessary for women than for men.

Subjects in Study Four read love stories which consisted of 13 sentences corresponding to the 13 actions of relational escalation. Subjects were asked to identify the different stages in relational escalation. Agreement on the stages was found, with no significant gender differences.

The findings from these four studies supported the application of Schank’s theory of memory organization to the study of communication behaviors in relational escalation. Honeycutt et al. (1989) concluded that relationship development may have been influenced by relational partners having different meta-MOPs regarding relational activities. They suggested
that cognitions drive behaviors in relationships. Thus, if couples have differing cognitions, it
follows that their expected and enacted behaviors would vary from each other.

Berger (1988) conducted a study of the planning behavior employed in obtaining a date.
Participants' responses were coded into CAUs (conceptual action units) based on Schank's
(1982) work. Participants listed the behaviors they would engage in to obtain a date. As a
follow up, Berger conducted a small pilot study where participants were videotaped asking for
dates during initial conversations. Participants had previously written plans for date-getting three
weeks prior to the videotaping. The basic hypothesis was that individuals with more complex
plans (meaning greater number of conceptual action units) would show less nervous behavior
adapters than individuals with simpler plans.

Berger's hypothesis was partially supported, although the results did not reach statistical
significance, due to design flaws reported by Berger. Interestingly, the behavior of men and
women was very similar. Berger (1988) concluded that "gender appears to make little difference
in the level of plan complexity, but does make a difference in the specific actions that persons
will use in carrying them out" (p. 113). The difference in action Berger refers to is the finding
that women were more likely than men to use hinting as a tactic.

Dynamic memory theory (Schank, 1982) has already proven itself to be directly
applicable to the study of initial conversations, and relationship escalation and de-escalation.
Kellermann and her associates established the link between MOPs and communication behavior.
This nexus provides the basis for the application of Schank's theory to the study of interpersonal
conflict, extending previous research on conflict and cognition. In particular, the present study
should widen the application of dynamic memory theory to many areas of communication study.
Final Arguments

This literature review has covered the diverse areas of gender differences in communication behavior, age and marital issues, conflict and cognition; and the application of Schank's (1982) theory of dynamic memory to the study of communication. Although varied in their scope, these areas of investigation can be brought together to shape an inquiry of the current approaches to explaining gender differences in communication.

The study of these theories is important, because each encourages further, more specific exploration. Should we investigate and describe the two separate cultures of men and women? Or should we, instead, examine the socialization process of women and men? Perhaps we should concentrate our communication investigations on variables other than gender. Whatever view researchers choose will clearly influence what substantive questions they will investigate. This study will test and compare the competing predictions of all three of these theories, thus providing a context to aid researchers in choosing what they are going to study, and how they will structure those future investigations.

Past research has generated many findings describing gender differences in communication behavior. We have noted that men and women differ in what conflict tactics lead to their long-term marital satisfaction. Additionally, men and women respond with different behaviors when they are unsatisfied (Acitelli et al., 1993). Wives seek closeness; whereas husbands seek distance (White, 1989). Also during dissatisfied times, wives are more emotional than husbands (Cunningham, Braiker, & Kelley, 1982; Gottman & Kroesoff, 1989). We may infer that during times of stress, men and women rely on tactics that are culturally approved and gender stereotyped.
In addition to examining conflict communication behaviors, researchers have also focused on examining the perception of conflict communication behaviors. Here, as well, men and women report differences. Briefly, women are more likely than their mates to make attributions about their mates' behaviors (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). Also, women, more often than men, conduct imaginary communication (Edwards, Honeycutt, & Zagacki, 1989). Lastly, women highly value relational talk (Acitelli, 1988) and use more abstract concepts to describe their relationships than do men (Martin, 1991). We are left with a picture of women thinking, talking and imagining about their relationships, more so than their male counterparts.

At this juncture, we can conclude that prior research supports the assertion that men and women actually do differ in the perception and conduct of conflict communication behavior. This empirical support leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis.

H1: Women will list more actions (quantified by the number of scenes reported) than men in producing a conflict MOP for romantic relationships.

Should the data support this hypothesis, with women listing more actions than men in their conflict MOPs, then support for the further study of gender differences will be offered. This finding would contradict the conception of those who theorize that men and women are more alike than dissimilar and that we should not focus on gender differences, but other variables to explain behavior.

That hypothesis alone, however, is not enough to determine whether gender differences may be attributed to socialization or culture. Thus, a further hypothesis regarding an interaction between gender and length of time spent in a relationship, in terms of number of actions listed in conflict MOPs, is required. Life stage, cohort, and intrinsic developmental processes can all be
described as influencing marital communication (Sillars & Wilmot, 1989). "Intrinsic developmental processes include the development of shared meanings and modes of conduct over time" (p. 226). If researchers are primarily investigating the early life stages, we are only seeing half of the developmental process. We need to fill in the gap in research by examining the ongoing development of couple communication over the life span.

