

Relationship Matters - Podcast Number 13

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Interviewer: From Champagne College in Burlington, Vermont, this is Relationship Matters. Hello, and welcome to Relationship Matters, the podcast of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. I'm your host, Dr [unintelligible 0:00:28 Biana Holmes]. Welcome to podcast number 13 from sunny southern California we've got on the phone today Tamara Afifi.

Respondent: Hello.

Interviewer: Hi, Tamara. She's going to talk to us about why women find avoiding conflict more uncomfortable than many do. Dr Afifi is a professor in the department of communication at the University of California in beautiful Santa Barbara. Welcome to Relationship Matters.

Respondent: Yes. Thank you so much for inviting me, I really appreciate it.

Interviewer: Now, Tammy, Santa Barbara will always have a very special place in my mind and heart. I spent some time as a visiting scholar back in 2007 in the psychology department there. It's a great place to live, work and play.

Respondent: Yeah, definitely. Not bad.

Interviewer: And also, Tammy, I want to introduce you to Matt Grasser our studio technician. Say, hello, Matt.

Respondent: Hi Matt.

Male: Am I going to find out that men are still cavemen today?

Respondent: No. No, you're not. Not at all.

Interviewer: The article that we're going to talk about today is called the Standards for Openness Hypothesis, Why Women Find Conflict Avoidance more Dissatisfying than Men. And it's free to download from the website of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships courtesy of Sage Publications and it can be found in the February 2012 issue of the journal, that's volume 29, issue 1. I should mention that the paper is co-authored by Andrea Joseph and Desiree [unintelligible 0:01:55 Aliz] also of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

So why don't you tell us a little bit about why you got interested in this in the first place?

Respondent: Well, I've been studying topic avoidance and secrets and disclosure for a really long time and so have my colleagues, like John [unintelligible 0:02:13 Coghlan and Anita Vengelisti]. And we found through a series of studies that the theories say that people need a balance of being open but yet having their sense of privacy. And so you kind of theoretically need a balance between what you tell people but yet what you keep private. But when it comes down to it, when we actually collect the data, we find that people don't like it when they think their partner is avoiding with them. So the theory sometimes contradicts the actual data. And so in a series of studies we've been trying to figure out why that is. And whether it's the same for men and women. And I'm actually not a big fan of conducting research on sex differences or gender differences.

Interviewer: Why is that, Tammy?

Respondent: Well, because I think that most people blow them out of proportion. Like personally I kind of can't stand books, Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus, just because [unintelligible 0:03:11].

Interviewer: They're not? Wait, men are not from Mars and women are not from Venus?

Respondent: Well, some people would disagree and clearly like that perspective. I just think that it polarises the sexes and I feel like people stereotype. And so I'm generally the person that always says the sex differences actually aren't that big and in fact they're very, very small. And there's actually more difference within sexes than between. So there's more difference, for example, if you compare within women than when you compare women against men. But that never really gets discussed in the social science research.

Interviewer: For what it's worth, I totally agree with you. Sorry, Dr Grey.

Respondent: And so there's a lot of I think individual differences and personally, for example, I'm much more masculine in a lot of my communication characteristics than I am feminine. But this is one area where there might be some sex differences that are worth exploring. And so that's kind of what got me to think that there are some differences, especially with regard to disclosure and social support and things like that where men and women might differ a little bit.

Interviewer: What do you mean by disclosure?

Respondent: Well, you know, for example, some research has shown over the years that women are more likely to disclose than men and people are more likely to go to women who disclose. And so men and women like to go to women when they need advice, or when they want to talk about deeper issues. Women tend to be a little bit more responsive than men and women tend to also be better at reading

people's non-verbal cues and so they're better able to detect for example when a problem exists. Now that can be both good and bad, right. It could be good in the sense that women are socialised to detect those things and they're kind of socialised to become what we call the relationship maintenance experts. And so they detect problems and they want to fix them because they've learned early on as little girls that they're communal, they talk with groups of their friends, and they're socialised to talk and to detect things. But it can be bad if they look for problems that don't really exist and sometimes blow things out of proportion. So there tends to be some conflict around that. That when should a topic be discussed and when is it better kind of left alone.

