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'SWEET PEA' AND 'PUSSY CAT': AN EXAMINATION OF IDIOM USE AND MARITAL SATISFACTION OVER THE LIFE CYCLE

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One hundred and fifty-four couples participated in this study to assess the relationship between their recalled use of idiosyncratic communication and marital satisfaction over the life cycle. Couples ranged from 'newly married' to 'married over 50 years'. Each couple was given the satisfaction sub-scale of Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment scale and were asked to recall idioms they use within their marriage. The hypothesis that satisfied husbands and wives report more idioms than unsatisfied spouses was supported. Results also suggest that spouses' use of idioms declines over the life cycle. Couples married less than five years with no children reported using the most idioms; couples in later stages recalled using the fewest number of idioms. The notion that idioms are developed and used in the early stages of relationships was supported by these findings.

Married couples create a 'culture of two' in which an idiosyncratic mode of communicating emerges to lend itself to increased intimacy (Betcher, 1987) and thus, most likely, to satisfaction within the relationship. Empirical evidence, however, is lacking to validate this hypothesis. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between couples' recalled use of idiosyncratic communication and the marital satisfaction of each spouse over the life cycle.

Idiosyncratic communication, the unique or 'personalized' communication behavior developed and maintained within relationships, is an important aspect of relational cultures (Bell et al., 1987; Betcher, 1987; Hopper et al., 1981). Baxter (1987) asserts that symbols are the essence of the relational culture and has identified idiomatic expressions as one type of relationship symbol. Denzin (1970) believes idiosyncratic means of communicating are most significant. He explains:

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'Social relationships ... contain ... unique vocabularies of meaning and motive, and most important, symbol systems that have consensual meaning only to the participants involved' (p. 71). Betcher (1987) further recognizes the importance of idiosyncratic communication: 'The bond of secrecy around such communication confirms [the couple's] uniqueness, sets them apart from other people, and helps establish a boundary' (p. 48). As such, unique communication and intimate relationships are symbiotic.

Hopper et al. (1981) studied the personal idioms of married and cohabiting individuals who revealed that idioms build cohesiveness and emphasize the identity of the pair. The researchers identified eight categories of idioms: (1) Partner nicknames; (2) Expressions of affection; (3) Labels for others outside the relationship; (4) Confrontations; (5) Requests and routines; (6) Sexual references and euphemisms; (7) Sexual invitations; and (8) Teasing insults.

Bell et al. (1987) replicated this study with romantically involved heterosexual couples. They suggest that intimacy is probably both a manifestation and a cause of idiomatic communication. Bell & Healey (1992) examined personal idiom use among friends and found a relationship between idiosyncratic codes and relational solidarity.

The present study seeks to fill a gap in past research, which has studied idiom use of friends and young, intimate couples who were either dating or newly married. The current investigation recognizes the importance of examining happily and unhappily married couples at all stages of the life cycle, and the potential change in idiom use over time. Couples in later stages of the life cycle are particularly valuable sources of information on marital satisfaction (Pearson, 1992).

Marital relationships change over time. In general, the literature reveals trends of a general decline in expressiveness and directness as spouses age (Sillars & Wilmot, 1989). Personal idioms similarly change. Hopper et al. (1981) found that most idioms were developed when couples were dating through the first few years of marriage and suggest idioms become less significant over time.

The relationship between good communication and marital satisfaction has been studied before. One aspect of communication which appears to be related to marital satisfaction is the use of idiomatic codes. In his assessment of happily and unhappily married couples, Navran (1967) reported that satisfied couples tend to personalize their language symbols and report frequently using 'words which have special meaning not understood by outsiders' (p. 175).

An idiomatic system of communicating facilitates a 'shared reality', or greater intimacy and togetherness, which is reportedly an emphasis of satisfied couples (Sillars et al., 1987). Idiom use is related to commitment, loving and closeness in romantic relationships (Bell et al., 1987) and related to solidarity among friends (Bell & Healey, 1992). Research reporting the positive functions of idioms within relationships (Betcher, 1987) adds further evidence to the potential relationship between idiom use and satisfaction within marriage. In light of the research reviewed, the following was hypothesized: *Hypothesis 1: Husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction is positively correlated with the total number of recalled idioms. Hypothesis 2: The number of idioms used between spouses will be significantly different at different stages of the life cycle, following a general pattern of decline.*

Method

Participants for this study were acquired through students enrolled in introductory

communication classes at a mid-sized midwestern university. Each student was given an envelope enclosed with two copies of one sub-scale of Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale, a questionnaire eliciting idiom use and demographic information, and directions for completion. The students were instructed to give this packet to a married couple of their acquaintance.

The marital satisfaction sub-scale from Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) was administered to measure marital satisfaction. The DAS has been widely used by marriage researchers. The 32-item, self-report questionnaire, designed to assess marital adjustment, consists of four sub-scales: dyadic satisfaction, consensus, cohesion and affection, each of which can be isolated and measured separately without loss of reliability or validity (Spanier, 1976). This study used only the 10-item sub-scale designated to measure satisfaction. To create uniformity of measurement, response options on all questions were changed to a 5-point scale.