Researchers have conducted limited studies regarding the relationship between longevity of relationships and marital issues. For instance, retired couples often use one confrontation style during an entire conflict; whereas, young couples change styles during conflict (Zietlow & Sillars, 1988). Additionally, couples report less arguing in old age (Argyle & Furham, 1983; Stinnett, Carter, & Montgomery, 1972; Suitor & Pillemer, 1987; Swensen, Zekew & Kohlhepp, 1981; Ward, 1993).

Differences in conflict frequency and tactic use between couples at different stages of longevity of their relationships may be explained by reviewing Berger's (1995) discussion of planning behavior. He asserted that the relative importance of attaining a goal may trigger planning to achieve the goal. It follows that the more important a goal is, the more likely a person will be to plan to achieve that goal. Considering marital conflict over time, I suggest that as conflict topics become less salient with age and time spent in a relationship, the need to create alternate conflict plans decreases. Also, as we age and spend time in our relationships, we can reach back into our MOPs and use an already established "routine." Further, as structures become less useful, they are deleted (Kellermann, 1995).

Hence, regarding this study I think that newly married couples will have highly developed conflict MOPs. They will develop them to cope with their many roles and varied goals as they progress towards child rearing. As time progresses, couples will eventually have
fewer differing goals and fewer salient sources of conflict. With less conflict interaction, their need for cognitive structures representing multiple tactics will lessen, eventually resulting in a streamlined cognitive structure containing only tactics that are called upon for the currently salient conflict issues. Accordingly, I propose that newly married couples will have conflict MOPs containing more scenes than the MOPs of longtime married couples.

The consideration of the interaction between gender and length of time spent in a relationship in terms of amount of actions found in a conflict MOP lead to the design of the following hypothesis and research question.

H2: The number of actions listed by conflict participants will be inversely related to the number of years spent in the relationship. Married couples with short relationships will have more actions in their conflict MOPs than married couples with long relationships.

Thus far, the first hypothesis focuses on gender difference and the second hypothesis focuses on longevity of marriages. A final question is necessary to examine the possible interaction between gender difference and longevity of marriage. Looking at the conflict MOPs of men and women in marriages of varying lengths will help to explain if gender differences increase, decrease, stay the same, or don’t even exist, over time spent in a marriage. The focus on the communication of young newlywed, and elderly longtime married couples will provide a test of the explanatory powers of the socialization and culture theories.

Do husbands and wives "socialize" each other over time spent in a marriage? This would presumably result in gender differences lessening over time as the two socialize each other. Such a finding would provide reasonable support for the socialization theory that suggests that males and females behave differently due to the differences in their socialization experiences. Over
time spent in a long-term marriage, couples interact and can slowly socialize each other, resulting in similarities over time, rather than continued differences.

If we find gender differences, but no interaction between longevity of marriage and gender differences, then support for the separate culture theory would be obtained. This would preliminarily indicate that over time spent in a long-term marriage, couples may form a unique sense of couple reality, but they still behave as though they are from two separate cultures with regards to gender differences in communication. Males rely on typical male behaviors in their communication. Females rely on typical female behaviors in their communication. Couples may form their own couple identity, but within that couple identity are two separate gender cultures with separate norms for communication behaviors.

Lastly, the results may indicate no, or very few, gender differences, regardless of longevity of relationship, as the "same culture" theory would suggest. This finding would further support the "same-culture" theory indicating that men and women are more alike than different, even as they continue through the life-stage continuum.

Finally, we have come to the essential question which will test the explanation powers of the competing gender difference theories.

R1: Will there be a statistical interaction between gender and longevity of relationship?

In conclusion, I have examined the evidence of communication gender differences in the attempt to explain communication behaviors. I have further discussed the absence of research findings regarding marital conflict communication in relationships with longevity. As was previously mentioned, the integration of these two areas of study provides a unique opportunity to investigate further the theories of differing socialization, different cultures, and the same
culture perspective in terms of gender differences in conflict communication. In the following chapter, I will explain my research procedures and instrumentation.
Chapter II

Method

Subjects

Participants were currently involved in their first marriage. They were split into two groups: married up to 3 years, and married 20 years or more. Only one member of the couple was asked to participate. I used a modification of Goodman’s (1961) snowball sampling procedure. A convenience sample of friends, relatives and coworkers, and church members were contacted and asked to name individuals that were currently married less than three years or more than 20 years. These individuals were contacted and asked to participate in the study. Further, they were asked to name eligible individuals for study participation. This snowballing continued until the goal of attaining 120 surveys was met. Interestingly, once data gathering was completed, it was difficult to stop the snowball. Some of the people in Group 1 (initial contacts) were survey administrators. Challenged by the task of finding enough participants, they were difficult to stop from collecting additional data. This procedure was very time-consuming, but once it gained momentum it was certainly worth the time investment.