Interviewer: Right here we're already starting to break this with an anecdotal of myself. I mean I'm the person, the male, who everybody goes to for disclosure and relationship advice and my wife, mmm, well, she's certainly – she certainly probably can carry a backpack that proportionally to her weight is about twice as much as I can. So, hmm.

Respondent: Why do you think it is that people go to you to disclose?

Interviewer: Maybe because I'm a relationship researcher and it's my interest.

Respondent: For example, yeah, that might be part of it.

Interviewer: So what did you find?

Respondent: I'll back up before I tell you about the actual study. I think that we live in the United States, you have to keep culture in context. And so we live in a very what we call an individualistic culture. We also are a very open culture. We like to be direct. So we have a lot of sayings in the US like 'tell it like it is', 'don't beat around the bush', 'spit it out'. So people like to be direct, people like to be open. And so you have – that's a standard that we have in the United States that doesn't apply in some other cultures. And so people have these expectations for openness in relationships and we're arguing that it's particularly salient for women because women have been socialised to be the ones to talk about their problems and to try and fix them because they're the ones who are supposed to maintain harmony in the family as women.

So men and women should have this standard for openness in the United States, but for women it's probably a little bit more salient. But what we're looking at is the gap between the standard that we have in society and what we – what our partner's actually doing. So, for example, if as a woman I detect when my partner's really avoiding with me and that really goes against what I think is my expectation for that treatment which is informed by what I think society views as a good relationship, then the bigger that gap the more dissatisfied I'm basically going to be in that relationship.

- Interviewer: Right.
- Respondent: Like in the US for example we equate often openness with healthy relationships. In fact if you pick up a lot of like popular magazines like Cosmopolitan you'll see phrases like 'ten ways to get your man to open up to you'. Openness is equated with healthy relationships. And so women kind of have that standard that they judge their relationship against. So the bigger that gap the more that they're probably going to like be dissatisfied and mull over it when their relationship doesn't match, what they think it should be. And then they're going to think about that for a while and the relationship until they come to some type of conclusion or they talk about it with their partner.
- Interviewer: So we've had Mars Venus and we've had Cosmo all mentioned in the last five minutes.
- Respondent: And I'm actually kind of countering against them, right, I don't think that's a good thing.
- Interviewer: So tell us the bottom line, what kind of advice do you have for people?
- Respondent: I need to tell you first I guess here's what we found and then I can tell you what the advice that I would have.
- Interviewer: All right, I'm jumping way ahead because I'm exciting about it but go ahead.
- Respondent: So basically we brought these couples into the lab and they were dating. We had them talk about something [unintelligible 0:09:06] and then we asked them before and after how much they avoided in general and then how much they felt they avoided in the interaction with their partner and how much they thought their partner avoided talking about the specific topic with them. And then we measured their satisfaction before and after. And so then they left the lab and then we asked them to come back into the lab a week later and then we assessed their satisfaction again and we also asked them how much they ruminated – that's a fancy word for just mulling, when you can't stop thinking about something. So we asked them how much they couldn't stop thinking about the topic, and their partner's community, and how much the lab affected what they thought.
- Interviewer: Now you say men and women, were these old, young, young couples, older couples...
- Respondent: These were college age dating partners.
- Interviewer: Does it matter?
- Respondent: Yeah, it would matter actually because I think there are huge generational differences in disclosure and privacy. That's a whole

other topic. But I do think that young people who have grown up with social media like Facebook and reality television do disclose more and their privacy boundaries are more fluid, like they'll disclose things online that even I, you know, would never think about disclosing just because my privacy boundaries are different. But I didn't grow up for most of my life with reality television or something like Facebook.

