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# Mapping the topography of couples' daily conversation

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports the results of an examination of the daily conversational behaviors of 10 satisfied couples over a period of 1 week. Examination of the data revealed that couples' conversations could productively be categorized into 13 categories (in order of frequency): self-report, observation, back-channel, other-report, TV talk, partner's experiences, miscellaneous/uncodable, household task talk, humor, plans, narratives, positivity, and conflict. Additional analyses indicated that couples were more likely to engage in conflict, humor, household task talk, planning and observations on the weekend, whereas their weekdays were distinguished by a greater occurrence of other-report, self-report, partner's experiences and narratives. Finally, examination of couples' daily satisfaction indicates that Wednesdays and Saturdays were the least satisfying days, whereas Mondays were the most satisfying.

**KEY WORDS:** communication • conversation • couples' talk • interaction • relational maintenance • romantic relationships • satisfaction

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Perhaps one of the most important issues raised in the 1990s in the field of personal relationships was the need for scholars to examine the routine and mundane interactions of relational partners (Acitelli, 1993; Duck, 1990, 1994; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). To date, however, relatively few scholars have done so. A few notable exceptions include Duck, Rutt, Hurst, and Strejc's (1991) diary study of everyday communication, Goldsmith and Baxter's (1996) diary study of speech events, and DeFrancisco's (1991) examination of the conversational work performed by wives.

Duck (1995), most prominently, has argued persuasively for the value of daily interaction to personal relationships. He maintains that the essence of a relationship lies in talk; he says, in fact, that couples 'talk their relationships into being.' He, along with Acitelli (1988, 1993), suggests that the creation and maintenance of ongoing relationships is 'constituted in talk.' A variety of other scholars (Berscheid, 1995; Burleson, 1995; LaRossa, 1995) have also argued that the field of personal relationships is in need of 'careful, close descriptions' of what people 'do' when they are in relationships (Kenny, 1995). Why, then, have so few studies of this type been conducted?

Most likely, the answer lies with the difficulty inherent in studying everyday interaction. To examine what people 'do,' one must have access to mundane interaction over a relatively lengthy period, at least longer than a few hours. Gaining access to individuals' private lives can be challenging, finding methods of data collection that are effective but reasonably non-intrusive is tricky, and analyzing the data once it is gathered is time-consuming. Nevertheless, if one is to provide a close description of daily conversation and life, such problems must be addressed.

This article provides preliminary findings of just such a project. It is a response to the call for a study of couples' daily interactions that involved collecting all of the conversations that occurred among a set of 10 couples for a period of 1 week. This project generated 172.7 hours of natural talk that were tape-recorded in the couples' homes as they went about the routine activities of daily life.

### **Examining mundane interaction**

Although few studies have taken as their focus a broad analysis of the varied types of talk that make up mundane interaction, numerous studies of isolated, individual conversational features have been conducted. For example, conversation and discourse analysts have explored the everyday construction of speech activities such as gossip (Bergmann, 1993), compliments (Pomerantz, 1978), teasing (Alberts, 1992), telephone openings (Hopper, 1989), and the like. However, none of these studies attempted to map the topography of everyday interaction; that is, none has examined, over time, the variety of conversational features people perform in relationships.

Goldsmith and Baxter (1996), however, attempted to do so by developing a taxonomy of speech events people perform in their relationships. In the first of a series of four studies, undergraduate students were instructed

to keep detailed logs of their conversational interactions. Based on the participants' self-reports, the authors derived an initial taxonomy of speech events. The taxonomy was then tested in three remaining studies, from which the authors derived 29 speech events. These speech events included categories such as *small talk*, *gossip*, *love talk*, and *serious conversation*. Although this series of studies provides a useful category system, because the categories are based on remembered and reconstituted conversations, it is not clear if actual discourse can be productively categorized in this way.

Duck et al. (1991) also conducted a series of studies in which they asked individuals to record logs of their conversational experiences. Rather than examine the *types* of conversational events constructed within romantic relationships and friendships, they analyzed the associations between conversation quality and type of relationship, sex of conversational partner, and day of the week. They found that, overall, the conversations of friends and romantic partners differ from one another in their internal conversational dynamics and the ways in which they were interpreted. Specifically, participants had a slight preference for female conversational partners, and Wednesday was the most conflictual day of the week for most dyads. The authors found that, in important ways, conversations with lovers were rated lower in quality than one would expect intuitively, especially relative to those involving best friends.

Although both studies offer important insight into the conversational practices of relational partners, because they rely on diary studies, they cannot tell us exactly what it is people 'do' when they interact, nor can they reveal how frequently such events occur. DeFrancisco (1991), however, did analyze actual, routine interaction. She recorded an average of 12 hours of interaction in the homes of seven White, heterosexual couples by placing omni-directional microphones in the couples' primary living areas. Despite this rich data set, however, the only conversational features she examined were talk time, question asking, topic success/failure, and turn-taking violations. Her findings, that women did more conversational work and were more likely to be silenced, are useful, but her analysis does not provide a broad view of couples' daily interaction patterns.

As Ginsburg has argued, studies of relationships often make claims about 'what people *might* say and do in their relationships, or of what they *report* having said and done. But analyses of what people actually *did* say and do and of how those actions either manifested or regulated a specific relationship, are provided only rarely' (1986, p. 51). Thus, the descriptions of everyday communication detailed earlier are invaluable, but much work needs to be done. Although we now have a better sense of the communication events that constitute everyday talk and how daily conversations are perceived, we lack a detailed examination of the actual discourse relational partners use in their daily lives. Duck et al. (1991) refer to their work as mapping the *geography* of daily interaction. Thus, their work, along with Goldsmith and Baxter's, provides a general map and set of signposts for routine interaction. Yet, neither provides an in-depth description of that discourse; that is, they do not chart the *topography* of daily interaction.

### **Discourse approaches to studying routine interaction**

Most researchers of mundane interaction have gathered information through self-reports. Such studies use participants' perceptions of what occurs in their relationships, and although these perceptions are essential, they cannot provide descriptions of the detailed, mundane interaction that is the bedrock of relationships (Duck, 1995; Granato, 2000). Also, recalled conversations are subject to a self-serving bias as well as other barriers, such as condensation of the interaction in one's memory and the inability to access stored information on cue (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991; Stafford & Daly, 1984). Finally, all self-reports are necessarily limited by the willingness of the participants to record their experiences and the amount of time they are willing to spend writing.