Demographics

The sample consisted of 35 newlywed men, ranging in length of marriage from 1-36 months (mean = 17.8). There were 29 newlywed women who had been married from 1-36 months (mean = 17.9). The married over 20 years group was comprised of 25 men and 31 women. The men ranged in marriage length form 276-660 months (mean = 441.36). The women had been married from 252-624 months (mean = 380.13).
Procedure

The surveys were administered by the investigator and several trained administrators. The administrator explained the study by closely paraphrasing the script found in Appendix A. The administrator then distributed the surveys (see Appendix B) to the participants. Next, the administrator went through a sample survey (see Appendix C), indicating how it was to be completed. After participants completed the survey, they were thanked and the basic purpose of the study was explained. Lastly, the administrator gave each participant the debrief letter that is displayed in Appendix D.

Instrumentation

The instrument employed in this study was modeled on the methods of Bower et al. (1979), Kelzermann et al. (1989), and Honeycutt et al. (1989). The survey form consisted of directions and 20 large numbered boxes. The entire survey is presented in Appendix B. Participants were directed to list the typical verbal actions that occur during a typical disagreement with their spouse, with each action placed in a different box. Extra paper was provided upon request. Finally, the demographics section contained questions regarding such topics as length of marriage, age, and gender.

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained from this questionnaire were analyzed by an analysis of variance, with gender and longevity of relationship the independent variables, and number of actions in the MOPs the dependent measure.

The participants grouped the actions that occur during their typical disagreements into scenes, because what is important here is their perception of what constitutes a scene. It is their
MOP, therefore they will parse it into scenes that they think should be grouped together.

Enforcing a researcher-coded analysis of what constitutes different scenes would not truly describe the organizational cognition of the participants. Primarily what is of interest here is the organizational cognition of the participants. Coding procedures involved the counting of the number of scenes each participant reported, as well as recording of demographic information. At a later date, the actual content of the scenes should be examined. At this stage of investigation, it would be premature to do so.
Chapter III

Results

Surveys were gathered from 149 participants. Twenty-eight were excluded from analysis due to various reasons. One survey was not completely filled out. Two respondents were not currently married. 25 were excluded due to a misunderstanding of the directions. For example, respondents listed only their own actions, clearly wrote a dialogue and did not report verbal actions, provided a list of conflict topics, or simply stated that they never argued. The remaining 121 responses were coded to indicate gender, length of marriage, and number of scenes reported in the conflict MOP.

The application of the literature reviewed in Chapter 1 suggests several findings for this study. Briefly, the literature reviewed indicates that marital conflict decreases as time spent in a marriage increases. Therefore, newlyweds should report a higher number of actions in their conflict MOPs than the number reported by long-weds. The literature also indicates that women think about conflict and their relationships more often than their male partners think about conflict and their relationships. If what the literature suggests is the case, then the data should indicate that women report a greater number of conflict scenes in their conflict MOPs than the number men report in their conflict MOPs.

Further, predictions for expected data outcomes can be made based on the assumptions of the Socialization, Different Cultures, and Same Cultures theories. These possible predictions are summarized in Table 3.1.
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<th>Interaction</th>
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<td>Length</td>
<td>* Newlywed Men and Newlywed Women differ in the amount of conflict scenes they report.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different Cultures</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>* Newlywed Men and Newlywed Women differ in the amount of conflict scenes they report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>* Long-wed Men and Long-wed Women are similar in the amount of conflict scenes they report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Cultures Theory</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>* Newlywed Men and Newlywed Women report similar amounts of conflict scenes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* Long-wed Men and Long-wed Women report similar amounts of conflict scenes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Stage Theory</td>
<td>Length</td>
<td>Newlyweds and Long-weds differ greatly in the amount of conflict scenes they report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Actions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If we are socialized differently, then we should see large differences between the responses of newlywed men and newlywed women. After time spent socializing each other in a marriage, differences between long-wed men and long-wed women should be far less. If the data indicate that gender differences decrease with time, then that would support the socialization theory.

If the responses of men and women are different from each other at both the newlywed and long-wed stages, then the data would indicate support for the different cultures theory. If we are different at the early stages of marriage, and still different at the later stages of marriage, it would indicate that we are essentially from two different cultures.

Lastly, if the data indicates that men and women are similar to each other at both times, then that would indicate support for the "same cultures" theory. Thus, men and women are more alike than different, and are from essentially the same culture.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 1 stated that women will list more actions quantified by the number of scenes reported than men in producing a conflict MOP for romantic relationships. The data do not confirm that hypothesis (F=.447, d.f.=1, p<.505). Instead, women (mean = 9.08) and men (mean = 8.91) did not differ from each other in the number of actions they reported in their conflict MOPs. Table 3.2 shows the mean number of actions reported by men and women in each relational length group.

