

wanted without the restrictions. "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 1998, p. 3).

We employed telephone interviewing for three reasons: (a) Telephone interviews allowed increased convenience for the participants, as interviews could be conducted in virtually any location at any time. (b) Telephone interviews allowed for follow-up questions and more immediate responses than computer-mediated interviews. (c) Telephone interviews allowed a broader geographic sample than face-to-face interviews.

### Sample

*Target.* Many researchers examine marital communication at specific life stages, and thus limit their samples to spouses representing a specific time frame within the marriage, such as newly-weds (e.g., Heffner, Kiecolt-Glaser, Loving, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2004) or long-term marital partners (e.g., Dickson et al., 2002). Furthermore, multiple studies document changes in marital satisfaction across the life span of the marriage (e.g., Ko, Berg, Butner, Uchino, & Smith, 2007; Mackey & O'Brien, 1999). Thus, we reasoned that spouses might request assistance in meeting their needs in different ways during specific marital life stages.

We elected to study request behavior in early marriages, specifically with spouses married two to seven years. We offer three reasons for this decision: (a) Such spouses would be past the earliest stages of experimenting to discover how best to communicate needs to their marital partners. (b) Spouses married two to seven years remain relatively young in their marriage and not entirely set in their ways. (c) Finally, such spouses are likely discussing or experiencing the arrival of the first child(ren), a situation that can prompt new communication patterns between spouses and influence marital conflict, quality, and satisfaction (e.g., Klein et al., 2007; Shapiro & Gottman, 2005).

*Size.* Our convenience sample was composed of fifteen adults who self-reported as married heterosexuals. We gathered data until no new information emerged during the 13th, 14th, and 15th (final) interview; at that point, we deemed the categories saturated. To assess the normality of our sample size, we conducted a search in the Ebsco Communication and Mass Media Complete database using the key word "interview" with "marriage," "marital," and "married." The search uncovered nine articles published in communication journals during years 2009 through 2012 that reported interviews with spouses describing communication within marital dyads (Damari, 2010; Durham & Braithwaite, 2009; Frisby, 2009; Goldsmith, Bute, & Lindholm, 2012; Harris, Keil, Sutton, Barnier, & McIlwain, 2011; Johnson, 2010; Medved & Rawlins, 2011; Merolla, 2010; Wilder, 2012). Sample sizes were 2, 9, 16, 16, 24, 32, 33, 41, and 48 (mean = 24.56;  $SD = 14.31$ ). Thus, our sample size of 15 appeared within the normal range for interview studies on marital communication (within

one standard deviation of the mean).

*Characteristics.* Almost all participants estimated that they disclosed about 80% of their needs to their spouse; thus, we obtained an incident-rich sample to examine spousal requests. Participants reported a mean of 4.77 years of marriage to their current spouse (median = 4.5, mode = 7, range = 2.5 to 7 years). Two participants reported one previous marriage, and one participant reported two previous marriages. Nine participants (60%) reported at least one child from the current marriage, and one participant reported at least one child from a previous marriage. The participants ranged in age from 21 years to 41 years old (mean = 30.20 years); participants reported spouses' ages ranging from 21 to 40 years old (mean = 29.60 years).

The participants included five men and ten women. Fourteen participants classified themselves as Caucasian and one participant elected not to respond to the question on ethnicity. Ten participants self-reported full-time employment, two part-time employment, and three no employment outside the home. Four participants self-reported as full-time students. All participants described their spouses as employed full-time.

### *Instruments*

*Demographic survey.* Participants completed a brief demographic survey prior to or following the telephone interview. The survey provided data for sample description.

*Interview protocol.* Following Kvale's (1996) guidelines, we developed an interview protocol consisting of 25 questions about spouses' perceptions and memories of marital communication about needs.<sup>1</sup> The interview protocol began with an explanation of the study's purpose and working definitions for key terms. The balance of the protocol consisted of 21 open-ended questions, three yes or no questions, and one scaled question.

The interview was divided into two sets of questions. The first nineteen questions asked the participants about their needs and strategies for introducing needs to their spouses. The final six questions focused on the participants' perceptions of the strategies their spouses employed to convey needs. We divided the sets of questions to direct the participants' thoughts first to their own habits and then to their spouses' habits.