One way to fill the gap left by previous studies is to study the actual conversations of relational partners. This allows us to extend our understanding of the perceptual and recalled data available from earlier studies. Although studying conversations alone cannot provide a complete picture of all that comprises a relationship, it is an interesting and valid place to begin for 'talk is the crucible wherein relationships are conducted' (Duck & Pond, 1989, p. 25).

More specifically, talk functions not just as an arena for relationships, but as an important tool for the very existence of relationships. Conversations with one's relational partner about the relationship serve as 'digestive juices' that help partners assess, clarify, and frame their views of the relationship and, therefore, affect the nature of the relationship itself (Duck & Pond, 1989). It is not simply talk *about* the relationship, however, that affects how partners view the relationship. All talk between relational partners may function jointly to formulate and negotiate accounts, history, and a framework wherein a set of interactions is agreed upon as constituting what will be understood as the 'relationship' (Duck, 1995; Duck & Pond, 1989). Casual, everyday talk is a large part of what helps us to make sense of our interactions and to impose continuity upon them (Duck & Pond, 1989; Sigman, 1991). Thus, off-hand and routine comments about plans, television programs, or the family pet may at first glance seem simply to fill a silence or answer a question, but they also may be maintaining a sense of shared reality and reinforcing the continuity of interactions that create a relationship.

### **Analyzing couples' interaction**

If scholars wish to study daily conversational interaction, they must decide where to focus their attention. In the present study, we chose to focus on the mundane conversations of romantic partners only rather than upon a variety of relationships types. We know from a number of studies that the type of relationship one shares with another affects how one communicates in that relationship. For example, Dindia, Fitzpatrick, and Kenny (1997) found that men and women disclose more self-descriptive information to opposite sex strangers than they do to their spouses, whereas women disclose more intimate thoughts and feelings to their husbands than they

do to male strangers. In addition, Duck and Miell (1986) found that friends and lovers are likely to carry out their relationships and conversations in different ways. They discovered that friends typically conduct themselves and their relationships in public, for short encounters, with superficial chat as the main ingredient. They did not find the long, intense, private intimacies that they expected friends to engage in. Also, the participants appeared to give considerable thought to the strategic control of their friendships and strove to manage the feelings that they did not know where the relationships were going (Duck & Miell, 1986), behaviors that probably differ from those performed by most established lovers.

Also, because the interactions of dating couples likely differ from those of couples who live together, we limited our study to cohabiting couples. For example, because they live together, cohabiting couples need to negotiate routine household tasks. In addition, because of the different structures of their relationships, dating couples and couples who live together likely engage in the same types of conversations with different frequencies. For example, dating couples may need to talk more about how they will spend time together, because they cannot be assured of seeing each other at home.

Finally, although conversational studies of dating couples, friends, roommates and others are all worthwhile, we chose to focus on satisfied cohabiting couples. We did so both because 'marriage is generally the central and primary relationship in a person's life' (Gottman & Carrere, 1994, p. 203) and because it is ubiquitous – approximately 90% of U.S. Americans marry (Gottman & Carrere, 1994). Although not all our couples were legally married (two were gay and thus did not have that option), all did consider themselves spouses and viewed their relationships as permanent.

In addition to the importance and frequency of committed, romantic relationships, dyadic interactions have been found to play an important role in relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships (Feeney, 2002). However, interaction patterns tend to change over the course of romantic relationship development. In the early stages of a romantic relationship, couples often focus more on being polite and invest heavily in positive self-presentation; as the relationship endures, the types of interactions they engage in typically become more varied and complex as couples engage in more self-disclosure and assertive behavior (Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002). Thus, conversational interactions in longer termed and more committed relationships likely differ from that which occurs in more casual romantic relationships. In fact, Spanier and Lewis posit that rewards from spousal interaction are one of the three major sets of variables that predict marital quality (Feeney, 2002; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). Thus, it has been established that conversational interaction is especially important in long-term, committed romantic relationships. Therefore, we chose committed, cohabiting couples for this study because of the centrality of interaction to their relationship satisfaction. Even more specifically, we chose satisfied couples for the study because we thought it important to understand the everyday interaction of happy couples before we examined that of unhappy

couples. We believe it to be as useful, if not more so, to understand *what to do* as it is to understand *what not to do*.

### **Relational maintenance and everyday interaction**

We believed that the most productive approach to mapping couples' daily talk lay with a relational maintenance approach. Relational maintenance is typically defined as *the preserving or sustaining of a desired relationship state or definition* (Ayres, 1983; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993). Relational maintenance seemed a logical area to pursue because, as various researchers have argued, couples talk as a way of staying in touch with each other and keeping the relationship at a specified level (Acitelli, 1988, 1993; Canary & Stafford, 1994; Duck, 1995). Within a relational maintenance approach, one can examine the actions implied by utterances and the functions they might serve in maintaining the relationship.

Current research on relational maintenance reflects a variety of emphases. Canary and Stafford (1994) note that the varying theories used by relational maintenance scholars can be grouped into three predominant approaches: dialectical, communication action, and social psychological. For our purposes, a communication action approach to maintenance seemed most appropriate. This approach focuses on identifying the symbolic, communicative behaviors that are used to maintain relationships and determining how these behaviors are used by relaters (Canary & Stafford, 1994).

Early typologies of maintenance behaviors focused upon the strategic behaviors partners used to achieve the goal of maintaining their relationship. These studies revealed several general behaviors (Ayres, 1983; Bell, Daly, & Gonzalez, 1987; Dindia & Baxter, 1987), which were collated and reduced into the five strategies of *positivity*, *openness*, *assurances*, *social networks*, and *sharing tasks* by Stafford and Canary (1991). Through an inductive analysis of various types of relationships, Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace (1993) extended the typology to include five more strategic maintenance behaviors: *joint activities*; *cards, letters, and calls*; *avoidance*; *antisocial*; and *humor*.

Attention later turned to the routine maintenance behaviors that are enacted daily and that occur without significant premeditation or attention to specific goals (Gilbertson, Dindia, & Allen, 1998). In Dainton and Stafford's (1993) study of routine maintenance behaviors, participants reported using the same behaviors routinely as previous respondents had reported using strategically. The difference between a behavior being enacted routinely or strategically, then, lies with the consciousness level and intention of the person enacting the behavior, not the behavior itself (Dainton & Stafford, 1993).

All previous maintenance research has relied upon the participants being conscious of their behaviors on some level. If respondents were not in some way conscious of them, they would not have been able to report them. But, it is possible that behaviors individuals are not even aware of using also



serve to maintain relationships. Specifically, everyday talk in (and about) relationships may act to maintain relationships without its participants even noticing (Duck, 1994, 1995; Sigman, 1991). For this reason, it is possible that self-report and role-play studies have not captured some types of relational maintenance that occur at a very low level of awareness.