Not only are the number of actions within length groups similar, but also the standard deviation scores are highly similar, showing that the data is similarly grouped around the means
of each group. The mode number for newlywed men was 7. The mode for newlywed women was 11. The mode for men married for 20 years or more was 7. The mode for women married over 20 years was 8. Even the modes were highly similar between the genders within length groups. As evidenced by these data, women did not list more actions than men.

Table 3.3 Mean Number of Actions Reported in Conflict MOPs by Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Newlyweds</th>
<th>Oldweds</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=35)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(N=26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>9.97</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>7.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=29)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(N=31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>10.68</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>7.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=60)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>10.29</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>7.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=64)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(N=57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the number of actions listed by conflict participants will be inversely related to the number of years spent in the relationship. Stated differently, men and women married for fewer than 3 years would report more actions in their conflict MOPs than men and women married over 20 years.
The data strongly support Hypothesis 2 (F=21.803, d.f.=1, p<.0001). Newlywed couples listed an average of 10.30 steps, whereas, long-weds listed an average of 7.54 steps.

Table 3.2 ANOVA Summary Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.771</td>
<td>4.771</td>
<td>.447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>232.791</td>
<td>232.791</td>
<td>21.803*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender x Length</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.039</td>
<td>3.039</td>
<td>.285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>1249.227</td>
<td>10.677</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>11,287</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.001

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked if there would be a statistical interaction between gender and longevity of relationship. The data demonstrates no statistical interaction between gender and longevity of relationship with regards to number of reported conflict actions in a MOP (F=.285, d.f.=1, p<.595). This is best explained by examining Figure 1, found on the following page. The nearly parallel lines indicate no interaction. In this area of investigation, length of relationship affects genders to nearly the same degree.
Figure 3.1 Mean Number of Actions by Mean Number of Months Married
Summary

The data indicated that men and women, within groups, listed approximately the same number of conflict actions in their conflict MOPs. Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Men and women married less than three years reported more conflict actions than men and women married over 20 years. Hypothesis 2 was strongly supported. Finally, in answer to the research question, there was no interaction between length of relationship and gender. Interpretation and discussion of the data follows in the next chapter.
Chapter IV

In order to investigate the conflicting explanations for apparent gender differences in communication behavior, this study examined cognition at two ends of the life stage continuum. The different cultures and socialization theories make assumptions about the origin of gender differences. By extending these assumptions over the life span, one can attempt to predict communication behaviors. If we learn to behave differently because we are from two different cultures, then we should remain as different as our two cultures over the life span. In contrast, if we learn to behave differently through socialization, then over time spent being socialized through marriage, gender differences should decrease as men and women socialize, or learn from each other. Lastly, if we are more alike than different, and essentially from the same culture, then we should remain similar over the life span.

To reprise, Hypothesis 1: Women will list more actions (quantified by the number of scenes reported) than men in producing a conflict MOP for romantic relationships. Hypothesis 2: The number of actions listed by conflict participants will be inversely related to the number of years spent in the relationship. Married couples with short-term relationships will have more actions in their conflict MOPs than married couples with long-term relationships. Research Question 1: Will there be a statistical interaction between gender and longevity of relationship?

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1, which proposed that women would list more actions in their conflict MOPs than listed by men in theirs, was not supported. Men and women were remarkably similar in the number of actions they reported (mean for men = 8.91, mean for women = 9.08). Men and women appear to be operating with the same size memory organization packets for marital conflict.

Previously, conflict communication behavior has been linked to cognition by several researchers (Burggraf & Sillars, 1987; Burrell & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Fitzpatrick, 1987, 1993; Kelley et al., 1978; Lavin, 1987; Lloyd & Cate, 1985; Noller, 1993; White, 1989; Yelsma, 1984),
making the study of interpersonal conflict cognition relevant to conflict behavior. In other words, these past studies have laid the groundwork for the investigation of conflict communication behavior via the examination of conflict cognition.

Extending Kellermann et al.'s (1989) work with MOPs, we can infer that conflict MOPs reflect actual conflict behaviors. Recall that Kellermann et al. (1989) forged a link between MOPs and actual observed behavior. Their research on the MOP for initial conversations found that actual initial conversations followed the patterns demonstrated by previous participants in their initial conversation MOPs. By generalizing this finding, we can tentatively conclude that men and women are similar not only in the production of conflict MOPs, but also in their conflict behavior.

Conceivably, through accessing MOPs, rather than inducing participants to think about issues such as what type of tactics they regularly use, or the context of a conflict, participants may be abstracting and thinking on a higher level. This may be due to their focus on verbal actions to the exclusion of all other issues. By accessing the conflict MOP, we may be accessing a previously unexplored view of what actually occurs during marital conflict.

