

Faculty Development Research Grant Proposal for Summer 2008

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I. Project Title, Abstract, and Summary

Title. Communication During Arguments: Connections With Individuals' Health

Abstract. These studies will investigate the various facets of communication during arguments and their relation to physical and mental well-being.

Project summary. This research will investigate the role of communication during ongoing arguments. Hostile communication during arguments has been linked to deleterious outcomes (e.g. Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993; Lawler et al., 2003). However, the relationship of collaborating, or integrative communication, and individuals' health is less clear. To further investigate the relationship between communication during argumentative episodes and health, my co-authors and I conducted two studies. I am requesting support to code, analyze, and write-up the results for these two studies.

With the first study we intend to explore the relationships between various conflict behaviors including avoidance, hostile communication, and integrative communication and physical and mental well-being. The second study aims to further investigate the role of integrative communication by analyzing the various facets of integrative communication including problem solving, listening, and self-expression and their connection with individuals' well-being. We hope to parcel out the effects of the multiple components of integrative communication in arguments and highlight the interplay between relational communication processes and one's health.

II. Narrative

1. Current Situation

Arguing is common in personal relationships (Argyle & Furnham, 1983). Often times, relational partners are not able to resolve their arguments in a single episode (e.g. Johnson and Roloff, 1998). Ongoing and unresolved, or serial, arguments have been linked with negative relational and health consequences. Recent studies suggest that arguing has deleterious effects on an individual's health due to the stress that is felt both during (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993) and after confrontations (Malis & Roloff, 2006b).

What contributes to this stress? One important component is the communication that occurs within argumentative episodes. Hostile communication appears to be detrimental to one's health and stress level. Hostility is positively associated with illness (Lawler et al., 2003). Also, the intensity of negative affect expressed during conflict has been linked with increases in blood pressure and decreases in

individuals' immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993). Finally, having a dominating, or competing conflict style was related to individuals experiencing more work-related stress (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000).

On the other hand, the effects of integrating, or more constructive communication on well-being are more complex. Constructive disagreements may be beneficial for individuals' health because they are associated with normalized blood pressure (Davidson, MacGregor, Stuhr, Dixon, & MacLean, 2000). Also, constructive communication, such as suggesting solutions and being supportive of one's partner during conflicts promotes "adaptive physiological responses to interpersonal conflict" (Robles, Shaffer, Malarkey, and Kiecolt-Glaser, 2006, p. 305). However, Friedman et al. (2000) failed to confirm their hypothesis that having an integrative conflict style would lead individuals to experience less stress.

Our prior research has shown that mutual hostile communication during arguments was detrimental to individuals as it predicted stress and stress-related problems whereas constructive communication was only mildly helpful as it was not a consistently significant predictor of stress and well-being (Roloff & Reznik, in press). Thus, we added to the body of research that supports the belief that bad is stronger than good (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). However, our prior work was limited to mutual patterns of communication (i.e. behaviors that both spouses engaged in) and we missed capturing the effort from unilateral self-related actions.

So, to build on our prior work and address our prior shortcomings, we will investigate how serial arguing harms physical well-being and what specific components of serial arguing are destructive. We will compare features of arguing including argument frequency, duration, and perceived resolvability of the argument. Then, we will see if argument strategy, including avoidance, destructive and constructive communication, accounts for additional variance beyond these components. We have preliminary evidence that arguing is stressful regardless of the strategy that individuals employ (Roloff, Miller, & Malis, 2007). However, we believe that the relationship between constructive communication and health is more complex.

We will test if constructive communication reflects a number of different facets including listening, problem solving, and self-expression and how these facets are related to well-being. Integrative behaviors include disclosure of one's feelings and sharing how the conflict might be solved (Witteman, 1988). The integrative style of conflict is thought to represent both a concern for oneself and a concern for the other (Friedman et al., 2000). Thus, as listening to the other demonstrates that one cares about the other's point of view, we predict listening will be a key and beneficial component of integrative communication. Because problem-solving requires effort and cognitive expenditure, we expect that problem-solving will be a harmful component to one's health. However, we believe that self-

expression will be beneficial as silencing oneself is related to health problems. In a study of spouses, wives who kept silent about their feelings were four times more likely to die than wives who expressed their feelings to their husbands (Eaker, Sullivan, Kelly-Hayes, D'Agostinno, & Benjamin, 2007).