One way to overcome this difficulty is to study naturally occurring interactions. Through this method, maintenance behaviors can be derived through observation, which may uncover behaviors that couples do not recognize as occurring. Therefore, in order to provide a description of couples' everyday interaction and to help refine current typologies of relational maintenance behaviors, we posed the following question:

*RQ1:* What types of maintenance communication behaviors occur most frequently in the daily conversations of satisfied romantic partners?

### **Couples' communication over time**

An advantage of studying couples' communication over time is that it allows us to study the impact of time on couples' relationships. For example, both folk knowledge and research (Duck et al., 1991; Stone, Hedges, Neale, & Satin, 1985) suggest that communication satisfaction and/or conflict are related to day of the week. Couples often report that weekends are more positive communicatively and relationally because of the lessened stress individuals feel at this time (Rossi & Rossi, 1977; Stone et al., 1985).

Although several studies have examined the effect of day of the week on mood (Egloff, Tausch, Kohlman, & Krohne, 1995; Kennedy-Moore, Greenberg, Newman, & Stone, 1992), few have addressed these effects on communication or relationship satisfaction. Duck et al.'s (1991) work appears to be the first study to examine the effect of day of the week on communication. They discovered significant differences in conversational quality across days of the week. Specifically, communication quality was rated highest on the weekends and lowest on Tuesdays and Fridays. They also found that individuals experienced more conflict during conversations on Wednesdays and that the value of conversation was judged lowest on Mondays. Therefore, in order to explore the influence of day of the week on couples' satisfaction, we posed the following question:

*RQ2:* Do levels of satisfaction with interaction in general, with conflict specifically, and with the relationship differ by day of the week?

In addition, we wondered whether couples' communication behavior varied during the workweek compared to the weekend. Several studies suggest that couples' communication may be less conflictual, more satisfying and less task focused on the weekend when couples have more leisure time and more time together (Duck et al., 1991; Stone et al., 1985). Therefore, we posed the question:

*RQ3:* How do these couples' maintenance communication behaviors differ during the week compared to the weekend?



## **Method**

### **Participants**

To achieve the goal of examining couples' naturally occurring conversation, data were collected from 10 romantic couples from the greater Phoenix area. The couples in this sample ranged in age from early twenties to late fifties and had been together between 2 and 33 years. Two couples had been together for more than 30 years. Three of the couples were in their twenties, four were in their thirties, two were in their forties, and one couple was in their fifties. A range of socio-economic and education levels were represented, with household incomes ranging from approximately \$30,000 to over \$60,000 and education levels ranging from high school to master's degrees. All the couples were White; eight were heterosexual, one was gay, and one was lesbian. Because one goal of the project was to examine the communication behaviors of satisfied couples, all 10 couples that were selected had evaluated their relationships as satisfying overall at the beginning of the study. The couples were located based on college students' recommendations of couples they believed to be satisfied with their relationships; couples who did not rate their relationships as satisfactory were excluded from the study. All couples were paid \$100 for their participation.

### **Procedures**

Prior to taping, couples completed an informed consent form, a demographic information survey, a 30-item relationship inventory using the communication, conflict, and marital satisfaction subscales from the ENRICH Inventory (Fournier, Olson, & Druckman, 1983), and a 10-item questionnaire on communication and perceived understanding (Cahn & Shulman, 1984). The relationship inventory assessed communication satisfaction, conflict satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction (10 items each). Communication satisfaction was measured using items such as 'I wish my partner were more willing to share her/his feelings with me,' while conflict satisfaction was assessed with questions like 'My partner and I have very different ideas about the best way to solve our disagreements.' Items, such as 'I am unhappy about our financial position and the way we make financial decisions,' determined relationship satisfaction.

Couples completed telephone surveys separately each evening of the week in which they were tape-recorded. Because individuals were connected to microphones during the telephone surveys, typically we could tell whether or not they were alone during the daily phone calls. (One husband was overheard attempting to 'sit in' on his wife's call, but she removed herself from the room.) During the daily surveys, the couples were asked to assess their daily relationship satisfaction, conflict satisfaction, and communication satisfaction on a scale of 1–7, with 7 being the highest. They also reported the nicest and worst comment their partners had made to them, how many times that day their partners had seemed bored, had dominated the conversation, and had said 'I love you,' criticized or complained, or made the respondent laugh.

The couples were given wireless microphones and asked to wear them at all times when they were home alone with one another. Their conversations were audio-recorded for 1 week on reel-to-reel recording equipment. Owing to the amount of data collected from each couple, for the present study, one weekday

and one weekend day were chosen from each of the 10 couples, resulting in 20 total days of conversation to be analyzed.

### Unitizing the data

The tapes were transcribed into script form, including elements such as overlapped speech, laughter, disfluencies, timed silences, and question asking. In order to provide a fine-grained analysis of the talk, the transcribed data were divided into thought units, defined here as an utterance segment that expresses a complete and autonomous idea (Sillars, 1986). (Generally, thought units include a single subject and predicate, though they may be implied.) Important features of everyday conversation can occur in minute segments of talk and might be missed if the unit of analysis was as large as the conversational turn or even the sentence. That is, a sentence can relate several different ideas or thoughts. For example, the utterance 'I love you, but I just don't want to talk about this right now' contains two thought units that could be coded into different maintenance categories. Thus, 'I love you' (affection) is one thought unit while 'I don't want to talk about this right now' (avoidance) is another. The unitizing was done by the fourth author, with the third author unitizing 25% of the data to check reliability, with an acceptable KR-20 statistic of .90.

### Coding

Owing to the sheer mass of the data, we coded only approximately 29% of the data collected. We selected one weekday transcript and one weekend transcript to be analyzed for each couple. Because weekends provide more opportunities for couples to interact and therefore may have more impact on their relationships, we chose to analyze the Saturday transcripts for five of the couples and the Sunday transcripts for the remaining five. In order to capture each day of the workweek as well, we chose to analyze the Monday transcripts for two couples, the Tuesday transcripts for two different couples, etc. Thus, we analyzed the Monday and Saturday transcripts for one couple, for another we analyzed the Monday and Sunday transcripts, etc., throughout the week. Even using only two-sevenths of the data, we coded 14,916 thought units.

