

Getting to It: The Science of Intimacy

Paul David, Ph.D.

The evolution of couple therapy as a scientific enterprise is a work in progress. Like other fields in mental health, couple therapy is in a continual process of refining its theory and practice by means of empirical investigation. This article discusses the research findings and contributions made by John Gottman and his associates that advanced the field of couple therapy into a more informed science of intimacy. Special emphasis is placed on the key factors that predict success and failure in intimate relationships, and based on Gottman's Sound House Model, key strategies are discussed about what intimate partners can do to improve their relationship with one another.

The Science of Intimacy

Empirical research has consistently been the underlying basis for conducting couple therapy, but it wasn't until a series of studies conducted by John Gottman and his associates (Gottman, 2002; Gottman & Levenson, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1999; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994) that the scientific basis for improving intimate relationships became more firmly established. These researchers developed innovative observation and coding methods to record the complex ways in which marital partners interact in non-clinical settings. These studies were not focused on clinical treatment per se, but on identifying key communication and problem solving patterns of both healthy and unhealthy marital relationships.

The observational studies by Gottman and his associates produced groundbreaking findings that were influential across the theoretical spectrum in the field of couple therapy. The general approach they took in these studies was to measure any variable they thought might be likely related to how couples fare over time, then they would follow the couples over many years, tracking how the couples' marriages would progress. These studies included newlyweds, couples in the first seven years of marriage, gay and lesbian couples, violent marriages, and long-term couples in their 40s and 60s (Atkinson, 2005).

A number of these studies were conducted in an apartment laboratory at the University of Washington. Couples lived at this special lab for 24-hour periods with video cameras recording everything that happened between them. These studies used a multi-method approach, observing the couples in three domains: (1) interactive behavior—coding partners' behavior and emotions as they interacted in various contexts, (2) perception—studying partners' perceptions of themselves and each other through questionnaires, video recall procedures, attributional methods, and interviews, and (3) physiology—measuring partners' autonomic, endocrine, and immune system responses. These researchers found that variables in each of these domains predicted different marital outcomes (Atkinson, 2005).

These researchers developed interview protocols documenting the participants'

marriage histories, their parents' marriage histories, their philosophies of marriage, and their levels of comfort with basic emotions. They also gathered qualitative data about the rituals, roles, life dreams, and goals that guided the couples in their search for meaning. When these researchers had measured everything they considered relevant, they then sent the couples back home, and followed them carefully—for, in some studies, up to 20 years (Atkinson, 2005).

Failure & Success in Intimate Relationships

Many of the findings from these studies were summarized in Gottman's (1999) *The Marriage Clinic* and *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*. From this research he established that there are four major predictors of relationship dysfunction that he called the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

The first Horseman is criticism. This type of dysfunction involves partners blaming their problems on one other's character flaws. The second Horseman is defensiveness. This relational dysfunction takes place when partners react to one another's criticisms by deflecting them back—often by becoming the victim or counterattacking. The third Horseman is contempt. Caught in a criticize-defend cycle of interaction, partners' frustrations morph into feelings of superiority and disgust toward one another. The fourth Horseman is stonewalling. This dysfunction involves partners shutting down from one another. When this occurs, partners curtail their interactions and become emotionally withdrawn.

From this same research, Gottman and his associates also identified key predictors of relationship success. When their research team observed couples discussing their problems, those with the highest relationship satisfaction expressed understanding and empathy in their disagreements. Moreover, it wasn't just that they were more positive, it was that the relationship of their positive to negative interactions maintained a ratio of at least five-to-one (5:1).

Conversely, Gottman and his associates discovered that couples with low relationship satisfaction and high divorce rates had much lower ratios at a level of one positive interaction for every negative one (1:1). These researchers also found that this ratio for successful couples was on the average much higher at a level of twenty-to-one (20:1). Based on these findings, they concluded that successful couples have relational bank accounts of positive interaction that they draw upon to help them get through the rough times when they are in conflict.

Sound Marital House Model

Building on an impressive body of evidence from his research about what predicts marital success, Gottman (2002) developed his Sound Marital House model of intimate relationships. In this model, Gottman organized his findings into seven different levels of effectiveness. The first three levels form the foundation of this relationship house and the other four levels constitute its superstructure. Brief descriptions of these levels of relational effectiveness are as follows:

Level #1: Developing Love Maps. At the most basic level, successful partners develop a working knowledge of each other's internal and external worlds. As a result, they know each other's likes and dislikes, friends and enemies, aspirations and insecurities, etc. In effect, they have a detailed road map of each other's lives and the make sure they continually update it as their lives change.