The interviewer asked participants to describe events that had taken place in the past 48 hours. If they could not recall requests from the last two days, then they were asked to describe an event in the recent past. All participants readily recalled requests and most participants volunteered answers such as, "I needed help moving a chest, and I asked him to help me, and he said that he would," or "I wanted us to do something without the kids that was just the two of us

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<sup>1</sup>A copy of the interview protocol is available upon request from the second author at: lynnewebb320@cs.com.

because I felt like we needed some one-on-one time, and he agreed with me and helped me make plans for the weekend."

### *Procedures*

Participants were recruited as referrals from students in various undergraduate classes, including two upper-level communication courses and two upper-level marketing courses, at a large, public, flagship university in the southeastern United States. Contacts with members of a student group at the law school of the same university also generated referrals. Students in the two communication courses were offered extra credit for either participating in the survey or for providing referrals to the study.

The interviewer was a Caucasian female honor student majoring in Communication, age 21, married 32 months, and completing her final semester of undergraduate work. She contacted participants by telephone or by email to arrange interview times as well as to confirm contact information. After scheduling the interview, the interviewer provided the informed consent form and the demographic questionnaire.

At the agreed time, the interviewer called the participant, asked if he/she had reviewed and signed the informed consent and if he/she had any questions. The interviewer then reminded the participant that the interview would be recorded and asked permission to turn on the recorder. All participants agreed to allow recording of the conversation. After beginning the recording, the interviewer read the introduction of the protocol and asked the participant if he/she had any questions before the interviewer began to ask the interview questions.

After receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the interviewer pilot-tested the protocol during the first interview, and subsequently reworded only two items to increase clarity. To ensure consistency, all interviews were completed within a period of three weeks. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for both consistency and flexibility; thus, the interviewer was able to ask follow-up questions to gain specific answers, as needed (Fontana & Frey, 1998).

### *Analyses*

In addition to audio-taping the interviews, the interviewer recorded field notes during the interviews. Following each interview, the interviewer reviewed the field notes and the tape recording, and expanded notes as necessary, to accurately reflect the participant's responses. The field notes, composed of 45 pages of handwritten notes, became the data for thematic analysis.

Rather than imposing conceptual categories on the data, the interviewer/coder followed Boyatzis' (1998) advice to allow themes to emerge from the data. The interviewer/coder employed Owen's (1984) criteria for identifying themes -- repetition (relatively the same lan-

guage to describe a phenomenon), recurrence (differing language but similar meanings for a phenomenon), and forcefulness (ideas strongly stressed verbally or nonverbally). After the third interview, the coder began compiling themes from the participants' answers by listing and grouping repeated responses. When no new themes emerged from the 13th, 14th and 15th interview, saturation was achieved. The coder again reviewed the tape recordings and field notes before finalizing the themes.

### Results

*RQ 1: "What are the most common needs married participants report discussing with their spouses?"*

Every participant reported that there were things they needed from his/her spouse. Three thematic categories of needs emerged: (a) intimacy and love, (b) household and childcare, as well as (c) support and respect (see Table 1). Participants discussed needs that they wanted fulfilled specifically by their spouse in more precise terms; eight thematic categories of such needs emerged from the data: intimacy/sex, personal conversation, companionship, unconditional love/affection, respect, honesty, support/encouragement, and help raising children. Most participants clarified that spousal fulfillment of their needs was different and distinct from having those same needs fulfilled by coworkers or other family members. Many participants pointed out that the conversation, companionship, respect, support, and encouragement from their spouse held special meaning and more value than the same things from other sources.

**Table 1:** Common Needs, Wants, and Desires Reported by Spouses Married 2-7 Years

Themes	Examples Provided by Participants
Intimacy and Love	Couple alone time; knowledge of spouse's love; interaction; affection; intimacy; romance; companionship
Household and Childcare	Help with house work; help with child care; everyday assistance; work together; family decision-making
Support and Respect	Undivided attention; sensitivity; understanding; affirmation; support; some autonomy; respect; recognition

*RQ 2: According to self-reports of married participants, what factors influence whether spouses reveal their needs to one another?*

Participants identified a variety of factors that influenced when and why they revealed needs to their spouses, including importance of the need, the moods and attitudes of both the participant and the spouse, the ability of the spouse to fulfill the need, the continuance of the

need across time, and the effect of the need on others. Also, several participants expressed awareness that their spouse would not know what they wanted if they did not reveal it. The most common circumstantial factors identified by the participants were (a) importance of the need, and (b) the moods and attitudes of the spouse.