The coding was done according to the communicative force of each unit; that is, we coded the action implied by each thought unit (Austin, 1975). As Nofsinger (1991) pointed out, any observer can see what people are *saying*; as researchers, the goal is to discern what they are *doing*. Thus, we sought to locate the symbolic, communicative behaviors that individuals enacted; coding according to the communicative action of the utterance best guided the analysis toward this goal.

We began by applying one of the most complete maintenance schemes, reported by Haas and Stafford (1998). This coding scheme, based on earlier work by Canary et al. (1993), consists of 15 codes individuals self-reported using to maintain their relationship: *positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, shared tasks, joint activities, talk, mediated communication, avoidance, antisocial, affection, focus on self, and other*.

Potentially some utterances could be coded into more than one category. For example, statements regarding preparing for a camping trip could be coded into either joint activities or shared tasks. In such instances, we coded first into the most narrow, specific category. Thus, the shared tasks category was narrower and more specific than the joint activities category, so in this instance the utterance would be placed in the shared tasks category.

Each of the categories captured both questions and comments. Thus, asking 'Must we talk about this right now?' and commenting 'I don't want to talk about this right now!' would both be captured by the category avoidance.

The second author coded the data while the first author independently coded 25% of it in order to check the reliability of the coding scheme. After 25% of the data had been independently coded, simple intercoder agreement was .88, and the Cohen's Kappa reliability was .86. According to Fleiss (1981), a reliability level greater than .75 is excellent, so the coding scheme was accepted as a reliable instrument.

Because in this study we were interested solely in interactions that occurred between the relational partners, three types of conversation were not coded. The first was *baby talk*, which consisted of conversation directed at an infant or small child ('Do you have a wet diaper?') as well as any talk conveyed through the child ('Your mommy is mean!'). The second was *pet talk*, which was comprised of talk directed primarily at a pet ('You're a good boy'). Lastly, *phone talk*, which consisted of talk that occurred between one member of the couple and a third party, was not included. These decisions were made in order to keep the focus of the analysis on the couples' talk with one another.

## Analysis

To determine if the amount of couples' talk differed during the week compared to the weekend, a paired samples *t*-test was run. In order to assess differences among the occurrence of the various categories of data on weekdays versus weekends, *z*-tests for proportional differences were conducted.

## Results

Analyses of the data using Haas and Stafford's (1998) relational maintenance coding scheme revealed that a number of their categories were usable, although we did need to refocus and rename several of them (see Appendix). For example, the maintenance category of *positivity* was used directly to capture compliments, thanks, courteous and affectional expressions, and the statement 'I love you.' In addition, the categories of social networks, self-focused attention, antisocial, and sharing tasks were slightly altered as *other-report*, *self-report*, *conflict*, and *household-task talk*. Other-report refers to comments about third parties such as friends, families, and colleagues. Self-reports were comments about one's own experiences, such as statements of preferences ('I like cake better than pie') or the recounting of one's daily activities ('I had lunch today with the rep on my new account'). Conflict included statements of disagreement, criticism, and complaint. Household task talk was comprised of conversations about preparing dinner, picking up the dry cleaning, and cleaning the house, among other activities. Although the categories were similar to those in the maintenance typology, the new labels capture the communicative aspect of the categories as manifested here a bit more precisely. An additional category, *narratives*, was borrowed from a study of maintenance behaviors in online relationships (Rabby, 1996). Narratives describe occasions on which participants relayed stories they had heard or seen on television, radio, or in the newspaper. Thus, 6 of our 13 codes originated in the maintenance literature.

In addition, six new content categories were developed: *observation*, *plans*,

*partner's experiences*, *TV talk*, *humor*, and *back-channel*. A number of the conversational events couples performed frequently in our data have not been reported in earlier studies as either routine or strategic maintenance behaviors. However, our data suggest that these behaviors play an important role in couples' relationships, if only in the sheer frequency of their occurrence. Of the 14,916 thought units coded, 2223 were *observations*. This category captured the seemingly random comments individuals made, usually about their environment. For example, individuals reported observations like 'It's raining' and 'That clock is slow.'

*Plans* involved contributions that individuals made regarding activities for the future, including vacation plans, car-pooling plans, and plans for recreation and entertaining. *Partners' experiences* captured talk directly addressing the partners' experiences, thoughts, attitudes, etc. *TV talk* comprised talk that occurred while the couple watched TV or that was about TV programs. For example, couples made comments about activities that occurred on the programs, such as 'Is that newscaster new?' as well as comments about programming choices, such as 'That special I want to see is on next.' *Humorous comments* were joking comments that were responded to with laughter or jokes. *Back-channel* responses included those comments that functioned to indicate the speaker was listening and/or involved in the conversation, including remarks such as 'uh huh,' 'I see,' and 'yeah' (when not used as a response to a question).

A final category of *miscellaneous/uncodable* was added to capture thought units that did not fit into the categories, or, more frequently, were uncodable due to equipment problems or our inability to clarify the reference/context.

### Frequency of maintenance behaviors

As Table 1 reveals, the most frequent conversational activity was self-report, which accounted for 4109 thought units or 27.5% of the data. The next most frequent activity involved making observations about the surroundings (2223 times or 14.9% of the data). Three activities clustered together in terms of frequency: other-report (1576 times or 10.6%), TV talk (1564 occurrences or 10.5%), and partner's experiences (1540 or 10.3%). The other eight categories accounted for the remaining 26% of the data. In descending order, they were: back-channel communication (1148, 7.7%), miscellaneous/uncodable (782, 5.2%), household-task talk (543, 3.6%), humor (459, 3.1%), plans (448, 3%), narratives (250, 1.7%), positivity (152, 1%), and conflict (122, 0.8%).