Level #2: Promoting Fondness & Admiration. Making use of their knowledge of each other, successful partners regularly express caring behavior toward one another. In doing so, they are particularly mindful about expressing their respect and affection toward one another in small and everyday ways.

Level #3: Bidding for Connection. Successful partners make sure to pay attention to each other's bids for connection. These bids may be for attention, affection, conversation, humor, emotional support, and so on; but these partners make an effort to be responsive to these requests for acknowledgement.

Level #4: Generating Positive Sentiment Override. This level is achieved when the first three levels have been firmly established. Positive sentiment override is a state of perception in which successful partners perceive neutral and negative events as positive. When this phenomenon takes place, partners are more likely to experience their relationship in a positive light and are less likely to find fault with one another.

Level #5: Managing Solvable Problems. Successful partners focus their problem solving efforts on issues that are subject to negotiation and don't get bogged down in problems that are embedded in their personality, coping, and lifestyle differences. When conflicts arise, these partners apply effective communication and problem solving strategies such as using soft startups, complaining constructively, soothing tension, making repairs, accepting influence, and finding compromise.

Level #6: Honoring Dreams. Successful partners make efforts to know and make room for one another's life dreams. This effort helps make their relationship secure enough for the partners to more fully be themselves and to find ways to realize their aspirations.

Level #7: Creating Shared Meaning. Successful partners work at building common meaning in their relationship. As a result, they carry out formal and informal rituals of connection, supporting each other's life roles, emphasize shared values, and identify common life goals.

Together, these seven levels comprise the essential building blocks for achieving success in intimate relationships. In referring to the scientific relevance of these building blocks, Atkinson (2005) points out that "for the first time, we now have... compelling empirical evidence that there are personal prerequisites for succeeding in intimate relationships. Those who want to succeed in love must have specific interpersonal abilities, and we now know exactly what these abilities are" (p. 2).

Summary

Gottman's research provides compelling evidence that there are a critical set of relational capabilities that intimate partners need to employ if they are going to maintain a healthy relationship. While Gottman (2011) went on to develop his own therapeutic method of enhancing these capabilities, his findings provided a sound scientific basis for the clinical significance of enhancing these relational capabilities in couple therapy across different treatment modalities. This achievement constituted a major breakthrough that enabled the field of couple therapy to become a more advanced science of intimacy.

References

- Atkinson, B. J. (2005). *Emotional intelligence in couples therapy*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Gottman, J. M., Coan, J., Carrere, S., & Swanson, C. (1998). Predicting marital happiness and stability from newlywed interactions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60, 5-22.
- Gottman, J. M. & Levenson, R. W. (1984). Why marriages fail: Affective and physiological patterns in marital interaction. In J. Masters (Ed.) *Boundary areas in social and developmental psychology* (pp. 110-136). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Gottman, J. M. & Levenson, R. W. (1988). The social psychophysiology of marriage. In P. Noller and M. A. Fitzpatrick (Eds.), *Perspectives on marital interaction* (pp. 182-200). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Gottman, J. M. & Levenson, R. W. (1992). Marital processes predictive of later dissolution: Behavior, physiology, and health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63, 221-233.
- Gottman, J. M., & Levenson, R. W. (1999). Rebound from marital conflict and divorce prediction. *Family Process*, 38, 237-292.
- Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles of making marriage work*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers.
- Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Gottman, J. M. (2011). *The science of trust*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Gottman, J. M. (2002). Building the sound marital house: An empirically derived couple therapy. In A. Gurman & N. Jacobson (Ed.), *Clinical handbook of couple therapy* (3rd ed.) (pp. 373-399). New York: Guilford Press.
- Jacobson, N. L., & Gottman, J. M. (1998). *When men batter women: New insights into ending abusive relationships*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Levenson, R. W., Carstensen, L. L., & Gottman, J. M. (1994). The influence of age and gender on affect, physiology, and then interrelations: A study of long-term marriages. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 56-68.
- Levenson, R. W., & Gottman, J. M. (1983). Marital interaction: Physiological linkage and affective exchange. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 56-68.
- Levenson, R. W., & Gottman, J. M. (1985). Physiological and affective predictors of change in relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 49, 85-94.