

**Dating Partner Communication Apprehension, Self Disclosure,
and the First Big Fight**

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Abstract

Communication apprehension toward a dating partner and self-disclosure patterns before and after a relationship's first big fight were investigated using a retrospective approach for data collection. Prior to the first big fight no differences in targeted communication apprehension were reported between those individuals in relationships that survived that event and those that terminated following that event. However, dating partner communication apprehension following the first big fight was significantly lower for survivors than non-survivors. In addition, survivors report a lessening of apprehension over the course of the FBF while non-survivors report a growing sense of apprehension. This targeted dating partner communication apprehension was significantly related to elements of targeted self-disclosure that are critical to continued maintenance and growth of interpersonal relationships. Future research is discussed.

Remembering Significant Conflicts in Terms of Dating Partner Communication Apprehension, and Self Disclosure Research in romantic relationship development has focused on a variety of variables which provide insight into the evolution of those relationships. Of ongoing concern are the variables of self-disclosure (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976, Wheeless, 1978) and dating partner communication apprehension (Powers & Love, 2001), both of which play a role in the participants' perception of how the socially constructed relationship works. Additionally, research has emphasized the importance of significant conflict events as they may influence relationship development and participants' abilities to explain relational history (Siegert & Stamp, 1984). In the tradition of the socially constructed reality model of relational communication, this study begins with the premise that all self report measures of communication behavior rely on the participants' memories of what happened in the past, how they felt about what happened, and how they behaved communicatively. Specifically, this study explores relational memory in terms of how participants remember a significant conflict, how they remember feeling toward their partner, and how they behaved communicatively as a consequence of how they have reconstructed the event. The overall thesis of this study is that reconstruction of significant conflict events may be explained by participants' self perceptions of their level of dating partner communication apprehension and types and degrees of self disclosing behaviors .

Review of Literature

Significant conflict events

During the evolution of dating relationships, specific and particular events contribute to changes in participant's perceptions of the relationship and motivate relational movement in either a positive or negative direction (e.g. Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Cupach & Metts, 1986; Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994; Siegert & Stamp, 1994). Of particular importance to this study is the identification of one of those critical events that occur in every relationship as the first big fight (FBF) by Siegert & Stamp (1994). They suggest that the FBF is "A relationship milestone conceivably encompassing aspects of turning points, critical events, and conflict..." (p. 24). Furthermore, they argue that the FBF is a monumental occurrence in the relationship and that the effects of the FBF have the potential to either result in termination of the relationship or movement of the relationship forward. In addition, they conclude that the survivors of the FBF have reduced uncertainty about their relationship and report "...survivors had greater understanding of one another as a result of the FBF." (p. 29). The uncertainty that precedes the FBF and its increase or reduction as a function of the FBF appears inherently to be associated with apprehension levels and the related self-disclosure patterns.

Siegert & Stamp (1994) argue further that the early steps in forming a relationship consist of each partner using positive communication to learn more about each other while specifically avoiding negative confrontations. As a result, there are few arguments; therefore the partners cannot comprehend how each other will respond in a conflictive situation. The FBF, in dramatic form, brings out all the unseen emotions and attack/defense tactics that a person uses to convey their message or feelings in a major conflictive event. According to Siegert and Stamp (1994), in some instances the FBF is the last big fight and results in termination of the relationship with no meaningful resolution of the conflict. However, in other instances, the FBF can become the glue of the relationship that sustains further relational evolution due to the positive communication outcomes during and following this event. How participants remember the relational outcomes associated with

the FBF may impact how they reconstruct or remember their anxiety and their self disclosure skills before and after the conflict event.

Dating Partner Communication Apprehension (DPCA)

The narrow-band approach to communication apprehension directed toward a dating partner (Powers & Love, 2001) is conceptually derived directly from the theoretical framework associated with general communication apprehension (CA) developed by McCroskey (1977). CA is described as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. Based upon a plethora of research, McCroskey (1977) offered three general theoretical propositions central to CA, all cast in terms of people having high CA. The research supporting these propositions is overwhelming and fully supported (McCroskey, 1977). The evolution of the DPCA construct is based on the CA model.