### Influence of day of the week on couples' communication, conflict, and relationship satisfaction

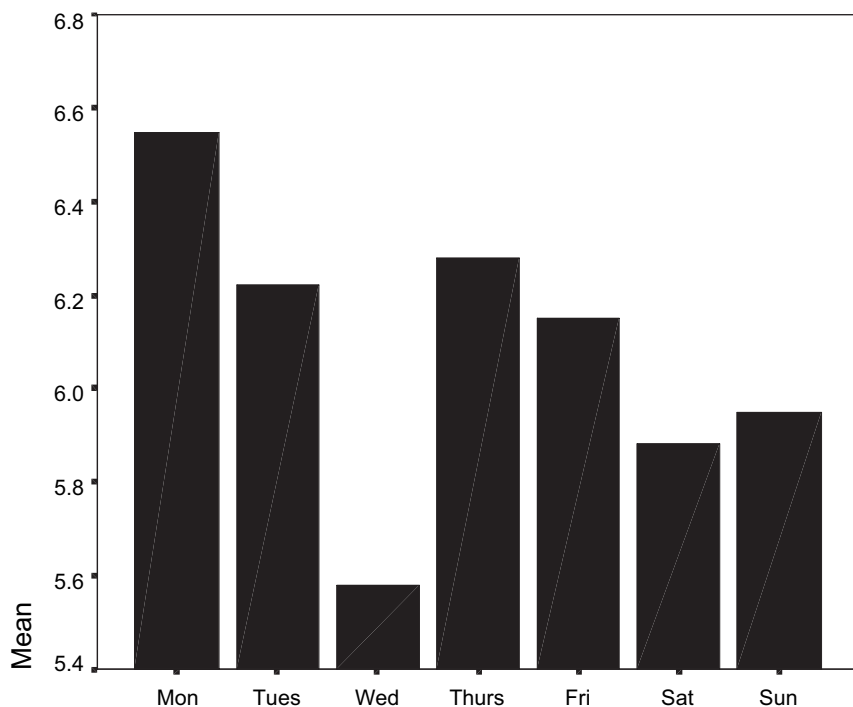
Next, we assessed the couples' satisfaction with aspects of their relational life across time. Examination of their daily scores for relational, communication, and conflict satisfaction revealed a number of interesting patterns. Overall, the most satisfying day for most couples, unexpectedly, was Monday ( $M = 6.55$ ) (see Figure 1). Six of the couples had their highest combined relational, communication, and conflict satisfaction scores on Monday. Two couples' satisfaction scores were similar across three or more days. The other two couples reported Tuesday as the most satisfying day overall.

Either Wednesdays ( $M = 5.58$ ) or Saturdays ( $M = 5.95$ ) overall were the least satisfying days for most of the couples (see Figure 1). Three of the couples reported that Wednesday was the least satisfying, four reported Sunday as the

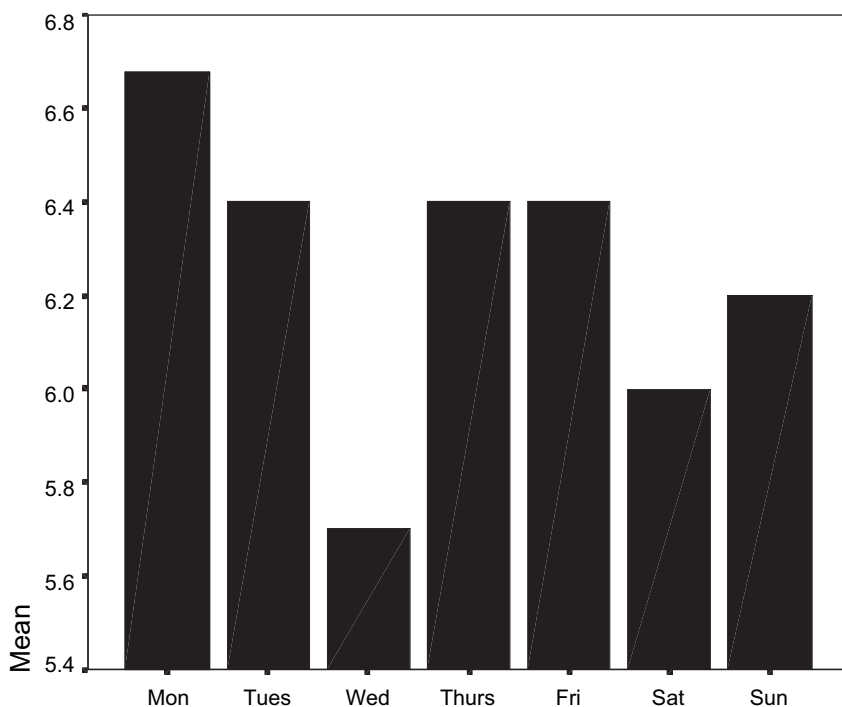
**TABLE 1**  
**Frequency of couples' relational maintenance communication behaviors**

Behavior	Frequency	%
Self-report	4,109	27.5
Observation	2,223	14.9
Other-report	1,576	10.6
TV Talk	1,564	10.5
Partner's experiences	1,540	10.3
Back channel	1,148	7.7
Miscellaneous/uncodable	782	5.2
Household-task talk	543	3.6
Humor	459	3.1
Plans	448	3.0
Narratives	250	1.7
Positivity	152	1.0
Conflict	122	0.8

**FIGURE 1**  
**Couples' overall satisfaction scores by day. Participants rated satisfaction on a scale of 1–7.**



**FIGURE 2**  
**Couples' relational satisfaction scores by day.**



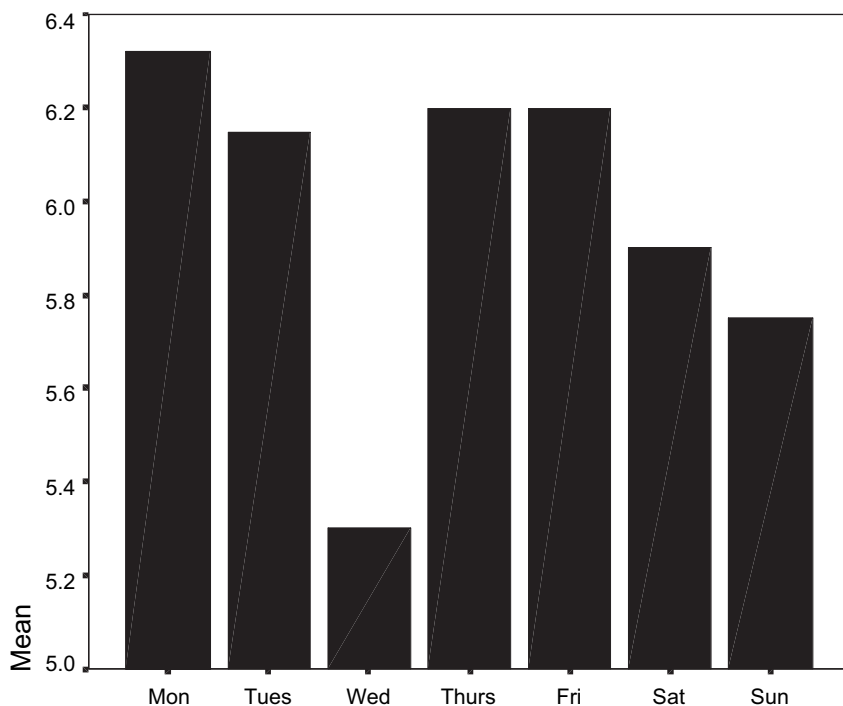
least satisfying, one reported Saturday, one reported a tie between Tuesday and Thursday, and one couples' scores revealed few differences across the week. Owing to the small sample size (and resulting lack of power), we were not able to conduct statistical analyses of variance.