Kellermann (1995) explains:

Having multiple memory structures being used to store conversational episodes suggests that recall of particular episodes will depend on which memory structures are accessed at the time of recall. Cueing people to focus on and recall specific details related to conversational content would lead persons to access the actual scenes of the conversation MOP and attempt to tap memories from the particular episode in question. By contrast, cueing people to focus on broader aspects of the encounter, by suggesting they form an impression of the conversation, is more likely to encourage them to access the MOPs (form, topic, goal, etc.) that yield these types of descriptions and evaluations. Indeed, Stafford and Daly (1984) reported these results of memory for conversations when comparing a recall-instruction set to an impression-instruction set. Persons told to recall the specifics of a conversation made fewer inferences and evaluations and generated more content specifics than persons told to form an impression of a conversation. (p. 201)

Therefore, participants reporting conflict MOPs may be focusing on specific verbal actions and not making as many inferences and evaluations about the situation, their behaviors
and those of their partners. This might explain why this study of marital conflict found similarities where past research would indicate the potential for major differences. The majority of evidence from past conflict communication research would indicate that men and women would generate different sized conflict MOPs. For example, one would think that if women were thinking about conflict and relationships more than men were then the size of the conflict MOPs would differ between the two partners. This was not the case, however.

This study is not alone in finding men and women to be more similar than different. Men and women have been found to be similar in several research projects that could usefully be discussed again. Men and women reported using similar tactics in their marital relationships. Bell, Chafetz and Horn (1982) found more gender similarities than differences regarding strategy choices. Further, Steil and Weltman (1992) concluded that when access to resources is similar for both the man and the woman, the typical gender based sex differences in strategy choices were not apparent. Also, men and women seem very similar in their methods of imaginary communication (Edwards et al., 1989). Older men and women have similar perceptions of long-term marriage (Stinnet et al., 1972). They identify the same factors as important to the long-term success of a marriage (Lauer et al., 1990).

Given these similarities, why does the literature frequently report gender differences in conflict behavior when it appears that we are more similar than different? I will attempt to address this question during the discussion of Research Question 1.

Hypothesis 2

As hypothesis 2 predicted, there was a significant difference in the size of the conflict MOPs between the newlyweds and those married over 20 years. Newlyweds reported approximately three more steps (M=10.296) than people married over 20 years (M=7.54). This
finding is not surprising in light of the literature reviewed. For example, older adults process less information in bigger chunks (Biren, 1980), and newlyweds tend to use many tactics during conflict (Zietlow & Sillars, 1988). Further, as we age, a shared background helps to make communication more efficient (Tamir, 1984).

The difference between longevity groups may simply be a reflection of how much energy is being brought to the situation. A casual reading of the responses from the newlywed participants indicated that they were energetic during their conflict interactions. They try several tactics to resolve conflict. They strive for closure and often attempt to improve the mood of their partners. On the other hand, the older participants in this study indicated a lack of energy and more of a “life is short, what does it matter in the long run” attitude. Responses varied from the idea that they love each other and that little things don’t matter, to a resigned expression that it is too late to change their partner’s behavior and takes too much energy to find and train a new partner.

Secondly, the difference in conflict MOP size between longevity groups may be attributed to differences in future planning behaviors. In the discussion of life planning, it was reported that the young have many plans for the future (Tamir, 1984), and base their interactions and decisions on these future plans. It follows that older adults, especially those in the stages after retirement, would have smaller or shorter life-plans than young newlyweds.

Older couples may feel that it is not necessary to consult life plans and consider the long-term repercussions of communication behaviors during each conflict episode. For example: a newlywed couple may view their current communication as setting precedents for the future, much more so than older couples whose precedents have been set long ago. If newlywed Roy agrees that his wife should buy an item on their credit card, he may see this as leading down a road of financial insecurity and poor spending practices in the future. In contrast, if retired Georgine agrees to the purchase of her husband’s new truck, she may not consider the possibility that this would evolve into a habit for the rest of their marriage.

Further, the life-plans of the older group may be less salient to the topics about which
older couples argue. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Berger (1995) asserts that the relative importance of attaining a goal may trigger planning to achieve the goal. It appears that as the number of salient conflict topics decreases, so too does the need or desire to create alternate conflict plans. In other words, older couples find less to argue about. When they do argue they tend to do so in comfortable routines without much variety in tactic choices. To conclude this section, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Certainly, life-stage must become a more important consideration in communication research.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked if there would be a statistical interaction between gender and longevity of relationship, in terms of the size of the conflict MOP. There was no significant interaction. The responses of the men and women were highly similar within marriage longevity groups. That is, the conflict MOPs of newlywed men were highly similar in number of actions to the conflict MOPs of newlywed women (mean for men = 9.97; mean for women = 10.68). In a like manner, the conflict MOPs of women married over 20 years were highly similar in size to the MOPs of men married over 20 years (mean for men = 7.50; mean for women = 7.58).