Upon receipt of the packet of materials from the responsible student, the participants reported demographic information, including how many years they had been married and the general age category of their children. The couples were then divided into four life-cycle stages, a modified version of divisions used by others (Anderson, et al., 1983; Sillars & Wilmot, 1989).

Stage 1: Young couples (newlywed couples to 5 years of marriage, without children).

Stage 2: Childbearing couples (couples expecting a child, or with children ages 1 to 5 years).

Stage 3: Mid-life couples (couples with children in school and still living at home — grade school through the first year in college, approximately ages 6 to 18).

Stage 4: Empty nest/retirement couples (couples who have had children, but all of the children have left home).

Only two couples reported five or more years of marriage with no children and were excluded from the analysis.

The questionnaire instructed the couple together to complete the idiom report form, a variation of Bell et al.'s (1987) form. They were asked to write (or describe if it was nonverbal) personal idioms they used within their relationship, what the idioms meant and how long they had used the idioms. Since idioms are difficult to recall, couples were encouraged to identify them over a few days or a week as they were used in their everyday interaction.

Two copies of the satisfaction measure of Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale were also enclosed. Instructions required the couple to fill out the DAS individually and separate envelopes for each scale were included.

A chi-square was performed on the four stages of the life cycle and each couples' total number of reported idioms. Husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction was correlated with total number of recalled idioms by the couple. Alpha was set at $p < .05$.

Idioms were also categorized according to the typology from Hopper et al.'s (1981) research. Intercoder reliability was satisfactory, with intercoder agreement using Cohen's Kappa = .85. Frequencies of each idiom type at each stage of the life cycle were computed.

Results

Of the 300 initial surveys distributed to married couples via introductory communi-

cation students, 154 usable and complete surveys were returned. Twenty-six (17 percent) were Stage One couples, 20 (13 percent) were Stage Two couples, 69 (45 percent) were Stage Three and 39 (25 percent) were Stage Four. Twenty-nine (19 percent) couples reported having no children, 70 (45 percent) had one or two children, 51 (33 percent) had three to five children and 4 couples (3 percent) reported having more than five children.

One hundred and sixteen couples recalled at least one idiom. From these couples, a total of 370 idioms were reported. Four couples recalled nine or more idioms, one couple identified eight idioms, three couples recollected seven idioms, five couples recalled six idioms, seven were able to identify five idioms, twenty-four couples reported four idioms, twenty-one recalled three idioms, thirty-one named two idioms, twenty couples identified one idiom, and thirty-eight couples reported no idioms.

The first hypothesis was confirmed: the marital satisfaction of both husbands and wives was positively correlated with the total number of recalled idioms. Correlations were also computed between idiom frequency and spouses' satisfaction at each life stage. Results of these correlations are located in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Correlations between husbands' and wives' satisfaction with idioms at each life stage

	Husbands	Wives
Stage 1 (<i>N</i> = 26)	.29	.18
Stage 2 (<i>N</i> = 20)	.13	.17
Stage 3 (<i>N</i> = 69)	.30*	.25*
Stage 4 (<i>N</i> = 39)	.08	.01
All stages	.21*	.22*

Note: Asterisks indicates significant at $\alpha = .05$.

The non-significance of the correlations for Stage One and Stage Two couples may be a result of the small sample of couples in these stages and the consequent low statistical power of the tests. The pattern of correlations generally indicates small correlations for Stages One through Three couples, but not for Stage four couples. It appears that personal idioms may be related to satisfaction for all couples, except those who are in the empty nest/retirement stage.

Husbands' and wives' satisfaction scores were also correlated with the number of each type of idiom. All correlations were non-significant, probably due to often small numbers of each type of idiom. The highest correlations were husbands' satisfaction and the couples' use of Expressions of Affection ($r = .15$, *d.f.* = 76, $p < .05$), and Requests/routines ($r = .13$), wives' satisfaction and couples' use of Partner nicknames ($r = .12$), Confrontational idioms ($r = .12$) and Sexual invitations ($r = .13$).

In the attempt to obtain a more informative analysis of the strength of the relationship between different types of idioms that couples use and their reported satisfaction at each life stage, Pearson *r* correlations were computed for each of the eight idiom types and spouses' reported satisfaction scores at each stage of the life cycle. Again, due to the size of the sample and the frequently small number of idioms in each category at each life stage, none of the correlations was significant.