DPCA is defined as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with a specific dating partner. The most sensible theoretical propositions associated with DPCA are directly derived from McCroskey's (1977, p. 85) model as follows:

- 1) People who experience a high level of DPCA will minimize communication with their partner when possible.
- 2) People who experience a high level of DPCA will be perceived less positively than people who experience lower levels of DPCA by others in their environment external to the relationship, by their relational partner, and by themselves.
- 3) People who experience a high level of DPCA will also experience less satisfaction in their interpersonal relationships with their dating partner, less satisfaction in their interpersonal relationships with others, and less satisfaction with themselves.

Based on these theoretical propositions, the apprehension toward communicating with a dating partner has a clear logical association with that person's inclination to enter into the FBF, perform well during the FBF, and to become more apprehensive should the FBF not be meaningfully resolved. DPCA was positively correlated with dyadic communication apprehension (Powers & Love, 2001). And, as anticipated, DPCA was negatively correlated with interpersonal solidarity and interpersonal communication satisfaction. In addition, a significant (and directionally appropriate) set of correlations was reported between DPCA and relationally-oriented perceptions of whether things are going well, the happiness in the relationship, the intimacy of the relationship, whether one would select the same partner again, whether one projects continuation of the relationship, and whether one considers separating from the relationship. All of these perceptions clearly relate to the antecedent and consequent conditions of a FBF in a negative outcome scenario. Higher levels of DPCA would logically be associated with unsuccessful communication outcomes associated with the FBF.

However one may also reason that when dating partners learn about each other from their FBF, positive outcomes evolve that result in the relationship flourishing after the FBF. Siegert and Stamp (1994) do indicate that survivors of the FBF had a reaffirmed belief that their relationship could succeed. Adversely, "non-survivors reported being surprised by a number of aspects of the conflict, including their partner's behavior. They found that their expectations of the relationship and its direction were incompatible" (p. 355).

Based on the propositions associated with DPCA, one would reason that higher levels of DPCA before the FBF would lead to more dysfunctional FBFs than would be

found with lower levels of DPCA. Thus DPCA would be more evident in relationships that terminated following the FBF than in relationships that survived the FBF. On that basis the following hypothesis was generated:

H1: Non-survivors will reconstruct significantly higher levels of DPCA prior to the FBF than will survivors.

Furthermore, reasoning that survivors of the FBF will have experienced positive outcomes from risky communication activities and terminated partnerships would have experienced negative outcomes during and following the FBF, the following hypothesis was generated:

H2: Survivors will reconstruct significantly lower levels of DPCA following the FBF than will non-survivors.

A trait anxiety such as communication apprehension is normally very resistant to change. However the target-specific nature of DPCA may allow for greater change as a function of such an emotionally charged and critical event in the life of an individual as is clearly represented by the intensity of a FBF. Then, one may reason that the change in DPCA as a function of the FBF would be different between those relationships that continued and those that terminated. With no evidentiary insight into which group would experience the greater emotional reaction, the following hypothesis was generated:

H3: The change in DPCA across the period of time prior to and following the FBF will be significantly different for survivors than for non-survivors.

Self-Disclosure

Wheless & Grotz (1976) identify the nature of self-disclosure as being directly associated with one's orientation toward sharing information with another person about one's self. In the context of the FBF, such information sharing is mandated and an integral part of the FBF. General communication apprehension has been found to have varying levels of low to moderate correlations with self disclosure and general disclosiveness in each of the five major factors of self-disclosure: intent, amount, positive-negative disclosures, control of depth of disclosure, and the honesty/accuracy of disclosures (McCroskey & Richmond, 1977; McLaughlin, 1979; Wheless, Nesser, & McCroskey, 1986). Logically, DPCA is expected to reflect similar correlations prior to the FBF. Furthermore, one would reason that the association would prevail with the same or possibly higher intensity following the FBF when both DPCA and the five disclosure factors are targeted at a specific dating partner. It should follow that survivors of FBF should reconstruct their conflict management memories as more positive in terms of self disclosing behaviors than non survivors.

H4: Survivors of FBF will reconstruct self-disclosure behaviors (intent, amount, honesty, positiveness of disclosure and depth) prior to and immediately following the FBF in significantly more positive ways than will non-survivors.