*RQ 3: What are the most common strategies married participants report for introducing their needs to their spouses?*

The interviewer asked the participants to describe the strategies that they typically employed to introduce their needs to their spouse. Five categories of strategies emerged: direct, indirect, positive social, negative social, and exchange. Table 2 displays definitions and illustrations of these five categories of strategies.

**Table 2:** Strategies for Disclosing Needs, Wants, and Desires to Spouses Reported by Individuals Married Two to Seven Years.

Strategy	Definition	Illustrative Quotations from Interviews
Direct	A direct statement of the need or want; a direct request for the spouse's assistance in fulfilling the need or want.	"I need us to spend more time together." "Can you please watch the baby for an hour while I go visit Liz?"
Indirect	Covert or roundabout disclosure of the need or want. Might or might not be recognized by the spouse as an introduction of need or want.	Hints; comments thrown into conversations; humor or joking about the need or want and the lack of fulfillment; using a third party to reveal the need or want
Positive Social	Direct or indirect disclosure of need or want that is likely to promote positive feelings between the individual and the spouse.	Affirming the value and ability of the spouse – flattery; flirtatious or friendly behavior; explanation of how the fulfillment of the need or want will benefit the spouse or the relationship
Negative Social	Direct or indirect disclosure of need or want that is likely to promote negative feelings between the individual and the spouse.	Debt owed by spouse for individual's past fulfillment of spouse's needs; guilt; pouting or withdrawal; attitude leading to questioning by the spouse
Exchange	Individual compensates the spouse for the spouse's assistance in fulfilling the individual's need or want.	Promise of future reward; compromise such that some need or want of each individual is fulfilled; reward or gift prior to disclosure or fulfillment of need or want – pre-giving

Many participants expressed the importance of removing distractions before introducing the need. In cases where both marital partners led busy lives, including school, career, and/or childcare, participants reported the importance of setting aside a time for discussion without interruption, instead of mentioning needs at times when the partner was too busy to make a deliberated decision about fulfilling the need. Other participants reported that when the need was not private, but important and likely to provoke resistance from the partner, they persuaded a third party to introduce the need to the partner and "plead the case" for the participant.

Finally, participants identified circumstances under which typical strategies might be effective. In situations where the need is extremely important to the participant or when the spouse obviously does not want to fulfill the need, participants reported employing alternative strategies to introduce the need, including addressing the partner's concerns when introducing the need; prefacing the introduction of the need (e.g., "You aren't going to like this, but..." or "When you have a minute, I'd like to talk to you about..."); questioning the partner to gauge his/her attitude about the need before making the request; and easing into a big issue by hinting about the need across time before making a direct request.

RQ 4: What strategies for introducing needs do married participants report as most successful with their spouses?

Participants consistently identified several strategies as successful, including the positive social strategies of flirtatious behavior, positive physical contact, and affirming the spouse. Some participants described promise or reward strategies as successful but others did not. Most discussed satisfying the needs of the spouse prior to introducing their own needs. Participants also found it successful to point out how the fulfillment of the need would be beneficial to the spouse, or as one individual put it, "Package it in a way that it is easiest for them to receive." In addition, a reward approach seemed most successful when the participants predicted their spouses were unlikely or unwilling to fulfill the needs without compensation. The most frequently reported strategies were direct statements, direct requests, flirtatiousness, or friendly behaviors. Some participants identified flirting as a successful strategy but reported rarely using it because they preferred to ask directly for what they needed. Less common strategies included a direct but hostile approach, hinting, using a third party, guilt, and offering a promise or a reward.

Some participants acknowledged that they occasionally employed a strategy that they expected to fail. Three circumstances led to this behavior: (a) When the participant reported knowing that what he/she wanted was unnecessary or irrational, he/she would word the request in such a way that the spouse would be unwilling to fulfill that need, thereby placing the blame for the failure on the spouse for not fulfilling the need. (b) One participant recalled using unsuccessful strategies when upset in the heat of a conflict. (c) Another participant

reported knowingly using an unsuccessful strategy simply to get an issue on the table for discussion.