So I do think there are like generational differences and that. So college students are going to be much more open and they've been educated to be open in their relationships as well. So anyway I mean part of the interesting finding is that both men and women – I found this in a few of my studies actually – when men and women are dissatisfied in their relationship they both avoid talking about issues with their partner. So it makes sense that when you're unhappy you just kind of avoid your partner. So they both kind of if they're dissatisfied go into that interaction not wanting to talk much about the topic, basically producing conflict in their relationship.

Interviewer: Do we know which comes first between those two?

Respondent: Well, that's actually what I've been studying the past six years because people used to always assume just with simple one shot surveys that when you're avoiding it makes you dissatisfied but it's actually bidirectional and so if you're dissatisfied you're going to avoid talking to your partner sometimes. And so it definitely goes both ways but not equally for men and for women.

So, for example, men and women who are dissatisfied avoid with their partner in a conflict inducing discussion but it bothers women more when their partners avoid with them than it does men. So men avoid talking about in the interaction and then when they're done they're kind of done with it. Women if they detect their partner's avoidance become dissatisfied because they begin to think about why, like why are you not talking with me about this, and it bothers them. Sometimes because they feel like their partner doesn't think it's as big of a deal and the fact that they don't want to talk about it bugs them because they feel like if it was a big enough issue for you, you should want to talk about it with me.

And so what we found was women were bothered by their partners' avoidance but men not. Men and women kind of mulled over it during that week after and then they were even more dissatisfied with their relationships at the end of that week. And then we've done diary studies where we've looked at it over like a two week period and found exactly the same thing. If they're dissatisfied both men and women avoid but the avoidance is more likely to bother women than men and affect their commitment and affect their satisfaction. And again it's only primarily because they have this standard that's a little bit different than men for openness.

- Interviewer: Right...
- Respondent: But I think the point really when you look at these two differences they're still not very big.
- Interviewer: Right, so that's the caveat obviously is don't...
- Respondent: Exactly. There are these small differences but they're small. I mean it's really still I think it's a lot more about individual differences and it's about the expectations that individuals have.
- Interviewer: So you're saying that gender matters but really what matters more is individual differences to some degree. In other words, just because you're a male or female doesn't mean you fall into any one of these perfectly.
- Respondent: Exactly. And I think it's about a lot of what we find distressing in our relationships is about the matching of expectations. And so if you have two people who don't – who are great with avoidance, if you have two avoiders but who like avoidance then I don't think there's an issue. But if you have one person whose standard for openness is different than another then that's something that you need to talk about and you need to work around. And it's not just disclosure, that happens in every type of construct you're talking about. People for example what a lot of affection from their partner and they're not getting it, that's going to make you dissatisfied. Versus if people are okay not receiving a lot of affection, neither partner, then there may not be as big of a deal.
- Interviewer: But that's a little error that any of our listeners could take away from this, and what we don't want is for them to go, "Okay, you're a male or you're a female so you behave this way because you're a male," right?
- Respondent: Exactly. Yeah. And so I was really worried about doing some research on sex differences because I really – I don't really buy into it very much because life isn't like that, it's a lot more complex than that. And you really do need to treat people as unique.
- Interviewer: Just like gender intelligence doesn't really exist.
- Respondent: Yes. So, yeah, I think that's kind of the moral of the story.
- Interviewer: So, again, so now that you got to say all of that I get back to the excited little kid in me who goes, "Okay, what is your advice?"
- Respondent: I think the advice is to really think about what your partner wants out of a relationship. What they want in terms of a lot of things. What they want in terms of openness, what do you want in terms of relationship maintenance things, like what you want to do to keep the spice in your relationship, what you want in terms of affection, and then how can you best meet your partner's needs and have your own

needs met. And try and work on that continually in your relationship. And I would really like to see how some of this stuff plays out in marriage. Most of my research focuses on marriage and families actually and not dating partners, but I do do some research on dating. But I think that's when it gets really hard is when people get really settled in their relationships and they have to figure out how to navigate those waters long-term.

Interviewer: And that's exactly why we have Matt, our anecdotal guinea pig right here in Vermont.