Method

Participants were enrolled in a basic speech communication class at a southern university. They volunteered to participate (participation in the research project completed a standard class requirement). This effort produced 93 volunteers: 33 males and 60 females. Two forms of the basic questionnaire were shuffled and distributed with 44 participants randomly receiving Form A (requested to identify and focus upon a partner in a current dating relationship that had already experienced a FBF) and 49 participants

randomly receiving Form B (requested to identify and focus upon a partner in a former dating relationship that had experienced a FBF but did not immediately terminate during the FBF).¹ Other than the focus upon a current or former partner, the remainder of each questionnaire was identical asking participants to complete the DPCA 13 item single factor measure using the 5-step Likert response pattern of Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree and the five factor self-disclosure instrument using the 7-step Likert response pattern of Strongly Agree, Agree, Moderately Agree, Undecided, Moderately Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree (Wheeless, 1978). Participants completed these scales relative to their recollection of their orientation toward their dating partner one day prior to and one day following the FBF.² Alpha reliability of DPCA had previously been reported as .89 (Powers & Love, 2001) while Wheeless (1978) reported reliabilities for the five dimensions as follows: intent = .85, amount = .88, positiveness = .91, depth = .84, honestly = .87. In the current study, reliabilities for each scale were calculated separately on both Before/After FBF recollection data, yielding the following indices: DPCA = .89/.89, intent = .76/.78, amount = .71/.75, positiveness = .84/.79, depth = .78/.76, honesty = .78/.49.

Results

To test the hypotheses concerning DPCA a two factor analysis of variance with repeated measures on factor B was conducted (Factor A: Continuing Relationship vs Terminated Relationship and Factor B: Pre FBF vs Post FBF). Significant F ratios were obtained for Main Effect A ($F = 15.30$, $p < .000$, Eta squared = .15) and Main Effect B ($F = 4.80$, $p = .031$, Eta squared = .25). Scheffe tests were used to compare specific cell means. The post hoc analysis revealed no significant difference between Continuing (mean = 32.63, s.d. = 13.33) vs Terminated Relationship (mean = 35.73, s.d. = 11.84) at the Pre FBF level. This finding lends no support for H1. Comparison of Post FBF scores reveal that Terminated Relationships reported significantly higher scores (mean = 44.31, s.d. = 14.36) than Continuing (mean = 28.93, s.d. = 9.74), providing support for H2. H3 is supported in that Continuing Relationship showed no change across time (Pre mean = 32.63, s.d. = 13.33; Post mean = 28.93, s.d. = 9.74) while Terminated demonstrated a significant increase across time (Pre mean = 35.73, s.d. = 11.89; Post mean = 44.31, s.d. = 14.36). In addition the interaction effect showed a significant post FBF difference with Continuing Relationships significantly lower (mean = 28.93) than Terminated Relationships (mean = 44.31).

To test the hypotheses concerning self disclosure the same two factor ANOVA with repeated measures was conducted for each of the five components. Only the significant findings are reported.

Amount. A significant main effect for Factor A was obtained ($F = 6.18$, $p = .02$, Eta squared = .06). No other effects were significant. Continuing Relationships claimed higher levels of self-disclosure (mean = 30.39) than did Terminated Relationships (mean = 27.48).

Control of depth. A significant interaction effect was obtained for control of depth ($F = 5.59$, $p = .02$, Eta squared = .06). Post hoc comparisons of means revealed that Continuing Relationships had significantly lower control of depth scores (mean = 18.70, s.d. = 6.11) following the FBF than did Terminated Relationships (mean = 22.08, s.d. = 5.94).

Honesty/accuracy. Main effect B had an $F = 4.83$, $p = .03$, Eta squared = .05, and an interaction effect of $F = 9.26$, $p = .003$, eta squared = .09. Post hoc analysis that

Continued Relationships pre-post scores increased significantly (pre mean = 38.66, post mean = 42.70, $p < .05$) and Terminated Relationships post scores were significantly higher than Continued Relationships' post scores (Continued mean = 42.70, Terminated mean = 37.20, $p < .05$).

Intensity. There were no significant differences at any level for the intensity variable.

Positiveness. There was a significant interaction effect for positiveness of self disclosure ($F = 4.39$, $p = .04$, Eta squared = .05). Terminated Relationships following the FBF showed a significantly lower mean than before (Pre mean = 34.75, Post mean = 33.69, $p < .05$).

Discussion

This study was conducted using participant recall of events and feelings; therefore all of the following discussion is offered under the standard limitations associated with retrospective analysis.