The finding of similarities in size between men and women in same life-stage groups is an important finding as it indicates that we are from the same culture. This similarity has not been so clearly indicated in the area of interpersonal conflict to this time. Based on these data, I must conclude that men and women are more similar than different.

Further, these findings support the position that we are from the “same culture,” as Burleson et al. (1996) suggest. They wrote that past research has focused too much on finding gender differences, thus overlooking many relevant similarities. Burleson et al. (1996) explain the same culture theory as:

An alternative viewpoint, which we will term the same culture perspective, maintains that although differential socialization experiences (along with, perhaps, biological factors) lead to some variation in the ways men and women approach the social world, similarities between the sexes far outweigh the differences . . . Thus, in contrast to the different cultures perspective, the same culture perspective suggest that men and women look for
very similar things in their intimate relationships, conduct their intimate relationships through similar forms of behavior and value the same sorts of communicative skills and abilities in their partners. The same culture perspective recognizes that there are, of course, some differences in the ways in which men and women communicate, but maintains that these differences need to be viewed against the backdrop of substantial similarities. (p. 206)

They conclude, "more complete assessments of sex and gender differences in communication will need to utilize multiple age cohorts drawn from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups" (p. 221). This study did examine gender differences in different age cohorts and certainly further studies examining other cohorts are indicated.

To use Gray's (1992) terms, men aren't from Mars and women aren't from Venus. Then what is the answer for the cause of all the perceived gender differences we are reading about? If it isn't the simple answer of gender, then it must be something else. Could it be that researchers are looking so hard for differences that we find them? Wright (1988) states, "for various understandable and occasionally regrettable reasons, social scientists, including relationship researchers, are attuned to finding and reporting differences. As applied to studies of gender and friendship, this sometimes leads to an emphasis on trivial differences at the expense of broader and more consequential similarities" (p. 371).

The picture of gender differences in communication is blurry at best, but close to resembling a puzzle with several pieces missing. I am reminded of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. The first man feels the tail and describes a snake. The second man feels the side of the elephant and describes a wall. The third man feels a leg and describes the trunk of a tree. Each one encountered the elephant and described the whole beast based on the examination of what was in front of him. In a like manner, how we design our research determines what part of the elephant is in front of us to be described.

Many researchers have reviewed the state of our knowledge of gender differences in communication behavior and concluded that our knowledge is limited. Basically what has evolved is a quite a confusing compilation of findings (Canary & Hause, 1993; Fisher, 1983; Martin & Craig, 1983; Wright, 1988). According to Fisher (1983), "the research literature
includes a number of confounding variables that lead to the inconclusive response to the question whether males and females communicate differently." (p. 225.)

Canary and Hause (1993) go so far as to ask if there is any reason to investigate sex differences. They determined, after looking at several meta-analyses on gender difference research, "sex differences are not powerful. Instead, the differences are modest and vary substantially according to the interaction context" (p.135).

Strongly expressing their evaluation of the current state of gender difference research, Canary and Hause (1993) state:

Currently, sex and gender enjoy a special research status. More precisely, sex is seen by many as a pervasive influence on communication such that few studies are complete until sex differences are explored. Often the burden of the researchers is to articulate reasons not to examine sex differences instead of reasons to examine sex differences. Sex and gender should not enjoy special status; in fact sex and gender should be classified as overused constructs that require especially compelling rationales before they are included in research projects. Once the presumed intuitive rationales for sex are no longer seen as persuasive, then perhaps researchers will extend or derive theories of sex relevant to communication. (p. 139)

If gender explains few differences in behaviors, then some other variables must be having an influence. Finding these is our future challenge. Gender is a convenient classification/demographic variable, being both observable and easily accessible through research questionnaires, as people are usually forthcoming regarding their gender. I think research design in the future will by necessity be much more complicated. Cross-situational traits are hard to classify and quantify; yet I agree with Canary and Hause (1993) in considering that to be the future direction of communication research.

One such case was found in Fisher's own work when another variable was found to be more explanatory than sex. Fisher (1983) found:

the competitive or cooperative orientation of the interactants apparently exerts a far greater impact on the communication behaviors of dyads than the sexual composition of the communicative system. Perhaps other interactional contexts are also more significant than sex-based differences. If that is the case, then future research into sex-based communicative differences should take into account the interactional context and it
potentially greater impact on communicative behaviors. (p. 237)

What does this indicate in terms of the study of conflict communication in the future, and why have we seen so many gender differences in conflict behavior in past studies? Gender may be acting as a "carrier variable," a convenient dichotomy that masks the actual variables that are causing differences to be reported. It was suggested earlier in Fisher's (1983) study that competitiveness and cooperation completely swamped the significance of gender differences. Several diverse variables may be underlying the common findings of gender differences in marital conflict. The identification of these variables will shape communication theory in the future.