Correlations of frequencies of each idiom type and marital satisfaction at each

stage, although non-significant, yielded some moderate correlations. The strongest positive relationship was Stage One couples' satisfaction and their reported use of Sexual references and euphemisms (husbands' $r = .35$, d.f. = 25, $p > .05$; wives' $r = .41$, d.f. = 25, $p > .05$). Interestingly, Stage Two couples' satisfaction was negatively correlated with the use of Sexual References and Euphemisms (husbands' $r = -.22$, d.f. = 17, $p > .05$; wives' $r = -.24$, d.f. = 17, $p > .05$). The strongest positive correlation for Stage Three couples was husbands' satisfaction and the couples' use of Sexual invitations ($r = .29$, d.f. = 62, $p > .05$). Analysis of Stage Four couples indicated the strongest relationships as follows: a negative relationship between both spouses' satisfaction and use of Labels for others outside the Relationship (husbands' $r = -.27$, d.f. = 33, $p > .05$; wives' $r = -.25$, d.f. = 33, $p > .05$), a positive relationship between wives' satisfaction and Confrontational Idioms ($r = .28$, d.f. = 33, $p > .05$) and negative for Sexual references and Euphemisms ($r = -.25$, d.f. = 33, $p > .05$), and a positive relationship between husbands' satisfaction and idioms of Requests and routines ($r = .24$, d.f. = 33, $p > .05$).

The second hypothesis stated that reported idiom frequency would be significantly different at different stages of the life cycle represented by a general pattern of decline. Results indicated a significant difference in couples' reported use of idioms at different stages of the life-cycle ($\chi^2(27) = 41.15$, $p < .05$). The average number of reported idioms by Stage One, Two, Three and Four couples was 3.9, 2.25, 2.3 and 1.6 respectively. Results of post hoc tests with Tukey's HSD indicated that the average number of idioms reported by Stage One couples was significantly different from idioms reported by Stage Two couples ($t(44) = 3.12$, $p < .05$), Stage Three couples ($t(93) = 3.03$, $p < .05$) and Stage Four couples ($t(63) = 4.20$, $p < .05$). All other comparisons were non-significant.

Tukey's HSD tests were also conducted to determine significant differences between the idiom types at each stage of the life cycle. Results indicate that Stage One couples were significantly different in their use of Partner Nicknames than Stage Two and Four couples, and were significantly different in their use of Confrontations, and Requests and Routines than couples at all other stages. Stage Three couples also reported significantly different numbers of Partner Nicknames than Stage Two and Four couples, and significantly more Sexual Invitations than couples at all other stages. Table 2 reports mean frequencies of each idiom type as reported by couples at various stages.

TABLE 2
Mean frequencies of idiom types at each life stage

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Nicknames	1.3	.60	.83	.46
Expressions of affection	.69	.40	.28	.33
Labels for outsiders	.00	.00	.03	.13
Confrontations	.26	.10	.04	.03
Requests & routines	.85	.45	.20	.18
Sexual references & euphemisms	.23	.15	.10	.10
Sexual invitations	.42	.55	.81	.31
Teasing insults	.04	.05	.01	.05
Total	3.9	2.25	2.3	1.6

Discussion

Overall, couples married no more than five years with no children used more idioms than childbearing couples, mid-life couples, and empty nest or retirement couples. Couples married less than five years with no children reported significantly more Nicknames, Confrontational idioms, and idioms of Request and Routine than couples at all other stages. These differences suggest that idiom use might have a unique function in the developing stages of a relationship.

It is also possible that, as relationships progress from dating to longer periods of maintenance, idioms might not be as salient as during early initiation and developing stages; idioms become integral and taken-for-granted as part of the fabric of the relationship. The use of special phrases or names over a long period of time may render them common rather than unique or idiosyncratic. Thus, although they might be less salient, they still serve important functions.

The number of idioms couples at each life stage recalled in this study are insightful when compared to those of dating couples in Bell et al.'s (1987) report. The average number of idioms reported by dating couples in their study was $\chi = 6.47$. As reported, numbers of idioms recalled by couples in this study were much lower, ranging from 3.9 for Stage One to 1.6 for Stage Four couples. Thus, personal idioms may decline from dating stages to married stages of relationships.

Significant correlations between idiom use and satisfaction among Stage Three couples suggest their idioms are important during the middle stages of a relationship. Although correlations between idiom use and satisfaction were non-significant for Stages One and Two couples, results suggest that a larger sample might reveal that idioms are, in fact, related to the satisfaction of couples in earlier stages of marriage. Significant correlations for Stage Three couples are consistent with Betcher's (1987) assertion of the importance of play and use of idiomatic communication in the enduring relationship. The significantly higher use of Sexual Invitations by Stage Three couples adds further evidence to Betcher's suggestion that play is an important part of a satisfying and lasting relationship. Significant correlations for couples in earlier stages would be consistent with research that suggests that idioms are commonly developed and used during the early stages of a relationship (Hopper et al., 1981).

One possible rival hypothesis to the results obtained in this analysis emerges from the fact that life-cycle stage and age are confounded. Participants were not asked to report their age. It is possible that age and stage were related such that older couples were those in later stages. Thus, the question emerges: do couples use fewer idioms as they get older, or do couples in later stages use fewer idioms than couples in earlier stages of the relational life cycle? Such a hypothesis should be considered in future studies, particularly in the light of the research on communication between aging spouses (e.g. Sillars & Wilmot, 1989).

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