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Current Theories and Epistemologies of Couple Communication Center White American Modes of Interaction

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ABSTRACT

The way that partners communicate with each other has been strongly linked with relationship outcomes, and communication therefore occupies a prominent place in key theories of relationship functioning. Direct observation is considered the gold standard methodology for studying couple communication, and this method has been widely used in relationship science over the past 5 decades. Although direct observation of partners' interactional exchanges has yielded insight into the functioning of relationships, it is a tool that is the product of research conducted in the Global North, primarily using samples of White American couples. White American modes of communication and interaction prioritize openly and directly confronting problems, but there is evidence to indicate that this paradigm would not adequately capture the various ways that couples from other cultural backgrounds deal with relationship problems or communicate love and support. By upholding this rigid epistemological definition of "good science," relationship scholars are limiting our ability to accurately understand relationship functioning among couples from cultural backgrounds that are not aligned with White American ideals, and perpetuating the White American mode of interaction as the "correct" way to behave in a relationship. The current manuscript highlights the ways in which the current observational paradigm is problematic for diversifying relationship science and discusses adjustments that must be made to this methodology, as well as alternative methodological approaches for studying couple communication, that should be adopted in order to move toward an inclusive, global science of close relationships.

1 | Introduction

The 1970s and 80s witnessed a precipitous increase in divorce in the U.S. (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014), leading relationship scientists to focus attention on understanding how relationships that start out happy and mutually satisfying can deteriorate into distress. Clinical psychological scientists who were treating distressed couples in their clinical practices observed that couples were overwhelmingly reporting issues with communication as the primary problem in their relationship, and communication quickly emerged as an important construct in the study of relationship maintenance and deterioration (Noller and Fitzpatrick 1990; R. B. Stuart 1969). By virtue of having a front row seat to observe partners' interactions during therapy sessions, clinical psychologists saw the richness and complexity of in vivo communication exchanges and concluded that direct observation would also be the best approach for measuring couples' communication in a research setting. Indeed, one of the

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pioneers of observational research noted "Studying what people say about themselves is no substitute for studying how they behave... Questionnaires and scales of marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction have yielded very little. We need to look at what people do with one another" (Raush et al. 1974, 5).

Thus, the observational paradigm was born, in which partners are videotaped discussing a topic meant to elicit behaviors such as problem-solving, emotional expression, or support, and the verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors displayed during this interaction are quantified through a coding system (Pasch and Bradbury 1998). Early studies conducted with this method were successful at identifying the behaviors that distinguished between happy and unhappy couples (Noller and Fitzpatrick 1990), confirming what couples had been reporting and what clinicians had been observing: couples who communicated poorly were less satisfied in their relationship than couples who communicated well.

Another decade of continuing observational research sought to identify the communication behaviors that are most harmful to relationships over time, and to a lesser extent those that are most beneficial (Gottman and Notarius 2000). Communication was anointed as "the common pathway to relationship dysfunction across theories, therapists, and clients" (Heyman 2001, 6), and the field congealed around a definition of the types of behaviors that are positive and negative. Communication behaviors that are classified as positive include offering solutions, self-disclosure of emotions, and clearly asserting one's needs, whereas communication behaviors that are classified as negative include hostility, defensiveness, and avoidance (Kanter et al. 2022; Woodin 2011).

One of the latest theoretical advances in the field aims to further refine our understanding of the types of behaviors that are adaptive for relationships by classifying behaviors not just by their valence (i.e., positive vs. negative) but also by whether they are direct versus indirect (Overall et al. 2009; Overall and McNulty 2017). This model concludes that "directness is pivotal" in order to resolve relationship problems, whereas indirect behaviors such as using affection to soften to blow of conflict, restraining negative reactions, appealing to the partners' relationship obligations, and conveying dependence are ineffective at resolving problems and can therefore lead to negative relationship outcomes in the long-term (Overall and McNulty 2017, 2). However, there is a major issue embedded within this body of research, which is that this work has been based on one small, specific context. The scientific study of couple communication was born out of the divorce epidemic in the U.S. and was based on the premise of understanding the role of communication in relationship outcomes for these couples. Not surprisingly, multiple meta-science studies of the intimate relationships literature have demonstrated that White American couples make up the vast majority of samples used in this body of research (McGorray et al. 2023; Williamson et al. 2022).