Shortcomings of This Study

Turning now to difficulties with this study, I begin with the separation of age from length of marriage. This is a common flaw in studies of long-term marriage. We need to be mindful in our research that we may be confusing chronological age with historical time (Stevenson, Paludi, Black, & Whitley, 1994).

In order to address this issue, I tried to find a group of newlyweds that were over 40 years old to develop a test to separate out age from length of marriage. This attempt met with little success in this study, resulting in their exclusion from this analysis. At this point it is difficult to form concrete conclusions as to the influence of age or length of marriage. A reasonable question to ask is whether newlywed elderly go through the same stages as newlywed young people. Further, we must ask if communication patterns of the couples in long-term marriages are as they are due to their biological age or the actual length of their relationship.

During the administration of this survey, several procedural and methodological problems were encountered. First, just finding participants was extremely time consuming. I had initially planned to visit groups and meetings and gather as much data at a time as possible. This was quickly demonstrated to be infeasible, which is why I turned to snowball networking.

Second, some participants had difficulty completing the questionnaire. This might be
because generating a MOP was a new way of thinking for them. Several of the participants did not understand the directions, or didn't read them carefully before they began. A few of the older participants may not have completely heard the directions. In order to administer this survey again, I would move the demographic questions forward to the beginning of the survey to ensure completion of the surveys. Hopefully gathering this information at the outset before completing the conflict MOP portion of the survey fatigues participants would increase the number of usable surveys. I also would pilot test with several example MOPs to see if the directions could be explained more fully.

Third, several participants reported never arguing with their spouses. This presented a difficulty in gathering data about conflict, eliminating several potential participants. Fourth, some people skipped over important questions at the end (such as length of marriage) rendering their survey unusable. Fifth, data collection without an example was very frustrating for participants. Once a sample was introduced, their comfort level rose markedly.

Suggestions for Future Research

People who are currently involved in long-term marriages are underused, valuable resources. The older participants in this study were very willing to discuss marital communication and share anecdotes and personal principals regarding marital conflict. Interacting with participants after they completed the surveys was highly informative. Often their narrative stories indicated great insight into marital communication. Their experiences should not be ignored; rather they should be recorded. It is up to researchers to find new and creative ways to access this great body of virtually un-mined relational knowledge that exists in our culture.

Communication research has focused on young adults and lacks data on the communication patterns of older adults in long lasting relationships (Huston & Ashmore, 1986; Sillars & Wilmot, 1989). To continue using the elephant metaphor, research in the past has primarily focused on one end of the elephant, the young end if you will. Research has described the young end of the marital spectrum, but what we have about elderly marriage is primarily
narrative data, or data gathered in the pursuit of marital satisfaction information.

Future research is necessary to provide more support for the link between memory organization packets and behavior. A logical next step for this study would be to closely follow the patterns of research established by Honeycutt, Cantrill and Greene (1989) when they examined relationship escalation and de-escalation. Based on an analysis of the content of these responses, several conflict stories could be developed. A new group of participants could read the stories and provide MOPs for what they think is going on in the story. Ultimately, a comparison of actual conflict behavior with actual conflict MOPs would be optimal.

Content analysis of the MOPs would be informative and provide an opportunity for future comparisons. This would involve the development of a highly specific coding procedure. Formal content analysis was not done in this study. After this investigation, it is now possible to follow Kellermann et al.’s (1989) procedures and formulate a coding criterion using their 20% inclusion criteria. Kellermann (1995) writes “MOPs that relate to conversational behavior of marital couples, although theoretically and pragmatically interesting, have no necessary requirements of ritualized behavior across couples, making identification of scenes difficult” (p. 185-186). These MOPs are so highly idiosyncratic it may be that too much information will be lost when the conflict MOPs are condensed into one generic conflict MOP. This is difficult to predict without actually making the attempt to do so.

Conclusion

Development of the “same culture” theory is indicated as necessary at this time. Canary and Hause (1993) contend that sex and or gender should be strongly justified before consideration as a variable to study. They state “progression of the scientific study of sex differences requires a theory that can explain the complex ways sex interacts with situational factors to affect communication behavior” (p. 141). I agree that situational traits should be examined first. The sex differences which do seem to occur account for very little of the variance. As Canary and Hause (1993) report after conducting their meta-analysis of hundreds of studies, sex differences account for 1% of the variance in most studies.
In conclusion, men and women have similarly sized conflict MOPs for marital conflict. Time influenced conflict cognition to the same extent for both sexes. Once again, as Filipp and Olbrich (1986) said, “time makes a difference” (p. 353). Marriage obviously changes over the life span and though we may one day be able to visit Mars and Venus, it will be a joint exploration, not a homecoming.