There were no significant differences reported between survivors and non-survivors in the amount of DPCA prior to the FBF. Thus, the evidence associated with the first hypothesis does not provide support for DPCA as an early predictor of negative outcomes from FBFs. This is encouraging in the sense that it would appear the negative outcomes typically associated with general communication apprehension are not necessarily congruent with those of the targeted, narrow-banded DPCA. DPCA does not appear to be an antecedent condition to the FBF that could pre-determine the outcomes of the FBF relative to the potential life of the dating relationship. Although high DPCA is intuitively unhealthy in the early stages of a relationship, people in terminated relationships did not report alarmingly higher levels of DPCA prior to the FBF than did people in surviving relationships. Prudence suggests that the role of high DPCA relative to potential relational termination prior to the FBF should be further explored.

The results do suggest that the DPCA that emerges during and immediately following that event is important. For example, the second hypothesis was supported with DPCA found to be significantly higher immediately following the FBF for non-survivors compared to survivors. In addition, analysis of the confirmed third hypothesis indicated that non-survivors report greater levels of overall DPCA change as a function of the FBF than do survivors. Furthermore, while the survivors reported no significant difference in DPCA scores between before and after the FBF, the non-survivors report significantly more DPCA after the FBF than before.

Given that survivors report (Siegert & Stamp, 1994) that they "confront their problems together, talk about them with one another, and work together to resolve problematic situations in the interest of continuing their relationship." (p. 356), it may be that the feelings about communicating were positively impacted during the FBF, thus slightly lowering DPCA. On the other hand, when one partner did not handle a FBF in a productive manner (as occurs within terminated relationships), the DPCA of their partner may have increased dramatically. One potential explanation for these results lies in the notion that a part of the attribution process may reflect differently for survivors and non-survivors. For example, a perception by survivors of developing a relational unity may decrease DPCA while non-survivors may reflect a rationalization for termination focused upon a perception of increased apprehension-inducing behaviors by the former partner during and following the FBF, thus increasing their own DPCA.

Future research may attempt to explore the viability of data collection over very long extended time frames, perhaps systematically and frequently collecting data from an entire freshman or transfer student class over the entire breadth of their higher education experience.

Future researchers should explore reputable, valid, and reliable ways to access the privacy of major FBF's and interpersonal feelings. Given the potential error inherent to all retrospective studies, identifying a means to gain more direct, observable behaviors is always a high priority.

Meanwhile, research must proceed cautiously, using the best available data, to learn more about the role of communication orientations, FBFs, and relational maintenance and change. There are clear long-term FBF ramifications of communication orientations that are critical to relational maintenance and growth. Research should continue to explore these factors in light of the potential for minimizing negative relational outcomes while maximizing positive relational outcomes.

Notes

1. In order to avoid eliminating substantial numbers of participants who did not have a very recent relationship that had been terminated following a FBF, restrictions on recency of the terminated relationship were not imposed. Furthermore, it was reasoned that college students had limited exposure to dating relationships that terminated following a FBF and those under investigation would not likely be confused with others. Finally, it was reasoned that the FBF that leads to termination of a relationship is of such very high situational intensity that the magnitude of normal memory would be greatly enhanced. Therefore, it is argued that the classic memory time-lapse error associated with retrospective analyses would not be overly intrusive in this instance and thus would allow for non-limitation of the recency of the FBF and relational crisis event.

2. One of the challenges of conducting research in this area is that of the unavailability of direct access to observable information at the exact time of communication events. The best, though admittedly flawed, approach is via a retrospective methodology. Fortunately, as Siegert and Stamp (1994) indicate, "... the FBF is a memorable event..." (p. 345) and, given that the event is considered a potential turning point (Baxter & Bullis, 1986) and critical event (Planalp, S., & Honeycutt, J. M., 1985; Planalp, S., Rutherford, D. K., & Honeycutt, J. M., 1988) with the power to significantly impact the termination and/or growth of the relationship, the circumstances surrounding the FBF certainly should stand out in the memory of young college age participants and minimize memory-lapse error. However, as with all such analyses, caution in over-generalizing these results is mandatory.

3. In light of the lack of a better option, the Sheffe t test was considered an acceptable post hoc comparison statistic for the test-retest condition.

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