

Disruptions in daily routine can adversely affect a couple's conversation

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Is the communication in your relationship a little frosty? It may be the little things you're not doing in daily routines are playing a part, says researcher Leanne Knobloch. Things like forgetting to walk the dog or fuel the car or take out the trash.

Disruptions you cause in your partner's routines can affect the quality of conversation, separate from your general satisfaction with the relationship, says Knobloch (pronounced kuh-NO-block), a professor of communication at the University of Illinois.

In a study published in the December issue of the journal *Communication Research*, Knobloch studied 125 married couples, using both questionnaires and short, lab-based conversations captured on videotape.

She found that those who reported more interference from their partners "were less fluent in their messages, their conversations were less coordinated, and they showed less liking," she said. Those who reported more facilitation from their partners "were warmer and showed more affiliation in their conversations."

"In general, couples who said that they were interfering with each other were a lot less warm, and their conversations were a lot more negative in tone," she said.

"When you take relationship satisfaction into account, you still see these effects. There's something apart from just the overall climate of the relationship that makes what my partner is doing on an everyday level really matter in my communication."

In conducting her study, Knobloch was working from a theory called the Emotion-in-Relationships Model, which suggests that emotion within a relationship is rooted in how your partner either

interferes with or facilitates your daily routines. Facilitation can include welcome interruptions in routines, such as surprising a partner by making dinner.

These actions are important, she said, because a key part of building a relationship is figuring out how to integrate the two partners' daily schedules.

"The theory says that routines are mindless, but when the interruption happens, we really focus on it and we attend to it and we get charged up ... we experience some emotion," she said.

What Knobloch was seeking to do in her study was extend the theory beyond the experience of emotion, to see how those interruptions affect partners' communication behavior.

"Trying to understand how interruptions leak out in people's behavior is, I think, very important," she said. "Emotions can kind of come and go - everybody experiences negative and positive emotion in relationships - but if the interruptions carry over into how I talk to you and how you talk to me, then that becomes part of the fabric of the relationship."

In conducting the study, Knobloch and a team of three graduate students recruited 125 married couples from the local community. During a session with each couple at a campus research lab, the partners separately completed questionnaires about the relationship, including questions about how much interference and facilitation they received from their spouse.

Next, they were asked to talk to each other for 10 minutes, alone but recorded on camera, about a positive aspect of their marriage. They then separately completed questionnaires about the conversation. A similar process was followed for a second 10-minute conversation in which they discussed a surprising event in their marriage.

In evaluating the conversations later, using both the self-report questionnaires and the coding of independent student observers who viewed the videotape, Knobloch found that the nature of the relationship often showed through. “You start the cameras and you get a real sense of the climate of a relationship, even though it’s in a lab, even though couples know that cameras are watching,” she said.

The link between interference/facilitation and the nature of couples’ conversations was shown to be statistically significant but not huge, Knobloch said. This is not surprising given the nature of the study and the need to rely on short artificial conversations in a lab, she said.

“If these effects are showing up in the lab, what are these couples doing at home when there are no cameras? If they’re trying to be on their best behavior, in some ways that’s a more stringent test,” she said.

The results are important, Knobloch said, given the well-established link between the quality of communication in a relationship and satisfaction with that relationship.

“If we can help people do more facilitating and less interfering, then they’re going to have better conversations, and if they have more pleasant conversations, they’re going to be happier.”

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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