Most participants reported several strategies they employed with their spouses; in contrast, participants typically recalled only one or two strategies that their spouses used with them. Nonetheless, the two lists of strategies were nearly identical. We noted one exception to this trend: Participants reported that their spouses sometimes employed pouting or a bad mood to indicate a problem, prompting our participants to ask their spouses, "What do you need?"

*RQ 5: What criteria do married participants report as influential in their selection of strategy?*

Most participants identified a list of important criteria they employed to choose their strategies, including mood of the spouse, mood of the requester, importance of the need, and the subject matter itself. For example, participants reported consistently introducing the desire for physical intimacy with positive social strategies (e.g., flirtatious behavior) as well as through indirect strategies (e.g., hinting and joking). Also, when the requester's need was of minor importance and simple to fulfill (e.g., asking for a beverage from the refrigerator), the participants reported using positive and direct strategies.

Finally, participants reported selecting strategies based on the strategy's previous success. Consistent with the notion of conditioned responses, participants recalled which strategies were successful with certain requests and situations, often choosing strategies that had been successful in the past. Participants also claimed that they often predicted the response of their spouse and would choose a strategy based on the predicted likelihood that the spouse would be willing to fulfill the need. For example, if the participant predicted that his/her spouse would be willing to fulfill the need, then he/she might use a strategy that did not require as much thought or energy, such as a direct request. In contrast, if the spouse predicted the partner would be unwilling to fulfill the need, then participants reported choosing and enacting more elaborate strategies.

Participants speculated that their spouses choose strategies using the same selection criteria participants employed: the moods of both partners, the importance of the need, the subject matter, the specific situation, and the requester's prediction of the target's willingness to fulfill the need. All but one participant reported that their spouses were aware that some strategies were more successful than others; most participants reported that their spouses used the same strategies "all the time."

## Discussion

### *Summary of Results*

Participants reported employing a variety of strategies to present their needs to their spouses, including a few consistently persuasive

strategies. Furthermore, participants identified factors that influenced strategy selection including the moods of both spouses, the importance of the need, the subject of the need, and the predicted likelihood that the spouse would be willing to fulfill the need. Participants reported that their spouses employed approximately the same set of strategies guided by the same set of factors influencing strategy selection.

### *Interpretation of Findings*

Participants articulated an extensive list of needs that we categorized into three themes: intimacy/love, household/childcare, and support/respect (see Table 1). The category of support/respect is consistent with the findings of a growing body of literature documenting the influence of social support both within and outside the marital dyad (e.g., Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010; Wright, 2012). The variety of needs reported by our participants suggests that they expected spousal assistance in fulfilling a broad range of needs. Furthermore, consistent with previous research regarding relational intimacy and satisfaction resulting from fulfillment of needs (Hobfoll, Nadler, & Leiberman, 1986), our participants described needs they thought could only be met by their spouses.

Participants identified factors that influenced their decision to disclose needs including the importance of the need and the perceived mood of the spouse and the self. How did participants balance these factors when they conflicted? Consistent with results from both the emotional expressiveness (Yelsma & Marrow, 2003) and the emotional response literature (Hunter & Boster, 1987), importance of the need can directly influence marital partners' emotional thresholds as our participants reported introducing only very important needs in the face of a spouse's bad mood. Given that participants reported using strategies consistent with those employed by their spouses, and given that prior research indicated that spouses exhibit similarity in communication skills (Burleson & Denton, 1992), perhaps marital dyads develop a common pool of options from which they select strategies to disclose needs to each other. Consistent with Weigel et al.'s finding of a significant positive association "between husband's reported use of direct strategies and their perceptions of [marital] satisfaction" (2006, p. 87), our participants deemed the direct and positive social strategies most successful, followed by indirect and exchange; they considered negative social strategies successful but not desirable.

Participants revealed strategies they employed when their spouses were unlikely to fulfill their needs; thus, our results offer a "first draft" of a list of compliance-gaining strategies within the marital context for introducing needs. They include direct, indirect, positive social, negative social, and exchange (see Table 2 for specific examples).

Given that targets can be reluctant to provide the resources necessary to fulfill requests (Schwartz, 1977), and given that requesters

commonly employ strategies to reduce resistance (Curl & Drew, 2008; Francik & Clark, 1985; Gibbs, 1985, 1986; Gibbs & Mueller, 1988; Paulson & Roloff, 1997), our participants reported employing alternative strategies to overcome spousal resistance. The most frequently reported alternative strategies included (a) acknowledging a partner's reluctance to fulfill a need and (b) attempting to see the request from the point of view of the spouse. Participants reported employing such strategies to preempt the spouse's negative reactions and reduce defensiveness.