The cultural norms of White Americans and other Western groups are characterized by high levels of individualism and independence (Hofstede 2001; Triandis 1995), and the intimate relationships viewed as most successful are those that help each partner achieve their own autonomy and personal-growth needs (Finkel et al. 2015). Individuals in this cultural ecology prefer to use communication strategies that are low-context, which means that the speaker is expected to clearly and directly convey their message so that the listener can understand without the need to decode (Ting-Toomey and Dorjee 2018). Outspokenness and direct requests for change are thus viewed as effective conflict resolution strategies, and it is common to view conflict between partners as an opportunity to share and renegotiate individual needs (M. Kim and Wilson 1994; Overall and McNulty 2017). Openly seeking support is normative, and emotions such as joy, excitement, and anger are openly expressed (Boiger and Mesquita 2012; H. S. Kim et al. 2008).

Overall, the cultural norms of White Americans manifest in communication exchanges between intimate partners that are readily observable to outside parties, and the observational methods developed to study couple communication were built to capture the types of behaviors displayed by these couples. In contrast, there are many cultural ecologies in which these types of overt communication strategies are atypical. The most obvious examples are found in the interdependent cultural ecology of East Asia, in which relations with extended family are held in high regard, and interpersonal interactions focus on maintaining social harmony (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis 1995). Though there are variations across countries within this region (Lee et al. 2013), these cultural values are achieved through behavioral strategies that center around acceptance and adjustment of oneself, rather than expecting change from others or drawing attention to one's own needs (Kitayama et al. 1997; Morling, Kitayama, and Miyamoto 2002).

In East Asian cultures, when partners want to communicate a concern, they would typically not do so directly. For example: "In Japan, if an intimate complains directly, it probably signals the end of the relationship. Mind-reading and avoiding self-assertion are ways in which partners assure one another of their closeness and commitment" (Rothbaum et al. 2000, 1135). Instead, concerns are often communicated in an indirect manner, such as hinting at the concern by talking to a third person in the presence of the hearer, or using an intermediary to communicate their concern (Yum 1988). If a more direct form of communication is used, it would almost certainly include a prefatory remark, such as "You have been busy lately, but..." which is aimed at softening the criticism and upholding the important cultural value of preserving dignity of others (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998). In contrast to Western contexts where conflict avoidance is often viewed negatively, tolerance and forbearance are regarded as vital communication strategies within Eastern cultures (Jou 2009; Li 2012; Li and Hsiao 2008). Additionally, emotions are more likely to be suppressed rather than outwardly expressed (Boiger and Mesquita 2012); even love and affection are expressed in a more indirect manner (Caldwell-Harris, Kronrod, and Yang 2013). Individuals from interdependent cultural ecologies are unlikely to directly seek explicit forms of support (e.g., tangible, emotional), instead engaging in implicit forms of support seeking, such as spending time with a close other without explicitly discussing their problems (H. S. Kim et al. 2008).

Thus, a methodological paradigm designed to capture expression of emotion, requests for or enactment of social support, and direct discussions of relationship problems is not well-suited to measure the types of communication strategies used by couples

in interdependent cultural ecologies. Although we have focused here on East Asian cultures because they are the most prominent counter-point to White American communication norms, there is evidence that the highly individualistic and direct mode of interaction may not be relevant to many other groups as well. The cultural value of harmony is shared by many around the world, including in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, and this value often manifests in various types of high-context, indirect communication such as emotional restraint, the use of silence and ambiguity, and avoidance of criticism and negativity (Albert and McKay-Semmler 2017; Elegbe and Nwachukwu 2017; Medubi 2010; Zaharna 1995). Within the U.S. there is also evidence that more indirect forms of communication are favored by some, such as low-income couples who may use a form of withdraw as an adaptive strategy to cope with intractable problems (Ross et al. 2019), and older adults who are more likely to engage in passive strategies such as doing nothing or letting the situation pass when faced with conflict with a partner (Charles and Carstensen 2008).