2. The Project Plan

After writing a manuscript for *Communication Yearbook* (Miller, Roloff, & Malis, 2007), my co-authors and I developed a questionnaire based on our assertions put forth in that paper. Then, I proceeded to collect data for the study from 117 undergraduates at Northwestern University who received course credit for participating. The questionnaire for Study 1 includes the following measures:

Components of episodes. We first asked the participants to recall and describe a particular ongoing conflict in their romantic relationship. Our prior work has conceptualized ongoing arguments as a chronic stressor characterized by *duration, frequency, and resolvability* (see Malis and Roloff, 2006b). Thus, we asked the participants how long they have been in conflict over their issue and how often they argued about the issue. We also used four items from Johnson and Roloff (1998) to assess how resolvable the participant perceives the conflict to be (e.g. I believe it [the argument] will be resolved in the future.).

Communication during conflict. We used 12 items from Johnson (1998) who adapted a measure from Witteman (1988) to assess *avoidance* (e.g. When the problem was brought up, I tried to change the topic of the discussion.), *distributive communication* (e.g. I insulted my partner.), and *integrative communication* (e.g. I shared with my partner how the problem might be mutually resolved.).

Stress. Stress was assessed with a 14-item scale developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Marmelstein (1983), to assess the degree to which situations in a person's life are stressful (e.g. After your last argument, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?).

Distress. We measured distress with the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R) tapping into *intrusive thoughts* about the conflict, *avoidance* of thoughts and feelings about the conflict, and feeling *hyperaroused* (Weiss & Marmar, 1997; e.g. I stayed away from reminders about it [argument]).

Self-rated health. We assessed participants' health right after their most recent argumentative episode using 33 items from the Cohen-Hoberman Physical Symptoms Checklist (CHIPS, Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) as well as 6 items from the Physical Symptoms Inventory (Spector & Jex, 1998) that were not included in the CHIPS. The other self-rated health items come from Rich (1989; e.g. participants report whether or not they have certain conditions such as allergies) and items assessing interference with life activities due to physical and mental problems are adapted from the SR-36 (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992).

Demographics. We asked participants questions about their age, gender, and year in school.

Based on my prior work on ongoing arguments, I developed the questionnaire for Study 2. I hope that study will build on Study 1 by illuminating the differential effects of the facets of integrative communication. I collected data for Study 2 from 167 undergraduate students at Northwestern University who received course credit for participating. The questionnaire for Study 2 includes the majority of the measures described above. Study 2 uses additional measures to assess communication during episodes:

Communication during conflict. Facets of integrative communication, *listening* (e.g. I listened to all of my partner's arguments.), *self-expression* (e.g. I tried to explain fully my point of view.), and *problem-solving* (e.g. I collaborated with my partner to work through our differences.), were assessed with 15 items taken from Klein and Lamm (1996).

Now that the data collection phase of the project is complete, I plan to follow the timeline outlined in Section III.

This project has multiple benefits for my students, Elmhurst College, and me.

Benefits for my students. My research informs teaching as I integrate my own research methods and findings into my course content. I discuss the research process when I teach classes such as Communication Theory. In the past, I have discussed and critiqued my specific methodologies with students. This discussion of my own research has led to fostering students' interest in relationship research. Sharing my research with undergraduates led me to conduct a research project with one of my students. Furthermore, the findings are directly relevant to my courses that address conflict behaviors in interpersonal situations such as Interpersonal Communication, Small Group Communication, Business and Professional Communication, and Organizational Communication.

Benefits for Elmhurst College. This project will help further the mission of the College. With this research, I am demonstrating my love of learning by conducting original scholarship. Engaging in the data analysis and write-up will also help hone my critical inquiry skills. Furthermore, I am increasing the visibility of the College by presenting my work at national and international academic meetings and getting my work published in a reputable journal.

Benefits for me. I will experience several benefits as a result of this research. First, these studies will be an extension of my program of research on serial arguing and health. Conducting a presentation at a national or international meeting as well as having a publication in a peer-reviewed journal will enhance my visibility in the field and enhance my professional career. Also, the publications and presentations that will result from this project will help provide evidence for scholarly work and

thus strengthen my tenure case at Elmhurst College. Finally, this project will also help me foster and maintain relationships with colleagues at other institutions as well as within the College.