Our participants' preference for direct strategies was consistent with research indicating that intimates were more likely to use direct requests than non-intimates (Jordan & Roloff, 1990) and that dual career couples are more likely to use direct versus indirect influence strategies (Stell & Weltman, 1992). Indeed, directness accompanied by a sense of obligation, as might be the case with spouses, raised the probability of compliance (Clark, 1993). A direct approach can seem a highly effective strategy for spouses when introducing a need; however, a direct request must be stated politely to be effective (Blum-Kulka, 1987), as politeness increases the willingness to comply with requests (Baxter, 1984; Kellermann & Shea, 1996). Schwartz's (1977) findings regarding the reduction in compliance with increased pressure supports the need for politeness. Moreover, when requests do not contain rudeness or aggressiveness, our participants described the direct strategy as most successful.

Participants reported negative strategies as prompting compliance but damaging the relationship and therefore undesirable. Although common in short-term relationships, these negative strategies can have ill effects on the health and stability of long-term relationships, except when relationship rules or personal characteristics allow them (Miller et al., 1977).

Participants readily identified their repertoires of strategies, which included their notions of successful versus unsuccessful strategies. Participants reported periodically employing unsuccessful strategies, and we offer three possible explanations for these choices. First, rather than engage in thoughtful strategy selection, requesters might employ the most expedient strategy, even if it is not always the most successful. Second, given the intimate nature of the marriage relationship, spouses can perceive an obligation to fulfill the needs of their partners. This obligation might reduce the target's resistance to requests and minimize the need to overcome that resistance (Schwartz, 1977), which would make more elaborate strategies unnecessary. Third, individuals might believe that their spouse has a duty to fulfill the individual's needs (Bar-Tal et al., 1977; Dillard & Fitzpatrick, 1985), and therefore, consider it unnecessary to structure the request in a particularly pleasing manner.

Contrary to expectations, but consistent with Shimanoff's (1987) observation that requests accompanied by expressions of vulnerability and/or hostility often lead to spousal compliance, about half of the

participants reported intentionally using a strategy they expected to be unsuccessful when introducing a need to their spouse. We offer four possible explanations for this finding: (a) There was a lack of communication between spouses regarding successful strategies. (b) If such meta-communication has occurred, the requesters believe they know better than the spouses which strategies work best. (c) Marital or gender role expectations dictate useable strategies. (d) Latent needs might prompt introduction of an unrelated need in such a way that the latent need is revealed and/or addressed (e.g., a wife desiring increased time with her husband might introduce a weekend trip in such a way that he will not be willing to fulfill the request, which in turn leads to a detailed discussion of how to spend free time). Future studies could examine the potential validity of these four explanations.

Participants reported two factors as most influential in strategy selection: the mood of the requester and the perceived mood of the target spouse. Both factors are potential obstacles to need fulfillment. The mood of the requester influences whether or not the need is introduced and the strategy that is selected. The mood of the target influences the likelihood that the spouse is willing to fulfill the need. In addition to mood, the importance of the need influences strategy selection; our participants reported that a need is more likely to be revealed if perceived as important. Requesters employed strategies that make clear the request and its legitimacy, while employing positive social behaviors to appear polite (Jordan & Roloff, 1990). Finally, participants reported selecting strategies based on their memories of what had worked in the past. When a past behavior facilitated compliance, logic would lead the interactant to assume that in similar circumstances acting in the same way would produce a similarly positive result. If the positive result occurs, the logic is reinforced and the pattern likely continues.

### *Theoretical Explanation of Results*

Aristotle explained rhetoric as involving the selection of a method of persuasion appropriate to the topic, audience, and occasion (Cooper, 1929). Hence, basic rhetorical theory provides an eloquent explanation for the process of choosing strategies for introducing needs in marital relationships. Our participants reported developing and choosing appropriate and successful strategies to introduce a need to their spouses through analysis of the audience, the message, and the situation. Thus, it appears that our participants are behaving rhetorically.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

Our lists of strategies could provide the basis for a compliance-gaining questionnaire relevant for use in marital contexts. Our study could expand to compare strategies used to introduce needs when the response is largely unknown versus strategies employed in the face of