Overall, there is reason to believe that the gold standard method for studying couple communication may not be well-suited for building a deep understanding of the communication processes of many diverse couples. However, although there has been an increased awareness in behavioral sciences about the exclusion of participants from the Global South and minoritized groups in the Global North (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010; Roberts et al. 2020), the study of couple communication does not seem to be attending to this issue. For example, the authors of the Valence by Directness model of communication state that "all types of communication can have beneficial and harmful effects on relationships, but whether they ultimately help or harm relationships depends on a range of contextual factors." Yet, the contextual factors they discuss include the severity of the problem, whether partners feel capable of change, and partners' attachment styles, with no mention of broader contextual factors such as cultural background (Overall and McNulty 2017). Indeed, the studies that form the empirical basis of this model were conducted with samples that were completely or majority White, and hailed from the United States or New Zealand. In contrast, researchers and participants from other demographic backgrounds have rarely been part of the couple communication literature (Friedlander, Lee, and Escudero 2019; Zhang and Kline 2020).

Despite the lack of generalizability in the couple communication literature, the methods, conclusions, and interventions stemming from this body of work have been eagerly exported to other contexts. Relationship self-help materials such as books, blogs, and magazines are rife with advice about the importance of good communication in relationships. One typical example from an article in Brides magazine entitled *How to Have a Happy Marriage, According to a Relationship Expert*, advises newlyweds that "Being an open communicator is so important," and "Don't expect your partner to read your mind" (Salam 2023). The message is clear throughout the media: the correct way to behave in a relationship is to openly and directly state your needs and desires. Relationship interventions also reinforce this message by focusing on teaching communication skills as one of the common principles across therapeutic approaches (Benson, McGinn, and Christensen 2012). The types of communication behaviors that are taught include "express[ing] needs and wants explicitly," and "making statements that are specific and focus on emotions" (Benson, McGinn, and Christensen 2012, 30–31).

The U.S. federal government has even invested hundreds of millions of dollars to disseminate communication-skills based interventions to low-income couples, and the effectiveness of these interventions is evaluated, in part, based on increasing the use of direct communication strategies (Hawkins 2010; Lundquist et al. 2014). These interventions are also being disseminated worldwide. For example, various types of couples therapy developed in the U.S. are used by clinicians in Asia (Tseng et al. 2020), and perhaps the widest global reach has been attained by the Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP), a communication skills-based relationship education program that is being disseminated in a multitude of countries with cultural norms around communication, gender roles, and families that are quite different from those in White American culture, such as Iran, Singapore, & Qatar (Fallahchai, Fallahi, and Badiee 2021; The PREP Approach Global Reach n.d.).

In sum, a body of research based on predominantly White American couples has been translated into advice and directives that are being applied to a vastly more diverse population of couples. These conclusions are based upon work conducted predominantly by White Western researchers using methods that were developed to capture the types of behaviors that are practiced in White Western couples. Therefore, the behaviors that are determined to be important stem from the cultural norms and liberal individualist values of these participants and researchers (Barton and Bishop 2014). Unfortunately, it is common in social sciences that "Those in dominant positions within society and within disciplines do not notice the centrality of their positions, and as a result end up assuming that their patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are "normal" and neutral." (Lewis Jr 2021, 1326). Scholars of couple communication must become aware of this issue and take action to ensure that our work does not promote one single cultural construal of what it means to be in a good relationship, at the expense of other equally valid models of happy relationships.

2 | Future Directions for Improving the Study of Couple Communication

Fortunately, there are a number of approaches readily available to the field of relationship science that can clarify the boundaries of our existing knowledge, open up new avenues of inquiry, and lead to a more complete and accurate understanding of couple communication processes beyond those of the White American hegemony. Reis observed 30 years ago that "Researchers seldom pay as much attention to defining the boundary conditions of a phenomenon as they do to identifying and characterizing the process" and it does not seem that much has changed over the ensuing decades (Reis 1994, 95). Thus, the first step toward building a more inclusive knowledge of couple communication is for researchers to clearly identify the population(s) to whom their existing findings, theories, and models apply.