Examination of the couples' scores on the individual dimensions of relational, communication, and conflict satisfaction scores across the week revealed that couples' relational satisfaction was highest on Monday ( $M = 6.68$ ) and lowest on Wednesday ( $M = 5.7$ ) (Figure 2). The couples' communication satisfaction, once again, was highest on Monday ( $M = 6.32$ ) and lowest on Wednesday ( $M = 5.34$ ) (Figure 3). Finally, their conflict satisfaction was also highest on Monday ( $M = 6.67$ ) and lowest on Wednesday ( $M = 5.75$ ) (Figure 4). Again, owing to the small sample size (and resulting lack of power), we were not able to conduct statistical analyses of variance.

### **Frequency of couples' maintenance communication behaviors during the week versus the weekend**

Finally, to discern the extent to which time of week affected the couples' behavior, we compared weekday interactions with weekend conversations to assess what, if any, differences existed. Of the acts, 6795 (45.6%) occurred

**FIGURE 3**  
**Couples' communication satisfaction scores by day.**



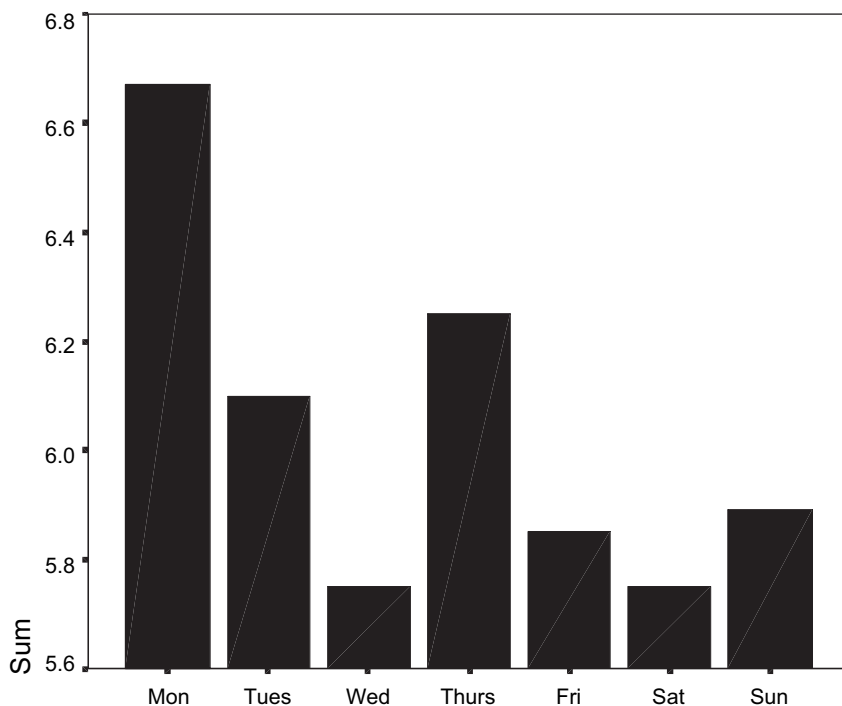
during the week, whereas 8121 (54.4%) occurred on the weekend. A paired-samples *t*-test revealed that more thought units occurred on the weekend than during the week, although the difference did not quite achieve significance ( $t(1) = 1.86, p < .07$ ).

Further analysis revealed differences in the occurrence of 10 of the 13 communication behaviors during the week compared to the weekend (Table 2). The three behaviors for which there were no differences were: positivity, TV talk, and back-channel communication. The largest differences were found for observation ( $z = -21.27$ ), miscellaneous/uncodable ( $z = 18.20$ ), plans ( $z = -13.40$ ), other-report ( $z = 10.33$ ), and conflict ( $z = -9.32$ ). Thus, individuals engaged in more observations, planning, and conflict on the weekend but were more likely to share other-reports during the week. Interestingly, more data fell into the miscellaneous/uncodable category during the week.

Differences also were found for the categories of household-task talk ( $z = -4.77$ ), humor ( $z = -2.10$ ), self-report ( $z = 4.94$ ), partner's experiences ( $z = 2.94$ ), and narratives ( $z = 9.36$ ). Couples engaged in more household-task talk and humor during the weekend and more self-reports, discussion of partner's experiences, and narratives during the week.



**FIGURE 4**  
**Couples' conflict satisfaction scores by day.**



**TABLE 2**  
**Differences in couples' conversational behavior during the week versus the weekend**

	Weekday (%)	Weekend (%)	Diff. (%)	z-test
I. Positivity	1.07	0.97	0.1	0.615
II. Observation	8.12	20.58	-12.45	-21.268
III. Plans	0.96	4.72	-3.76	-13.397
IV. Household-task talk	2.84	4.31	-1.47	-4.772
V. TV Talk	10.42	10.54	-0.12	-0.241
VI. Other-report	13.41	8.19	5.22	10.325
VII. Humor	2.75	3.35	-0.6	-2.104
VIII. Self-report	29.52	25.9	3.63	4.936
IX. Partner's experiences	11.13	9.65	1.47	2.942
X. Narratives	2.75	0.78	1.98	9.364
XI. Conflict	0.07	1.47	-1.39	-9.323
XII. Back-channel communication	8.11	7.35	0.76	1.729
XIII. General	8.87	2.2	6.67	18.202

In sum, on average, weekends were marked by greater conflict, humor, household-task talk, planning, and observations, whereas the weekdays were distinguished by a greater occurrence of other-report, self-report, partner's experiences and narratives.

## Discussion

Our findings suggest that a number of the existing maintenance categories reflect not only individuals' perceptions of their behavior, but also their actual behavior. Approximately half of the categories useful for describing couples' conversations originated in the maintenance literature. We believe that our study provides important evidence of the utility of the maintenance typology (Haas & Stafford, 1998) for describing couples' behavior.

The remaining categories describe conversational behaviors that may be so routine as to be unremarkable or performed out of consciousness. For example, few individuals likely are aware of the extent to which they make observations about their environment, or the degree to which self-reports dominate their conversations. Our data suggest that 42.4% of people's interactions with their partners are composed of self-reports and observations. We were struck by the extent to which couples' conversations were dominated by relatively narcissistic or self-involved communication. In many instances, it seemed as if the partner played a relatively minor role during the 'interaction.' These findings suggest to us one of the more important roles relational partners may play – as audiences for the articulation of one's experiences and thoughts. If this is so, an important part of relational 'communication' may simply be co-presence.

