

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Marital Process Predictive of Later Dissolution: Behavior, Physiology, and Health

Gottman, J. & Levenson, R., 1992. Marital Process Predictive of Later Dissolution: Behavior Physiology, and Health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 63 (2) 221-233

Key Words: Relationships, Gottman Ratio, Positive statements, Divorce, Marriage

Summary/Conclusions

In the present study, researchers were interested in the processes that led to marriage dissolution (divorce). Seventy-three married couples were studied for a period of four years. To see what patterns of interactions contributed to couples staying together, separating, or divorcing. Researchers discovered that those marriages with patterns of more positive activity were less likely to end in divorce.

Limitations of Information

The study contained a small population of married couples. The study dealt with married couples. While the principles of healthy relationships may share many qualities, there may be factors that help or hinder that are not present in working relationships. There may have been factors (e.g. societal norms, number of children) that the researchers did not control for that influenced the outcome. Researchers cautioned that these findings were based on correlational data, a small sample, and a small number of divorces.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Healthy Relationships Depend on Positivity

A common word of advice when providing feedback to individuals is to provide four positive statements to every negative statement. Even though many individuals follow this advice not many people know the research behind the practice. The current article was one of the first to link relationship stability with the statements individuals exchange in a relationship.

In 1983, researchers recruited married couples in Bloomington, Indiana by placing an ad in the local newspaper. The ad recruited 79 married couples for the study. Couples were asked to complete a questionnaire, complete a video interaction, and follow-up with an individual recall session to rate the previous interaction. For both the interaction and recall sessions, physiological responses were collected. Interactions were coded for a number specific variables that were categorized as positive or negative. After a period of four years, researchers contacted at least one spouse from the recruited couples from the study. Individuals were asked about their marital satisfaction, health, and current marital status.

After the four year period, 49.3% of the couples reported considering dissolving their marriage, 24.7% of the couples separated, and 12.5% of the couples were divorced. The data collected provided support for the cascade model of marriage dissolution and the balance theory of marriage. More importantly, the researchers discovered preliminary support that marriage satisfaction could be determined by analyzing the ratio of

positive to negative statements. In the taped interviews, successful couples were more likely to meet or exceed five positive statements to every negative statement.

Practical Applications for Probation Officers:

- ✓ When working to engage probationers in a positive working relationship, try to identify and highlight positive behaviors, decisions, and strengths more frequently than expressing disapproval and disappointment (4:1).
- ✓ Use assessment information to identify strengths and protective factors that you can affirm and appreciate.
- ✓ Use specific examples to highlight your messages and feedback.
- ✓ Ask a coach (e.g. supervisor, colleague) to keep track of your positive to negative statements and provide you that ratio.
- ✓ When using SBC, try running the ratio report as an indicator of the interactions you are having with probationers.
- ✓ Ask probationers for feedback on how positive or negative the working relationship seems.

Practical Applications for Probation Supervisors:

- ✓ When giving feedback, generally provide officers with at least four positives to every negative statement about their work.
- ✓ Engage in conversations with staff about techniques (e.g. motivational interviewing) that can be utilized to increase the positive interactions with probationers and colleagues.