Male: Look, can you two just come up with a test to find out what type of woman my wife is and then just build me a reference guide so I can deal with her, that would be super awesome and you guys could really make some super money out of that.

Interviewer: One day we're going to have her in here to answer about that.

Male: That'll be exciting. That'll be an exciting day. You'll find out that I'm the woman.

Interviewer: Hey, I was just thinking the same thing. We're sensitive guys. Let me just ask you, Matt, for a second. Do you recognise yourself in this, are you the avoidant guy or are you the communicator, what are you? I realise you're just an n of 1.

Male: No, I'm the over-communicator.

Respondent: Oh, wow.

Male: Yeah. I'm the over-communicator.

Interviewer: Yeah, so am I.

Male: And what I also do is I'm the – part of – over-communication is sometimes good but when you never let things go that's bad. And I think of it as I'm just communicating, and my wife thinks of it as you will not let anything go.

Respondent: Yeah. You're more the demander. You demand to talk about issues. Do you think you're what we call a ruminator, do you mull...

Male: Ah, I'm not a ruminator I'm the ruminator.

Respondent: Yeah. Because when you were talking I was like, oh you're a definite ruminator. And actually we study not just cognitive rumination where you can't stop thinking about something, but verbal rumination, so when you can't stop talking about something.

Male: I think probably good ruminators make good researchers as well.

Respondent: I'm a ruminator so that must mean I'm a good researcher.

- Interviewer: You are a great researcher, not just good. Personally as a male I will have to say that I am also absolutely the demanding communication. I don't ruminant though. I demand it. And I demand that we speak about everything in blunt honest, blunt brutal honesty, get it out there, put all the cards on the table, negotiate and move on. And that's how I am.
- Male: I'm even ruminating over like a minor purchase at the grocery store.
- Respondent: Oh, my god.
- Male: The entire way home, like, should I really have spent the extra 20 cents on the named brand, whatever.
- Respondent: Well, [unintelligible 0:17:57] serious.
- Male: It rules my life.
- Interviewer: Well, Matt, we'll have an individual session later.
- Male: Thank you.
- Respondent: So do you think that you're outliers or do you think that you're mainstream?
- Male: I think we're probably at the very top end. I don't think we're mainstream at all either of us.
- Interviewer: I think we're absolutely awesome. What are you talking about? It's a little unfair because obviously I work with relationships, I study relationships, I'm interested in relationships, so it's kind of who I am. Yeah, no, I guess I'm not – I don't know, you'd have to ask my wife, what's it like being married to a relationship researcher? Of course you are married to a relationship researcher, so what's that like?
- Respondent: [unintelligible 0:18:40] because both of us are relationship researchers, we're married to each other and we have children together so that's – our poor children some day.
- Interviewer: You're listening to Relationship Matters. I'm your host, Dr Biana Holmes. If your beaches are not quite as pretty as those in Santa Barbara or you just don't have any beaches, you could always get your thrill on by downloading this paper and improving your own relationship. You can download it for free from Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. And, Tammy, if we link you in with some of our Facebook users would you be willing to specifically answer some questions from audience members?
- Respondent: Oh, yeah, great.

Interviewer: Yay, you heard it there. You find us on Facebook by searching for Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. And Tammy, I want to thank you for a great conversation and you are a fabulous researcher.

Respondent: You're joking. No, thank you for a fabulous time. I appreciate it.

Interviewer: Thanks a lot. Enjoy the sun.

Respondent: I will, thanks.

Interviewer: All right, bye-bye.

Respondent: Bye.

Interviewer: Relationship Matters is a production of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships and Sage Publications. You can subscribe through iTunes by searching for Sage Podcasts or access the series from the webpage of the journal. Send us an email at jsrprpodcast@gmail.com, follow us on Facebook by searching for Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, or follow us on Twitter, jsrprpodcast. The music you've been hearing is by Urban Delights, more at urbandelights.net. Thank you for listening and remember we're talking Relationship Matters because relationships matter.

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