Perhaps most surprisingly, our data revealed low levels of conflict (0.08%), positivity (1%), and humor (3.1%). The lack of conflict may be due in part to couples' overt attempts to minimize their disagreements because they were being recorded. Or it may be due to the fact that we have coded only 29% of the data thus far and have not tapped into the full extent of conflict present among the couples. Finally, it may be due to the fact that these satisfied couples simply engage in low levels of conflict. A review of couples' conflict satisfaction scores supports the latter explanation. Although a number of couples reported relatively high dissatisfaction with their relationships and/or communication on individual days, only four couples reported a total of 6 days (of 70) in which their conflict satisfaction scores fell below the midpoint.

By contrast, all couples reported more relationally and communicatively satisfying days than not, but positivity still represented only 1% of their interaction. This finding can be accounted for in several ways. First, we coded the *content* of couples' talk rather than the affect specifically. Affect was used to interpret the communication where needed, but we defined positivity as occurring when specific types of content occurred – such as 'I love you,' 'thanks,' and terms of affection. It is possible that overt statements of affection and positivity are less important than the general tone

of couples' interaction. Also, given the relatively low levels of conflict that occurred on the days we coded, positivity may have been less necessary to the couples in maintaining their relationships and feelings of affection. Finally, the use of humor may also be considered an expression of positivity and thus likely contributed to the positive tone of couples' interactions.

We were not pleased that approximately 5% of our data were either uncodable or fell into the category of miscellaneous. However, given the fact that the data were collected while couples prepared meals (and thus used microwave ovens, can openers, and stove fans), worked around the house (using household and garden equipment), and engaged in the daily activities of life, we are not sure it is possible for us to have coded the data more completely.

Our analyses of couples' satisfaction add to earlier research on the effect of day of the week on couples' satisfaction. Previous research suggests that weekends may be times of greater relationship, communication, and conflict satisfaction as couples have more time together, are more relaxed, and have fewer demands. This was not true for our couples. Half of our couples reported that a weekend day was the least satisfying overall. Perhaps the greater amounts of time these couples had together on the weekend gave them more opportunity for conflict and dissatisfying interactions and/or they may have experienced pressure as they prepared for the new workweek. Duck et al. (1991) found Wednesdays were difficult days for couples, particularly in terms of conflict. Three of our couples reported their lowest overall satisfaction on Wednesdays, and average satisfaction scores across all dimensions were lowest on Wednesday as well. However, it is important to note that these scores are relative to the overall high scores reported by the couples in this study. Even on Wednesdays, the couples' overall satisfaction scores still averaged approximately 5.5 on a scale of 1–7, where 7 represents highly satisfied.

In order to understand the influence of weekdays compared to weekend interactions on couples' relationships, we compared the different categories of couples' communication across weekdays and weekends. We found differences for 10 of the 13 categories. We discovered that couples were most likely to engage in observations, planning, and conflict on the weekend but talked more about social networks during the week. These findings make intuitive sense in that couples have more time on the weekend to share their observations, to make plans, and to engage in conflict. This is also true of their tendency to engage in more humor and to discuss household tasks more on the weekend. The fact that they discuss third parties, their partners' experiences, and narratives during the week also makes sense. The time spent apart engaging with others, having individual experiences, and listening to the radio, and so on, make it likely they will have more information to share on these topics during the week.

Of course, our study possesses some clear, and at times unavoidable, limitations. It is impossible to generalize from 10 White couples in the southwest to the diversity of couples across the entire US. Also, given that

our study focused on happy and satisfied couples, the results are applicable only to other satisfied couples, at best.

In addition, we are aware that some aspects of couples' conversations simply cannot be captured by the methods we used: talk that occurs on the phone from work, talk that takes place in the car and away from home, and any talk that couple chose to exclude us from. Most couples turned off the recorder before they went to bed. Only one couple left the equipment running (at least some of the time) once they had gone to bed. Thus, we were excluded from an important location and occasion for couples' talk. Our limited access to that data suggests that futures studies would profitably be directed toward examining additional talk in that location – if it is possible.

In addition, as noted by Rabby (1996), although the thought unit is well suited to studying discourse, there is an inherent drawback to using this unit of analysis. Some communication events/behaviors (such as discussing social networks) tend to involve many more thought units than others (e.g., expressions of positivity). It may take only one thought unit to say, 'I love you,' but multiple ones to report/discuss a friend's relational dilemma. The use of the thought unit indicates that discussing social networks takes up more talk time than does positivity; however, the results do not indicate the frequency with which each of these behaviors as a whole are enacted. In future studies it may be useful to recode the data by turn or topic in order to determine how many discrete times couples' behavior shifts, which would result in a count of the number of times each behavior was enacted. That information, together with the amount of time devoted to different categories of behavior, may provide a more comprehensive picture of couples' everyday interaction.

What do we have to show for our extensive effort to analyze couples' everyday interaction? Some of the findings do not seem particularly surprising – couples have more conflict on the weekends and ask about their partners' experiences more during the week – but these are 'truths' that simply could not be established based on prior research. Many of the facts that we believe to be 'true' about relationships intuitively have not been borne out when subjected to scientific scrutiny. Thus, although some of our findings 'make sense,' we could not be sure of their 'sense' prior to studies such as this one.

We also believe we have made an important contribution to the maintenance literature by establishing that approximately half of couples' conversations are effectively captured by existing maintenance typologies. Previous scholars have relied almost exclusively on participant surveys in order to acquire information about couples' maintenance behaviors. Frequently, such surveys have been open-ended (Bell et al., 1987; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Haas & Stafford, 1998) and have consisted of a definition of relational maintenance and then a request for participants to list what they do to maintain their own relationships. Other studies (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Guerrero et al., 1993; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999) have used closed-ended surveys in which participants are

asked to rank items or lists of relational maintenance behaviors that they use in their own relationships.

Also, we have discovered a number of communication behaviors couples perform routinely and daily, but of which they likely are unaware. Previous studies have assumed that respondents are aware of the full range of behaviors they use, both routinely and strategically, to maintain their relationships. We questioned this assumption because we suspected that asking people to remember their maintenance behaviors (especially routine ones) may not be effective, for some behaviors may be so routine or subconscious as not to be brought to awareness or reported. Our analysis proved this to be true, for six of the types of communication that occurred in our data were not captured by previous maintenance typologies, including four of the six most frequently occurring types of interaction.