3. Faculty Expertise

My expertise is demonstrated by my prior research experience. I have been conducting relationship research for over eight years. Furthermore, I have authored or co-authored 21 conference papers and presentations and co-authored 11 publications. Also, I have been asked to serve as a reviewer for journal articles focused on conflict in interpersonal relationships.

4. Plans for Evaluation and Dissemination:

This project will be successful if it leads to at least one peer-reviewed conference presentation at either a national or international communication conference or at an international relationship research meeting and an article in a peer-reviewed communication or interdisciplinary publication. Thus, I plan on submitting the results of these studies to one of the following: the National Communication Association's annual convention, the International Communication Association's annual convention, or the annual convention of the International Association of Relationship Research. After receiving feedback from the reviewers at the conference, I plan on submitting the results to a journal such as *Communication Monographs*, *Human Communication Research*, *Personal Relationships*, or the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

I intend on presenting the findings of this research to the Elmhurst College community in forums such as the Research Forum. I also plan on sharing the information with my students in various classes such as Interpersonal Communication, Small Group Communication, Business and Professional Communication, and Organizational Communication.

III. Time line

I do not expect any other major commitments during the time I will be conducting this project. This is the timeline I plan to follow:

May-June:

I will update my collection of relevant literature during this time. If there are questionnaires that still need to be entered, I will enter them into SPSS. Then, I will prepare the two sets of data for analysis. This will entail coding the qualitative data and performing the statistical transformations in SPSS necessary for analysis.

June-July:

One of my co-authors and I will perform the data analysis and write at least one article-length manuscript of our findings. It is possible we will also be able to write another manuscript focused on other variables in the data sets.

July-Aug:

We plan to submit the manuscript to a peer-reviewed national or international academic communication conference or an interdisciplinary conference focused on relationship research. After receiving feedback from our conference paper and presentation, we plan to revise the manuscript and submit it to a peer-reviewed communication or relationship research journal.

IV. Budget

<i>SPSS upgrade from version 11 to 16</i> I am currently using an outdated version of SPSS. An upgrade will allow me to share output files with my collaborators.	\$600
<i>Faculty salary</i> I am requesting salary support as this funding will allow me to focus on conducting my research this summer.	\$2,900
Total	\$3,500

V. Current and Previous Grants

Travel Grant, Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty (2007)

Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, IL

- \$400 provided to present research at the National Communication Association annual meeting.

Dissertation Research Grant, School of Communication (2005)

Northwestern University, Evanston, IL

- \$1,000 provided to pay research participants and pay for materials.

Travel Grant, Graduate School and Department of Communication Studies (2004, 2005, 2006)

Northwestern University, Evanston, IL

- \$1,150/year to support travel to various scholarly conferences.

VI. PUBLICATIONS (from past three years):

Roloff, M. E., & **Reznik, R. M.** (in press). Communication during serial arguments: Connections with individuals' mental and physical well-being. To be included in *Addressing Communicators' Dilemmas: Studies in Applied Interpersonal Communication*. M. T. Motley (Ed.). [invited/peer-reviewed]

Malis, R. S., & Roloff, M. E. (2007). The effect of legitimacy and intimacy

on peer interventions into alcohol abuse. *Western Journal of Communication*, 49-68. [peer-reviewed]

Miller, C. W., Roloff, M. E., & **Malis, R. S.** (2007). Understanding interpersonal conflicts that are difficult to resolve: A review of literature and presentation of an integrated model. In C. S. Beck (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 31*. (pp. 117-171). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. [peer-reviewed]

Malis, R. S., & Roloff, M. E. (2006a). Demand/withdraw patterns in serial arguing: Implications for well-being. *Human Communication Research*, 32, 198-216. [peer-reviewed]

Malis, R. S., & Roloff, M. E. (2006b). Features of serial arguing and coping strategies: Links with stress and well-being. In R. M. Dailey, & B. A. Le Poire (Eds.) *Applied interpersonal communication matters: Family, health, and community relations*. (pp. 39-65). New York, NY: Peter Lang. [invited/editor-reviewed]

Rintamaki, L. S., Witt, W. P., Weaver, F., **Malis, R.**, Breslow, D., & Simuni, T. (2006). The experience of stigma among people living with Parkinson's disease. *Movement Disorders*, 21, S135-S136. [peer-reviewed]