The findings from this study indicate that men and women are from the same culture. Men and women in the same marriage length groups were the same or similar in the size of their marital conflict MOPs supporting the same culture theory of Burleson et. al (1996). At this time, a new theory of sex differences is not indicated, rather the development of the same culture theory could be instrumental in guiding future research. Pointed research questions targeting the underlying variables, which sex differences are apparently masking, are essential to the advancement of our knowledge. Taking the sex out of communication research and focusing on the uncovering of distinct situational variables will guide communication research in the coming millennium.
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APPENDIX A

Administration Script

"Thank you for giving me the opportunity to meet with you today/this evening. I have studied public speaking, business communication, and conflict communication, to name a few areas of my interest. Currently, I am working on a research project about marital communication. In particular, I am interested in typical patterns of communication during a disagreement.

Now I will be handing out sheets of paper asking you about what happens during a typical disagreement with your spouse. Your responses are completely anonymous and confidential. I will have no way of knowing who filled out any of the surveys and no one involved with this group will be permitted to read them.

This sheet of paper (hold up paper) is a conflict behavior report. I want you to list the typical verbal actions that occur when you and your mate have a disagreement. For example, verbal actions can include: repeating, denying, apologizing, offering to compromise, bringing up the past, changing the subject, avoiding the topic, yelling, being sarcastic, and joking. Those were just some examples to help you think about verbal actions. Please don't feel that you have to include all or any of them in your response.

I am interested in your own thoughts about you and your mate's typical conflict pattern. I am interested in the typical behaviors that occur during your typical disagreements. I am not asking you to write what was said, word for word, simply think about a typical conflict and write the behaviors which typically occur in the order in which they happen. It is important that you place each behavior in a separate numbered box. If you need more paper, please ask and I will provide more.
If you don't want to participate, simply return the sheet blank when they are collected. You will have 5-10 minutes to complete the survey form. The last page asks you some demographic questions. This won't take long to complete, but it is very important to my project. Once again, I want to assure you that your answers are totally anonymous. Please don't rush, you will all have enough time to finish. Afterwards, I will answer your questions and explain the idea behind my research project.

At this time, I ask any of you who are sitting next to your spouse, to change seats so that you are not near each other. Please don't discuss your answers. Please stay quietly in your seats until everyone has finished."
APPENDIX B

Conflict Behaviors Report

Please list the typical verbal actions that occur when you and your mate have a disagreement. Here are some examples of verbal actions: joking, being sarcastic, yelling, avoiding the topic, changing the subject, bringing up the past, offering to compromise, apologizing, denying, and repeating. Those were just some examples to help you think about verbal actions. Please don’t feel that you have to include all or any of them in your response.

I am interested in your own thoughts about you and your mate’s typical conflict pattern. I am interested in the typical behaviors that occur during your typical disagreements. I am not asking you to write what was said, word for word. Simply think about a typical conflict and write the behaviors which typically occur in the order in which they happen. Please place each behavior in a separate box. If you need more paper, please ask and I will provide more.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Verbal Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Please indicate the answers that best describe you.

1. Gender:
   - Male
   - Female

2. Age:
   - 18-25
   - 26-35
   - 36-46
   - 47-57
   - 58-68
   - 69-79
   - 80-85
   - 86+

3. Marital Status:
   - Currently Married
   - Divorced
   - Widow/Widower
   - Never Married

4. If you are currently married, how many years have you been married? __________

5. If you are currently married, is this your first marriage?
   - Yes
   - No

6. If this is not your first marriage, is it your:
   - Second
   - Third
   - Fourth
   - Other

7. Do you have children?
8. If you do have children, do they live at home?

☐ Yes
☐ No

9. If you do have children, how old are they?

Child 1 
Child 2 
Child 3 
Child 4 

10. Are you employed?

☐ Yes
☐ No

11. Are you retired?

☐ Yes
☐ No

12. Year of retirement: 

13. Is your spouse employed?

☐ Yes
☐ No

14. Has your spouse retired?

☐ Yes
☐ No

15. Year of Retirement: 

Thank you very much for participating!
**APPENDIX C**

Conflict Behaviors Report

Please list the **typical verbal actions** that occur when you and your mate have a disagreement. Here are some examples of verbal actions: joking, being sarcastic, yelling, avoiding the topic, changing the subject, bringing up the past, offering to compromise, apologizing, denying, and repeating. Those were just some examples to help you think about verbal actions. Please don’t feel that you have to include all or any of them in your response.

I am interested in your **own thoughts** about you and your mate’s typical conflict pattern. I am interested in the typical behaviors that occur during your typical disagreements. I am not asking you to write what was said, word for word. Simply think about a typical conflict and write the behaviors which typically occur in the order in which they happen. **Please place each behavior in a separate box.** If you need more paper, please ask and I will provide more.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Verbal Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I brought up the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>He changed the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I brought it up again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>He made a joke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I cursed at him</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>