What does it mean for the study of maintenance that half our categories of behavior did not previously exist in the literature? We believe it suggests that our findings speak directly to the issue of intentionality as a dimension of relational maintenance. Canary and Dainton (2003) argue that relational maintenance behaviors could be placed on a continuum based on their degree of intentionality, with strategic, conscious efforts at one end and unintentional behaviors that are routine and less conscious at the other end. We essentially agree, but based on our findings, we envision a continuum with three distinct reference points. One end would be anchored by strategic (and intentional) behaviors, nonstrategic but conscious behaviors would fall in the middle, and the other end would be anchored by behaviors that are so routine as to be performed without awareness.

We believe it is important to separate routine behaviors that are performed without consciousness from nonstrategic behaviors that couples are aware of performing, as Stafford (2003) has mentioned in her work. The majority of our data were comprised of types of talk that have never been reported as being either strategic or routine in previous studies. Observations, self-reports, narratives, television talk, and back-channel communication are all types of interaction that most couples likely are not conscious of performing and therefore have not reported. It appears that these types of conversation are routine and most often are performed 'out of consciousness.' Nonetheless, they are important in maintaining relationships and need to be studied as relational communication behaviors.

We know from research on both long-distance relationships and relational dissolution that mundane interaction can be both a cause and an effect of maintenance failure. For example, couples in long-distance relationships often find that their relationships are harder to maintain specifically because they do not have as many opportunities to share the everyday details of their lives (Gross, 1980; Rohlfsing, 1995). In addition, we know from research on relationship dissolution that once couples are in significant distress they frequently stop communicating the details of their lives to one another, which frequently leads to greater distance and distress (Duck, 1988). Thus, self-reports, observations, narratives, and back-channel comments (and in

some instances television talk) likely function as routine, necessary types of interaction for relationship maintenance that form the bedrock on which the relationship is built.

Other types of relationship talk may occur more consciously but still nonstrategically. For instance, plans, household-task talk, and other-report may be types of talk that couples are aware they perform but which they do not view specifically as maintaining the relationship. Rather, this type of talk is the talk that is needed to manage daily events and to keep up to date on what has, is, and should occur and thus functions to keep the relationship on track. However, if this type of communication does not occur, the relationship likely will not work effectively or be satisfying.

Yet other types of couples' conversations are more productively viewed as strategic maintenance interaction. In our study, that might include positivity, partner's experiences, and on some occasions, both humor and conflict. These types of interaction may be performed more consciously with the understanding that they are important to the relationship. Thus, most couples recognize that offering endearments, thanks, and compliments are important to their partner's happiness just as they realize that it is polite and a sign of interest to ask their partner how his/her day went. Similarly, in every relationship the individuals recognize that at times humor is important to providing relief and support, just as conflict may be necessary to solve a problem and maintain the relationship.

Although we believe thinking of maintenance in this way is useful for scholars who study couples' communication and maintenance, we also recognize that it is possible that any one of the behaviors can be used routinely, nonstrategically or strategically. For example, saying 'I love you' can be a routine closing to a phone call, may be said with awareness but without a specific goal, or offered as a strategic utterance in the midst of a conflict to reassure the partner. However, this does not mean that some types of communication are not most often routine, nonstrategic, or strategic. We do not believe it is useful to simply put all types of talk into a broad category called 'maintenance' or to lump routine, unconscious behaviors with nonstrategic communication of which partners are aware. Previous studies that have used self-reports to determine that essentially the same behaviors comprise both strategic and routine behavior may have actually been assessing the same thing – communication behaviors couples are aware that they perform. We believe that it is important to bring more specificity to the study of maintenance communication by recognizing that some types of talk function in particular ways most often. This also suggests that asking couples about their nonstrategic and routine maintenance behaviors may not be an effective way to capture these types of behaviors.

In closing, we hesitate to say that additional studies, such as this, need to be done, because we know the extreme amounts of time and effort such analyses require. Nonetheless, we likely never will understand fully the contributions of mundane interaction to the construction, maintenance, and destruction of relationships if we do not.

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## Appendix

Typology of couples’ relational maintenance communication behaviors:

1. **Positivity** – compliments, politeness behaviors, thanks, affectional expressions, I love you.  
Examples: ‘Good job honey!’; ‘Thank you very much’; ‘Excuse me’; ‘Sweetie’; ‘I love you.’
2. **Observation** – random comments or questions, often about the environment.  
Examples: ‘Is it raining?’ ‘That clock is slow.’
3. **Plans** – planning and discussing the future.  
Examples: ‘What do you want to do this weekend?’ ‘Should we take the train or rent a car while we’re in Europe?’
4. **Household-task talk** – discussion of tasks that need to be done, such as taking care of housework, cooking, childcare, pets, dry cleaning, etc. focused on the present or near future.  
Examples: ‘Would you empty out the dishwasher?’ ‘Let’s get that laundry folded.’
5. **TV talk** – comments about television programs that occurred while watching television.

Examples: *'Is that that woman we saw in that movie last night?'* *'What is he doing now?'* *'Well, that's never going to work.'*

6. **Other-report** – Comments about known others or what known others have said/done.

Examples: *'Ryan is thinking about changing jobs.'* *'Mom called and she and dad are going to the early service tomorrow.'*

7. **Humor** – a statement delivered in a humorous style (often with laughter) and/or responded to with laughter or humorous commentary.

Examples: *'Oh God. A rotten old fish (laughs). That's funny.'*

8. **Self-report** – Description of one's past or current experiences; information not known unless revealed by speaker.

Examples: *'Do you want to hear about my day?'; 'I thought about you today.'*

9. **Partner's experiences** – questions or comments about partner's experiences or internal states.

Examples: *'How was your day?'; 'Would you like a paper towel?'*

10. **Narratives** – recounting of stories or activities from TV, books, movies, and life; probe.

Examples: *'They said she got sick from drinkin' that tea'; 'It's almost like them people explode.'*

11. **Conflict** – statements of complaint, criticism, or dissatisfaction.

Examples: *'Why can't you ever take anything seriously?'* *'You don't have to leave so early; you just want to.'*

12. **Back-channel communication** – verbal fillers that indicate involvement, interest, or that one is listening.

Examples: *'oh,' 'uhm,' and 'yeah.'*

13. **Miscellaneous/uncodable** – material does not fit into an existing code or the meaning is not clear due to interference or an unclear referent.