Witt, W. P., Rintamaki, L., Weaver, F., Khan, S. O., Lamba, N., **Malis, R.**, Breslow, D., & Simuni, T. (2006). Exploring the sources of stress and adjustment strategies among family caregivers of Parkinson's Disease patients. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 54(4), S61. [peer-reviewed]

Witt, W. P., Rintamaki, L. S., Weaver, F., Khan, S. O., Lamba, N., **Malis, R.**, Breslow, D., & Simuni, T. (2006). Stress and coping among family caregivers of Parkinson's disease patients. *Movement Disorders*, 21, S137. [peer-reviewed]

Roloff, M.E., & **Malis R.** (2005, August). Vignette 5: Physician-to-Drug Rep Communication. Finding the (Right) Time. *Virtual Mentor*. <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/15355.html> [invited/editor-reviewed]

MANUSCRIPTS UNDER REVIEW:

Reznik, R. M., & Roloff, M. E. (under review). Legitimacy and relationship orientation: Factors affecting health influence strategies.

Reznik, R. M., & Miller, C. W. (under review). Social allergens: Exploring the impact of emotions, apologies and resolvability on relational well-being and communication.

RESEARCH WITH STUDENTS:

Wernsing W., & **Malis, R.** (2007, April). The effects of conflict on the well-being of

couples. Poster presented at the Student Research and Creative Production Exposition at Bradley University, Peoria, IL.

PEER-REVIEWED CONFERENCE PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS (from past three years):

Reznik, R. M., & Roloff, M. E. (November, 2007). The role of legitimacy and communal orientation on the use of health influence strategies. Paper presented at the annual convention of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL. [133 competitive papers were submitted and 90 were accepted. Therefore, the acceptance rate was 68%.]

Roloff, M. E., Miller, C. W., & **Reznik, R. M.** (November, 2007). The interplay of serial argument, relational quality, and health. Paper presented at the annual convention of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.
[This paper was part of a panel. The acceptance rate for panels was 50%].

Malis, R. S., & Roloff, M. E. (May, 2007). Communication during serial arguments: Connections with individuals' mental and physical well-being. Paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA.

Miller, C. W., Roloff, M. E., & **Malis, R. S.** (November, 2006). Understanding interpersonal conflicts that are difficult to resolve: A review of literature and presentation of an integrated model. Paper presented at the annual convention of the National Communication Association, San Antonio, TX.

Malis, R. S., & Miller, C. W. (July, 2006). Social allergens in romantic relationships: The role of communication and emotion. Paper presented at the International Association of Relationship Research, Crete, Greece.

Witt, W. P., Rintamaki, L., Weaver, F., Khan, S. O., Lamba, N., **Malis, R.**, Breslow, D., Simuni, T. (May, 2006). Exploring the sources of stress and adjustment among family caregivers of Parkinson's Disease patients. Poster presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the American Geriatrics Society, Chicago, IL.

Rintamaki, L., Witt, W. P., Weaver, F., **Malis, R. S.**, Breslow, D., & Simuni, T. (February, 2006). The experience of stigma among people living with Parkinson's Disease. Paper presented at the World's Parkinson Congress, Washington, D.C.

Witt, W. P., Rintamaki, L., Weaver, F., Khan, S. O., Lamba, N., **Malis, R.**, Breslow, D., Simuni, T. (February, 2006). Stress and coping among family caregivers of Parkinson's Disease patients. Paper presented at the World's Parkinson Congress, Washington, D.C.

Malis, R. S., & Roloff, M. E. (2005, November). Linking Serial Arguing and Well-being:

- Implications for Stress and Physical Health. Paper presented at the annual convention of the National Communication Association, Boston, MA.
- Malis, R. S.** (2005, July). Serial arguing in romantic relationships. Presentation at the International Association of Relationship Research New Scholar's Workshop, Indianapolis, IN.
- Malis, R. S., & Roloff, M. E.** (2005, July). Coping with serial arguments: Implications for health and well being. Paper presented at the International Association for Relationship Research mini-conference, Indianapolis, IN.
- Malis, R. S., & Roloff, M. E.** (2005, July). Privacy and legitimacy: Connections with health influence. Paper presented at the International Association for Relationship Research mini-conference, Indianapolis, IN.
- Malis, R. S., & Roloff, M. E.** (2005, May). Legitimacy, Relationship Orientation, and Psychological Reactance: Factors affecting health influence attempts. Paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, New York, NY.

References

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