2.1 | Transparency About Populations That Have Been Studied

Some journals have already begun to require that sample characteristics be identified within the abstract and fully described in the body of the article (e.g., *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*). These requirements are crucially important, given that many researchers omit basic descriptive information about their samples (Williamson et al. 2022). However, reporting sample descriptives is not sufficient when many researchers still go on to describe their findings in generic language that ignores important exceptions or variability (DeJesus et al. 2019). In particular, White samples are treated as representative of the normative human condition, and findings that stem from majority White samples are regularly described in terms that erroneously indicate broad generalizability (Roberts and Mortenson 2023). Thus, we join Letiecq (2019) and Marks (2000) in encouraging authors to highlight relevant qualifiers throughout the article rather than relegating them only to the Method and Limitations sections. For example, a hypothetical result that would typically be described in the Abstract or Discussion section as "The use of more direct communication was associated with smaller declines in relationship satisfaction over time" could be changed to "In this sample of White, affluent, married American couples the use of more direct communication was associated with smaller declines in relationship satisfaction over time." Importantly, adding these qualifiers throughout the manuscript does not eliminate the need for a robust discussion of constraints on generality. Thus, we also encourage authors to follow the guidelines laid out by Simons, Shoda, and Lindsay (2017, 1125) to include a Constraints on Generality (COG) statement which "clarifies which aspects of your sample of participants, materials, and procedures should be preserved in a direct replication and identifies both those aspects believed to be crucial to observing the effect and those thought to be irrelevant."

If researchers are dissatisfied with ascribing this level of specificity to their results, and wish to claim in their COG statement that their findings are more broadly generalizable, then they must undertake the necessary research to demonstrate generalizability (or determine the boundary conditions). Historically, "basic researchers who study White people have never had to prove universality to claim it," and the burden of demonstrating lack of generalizability beyond White samples has fallen to researchers from underrepresented groups, rather than the researchers who conduct the initial research (Lewis Jr 2021, 1325). This is obviously an unjust state of affairs, and is one of many extra burdens placed on scholars of color (Buchanan et al. 2021).

Conducting our research primarily with White samples and failing to appropriately describe the resulting theories and models as being specific to White Americans gives the impression that we have already fully mapped out the contours of couple communication and that little additional basic research is needed on this topic. An alternative approach that accurately labels our models and works to identify their boundary conditions is more helpful to the field because it points out the true gaps in our knowledge. Working to fill these gaps and develop new models of couple communication processes outside of White American couples provides a windfall of new research questions for relationship scientists. However, successfully testing these research questions will require adaptation of existing methods and adoption of new research methods.

2.2 | Adaptations to the Current Observational Paradigm

Although we have been critical of relying on video-taped observation as the gold standard method for studying couple communication, observational methods are still a very valuable tool. But the pitfalls associated with this methodology, which we outlined above, mean that this method must be improved in order to accurately capture communication processes in diverse populations of couples. There are three over-arching aspects of the observational paradigm that researchers must critically evaluate before applying the existing methods to new populations; the behavioral task, the coders, and the coding system.

First, as we discussed already, the standard observational paradigm may not be relevant or comfortable for all groups, so researchers should make adaptations to the protocol to ensure that it is culturally consonant for the population of couples they are working with. For example, Boiger and colleagues (2022) followed an existing observational paradigm, but altered the way the discussion topic was chosen to avoid making their Japanese participants uncomfortable. Specifically, the original protocol had the researcher choose the topic to be discussed by the couple by exploring different topics with them to determine the one that elicited the strongest emotional responses. The researchers felt that this was not appropriate for the Japanese cultural context, in which private matters would not be readily discussed with strangers, so they instead allowed couples to privately choose the discussion topic themselves. This does raise the question of whether the Japanese couples were willing to openly discuss their private disagreements in front of the video camera: they conducted a number of "manipulation checks" to ensure that the paradigm was equivalent across cultures and found that Belgian and Japanese chose discussion topics that were of comparable importance to them and rated their discussions as being similarly typical of how they commonly discuss disagreements. However, Belgian couples discussed more relationship issues (e.g., communication, family relations) whereas Japanese couples discussed more concrete issues (e.g., money, leisure time). More research of this type is needed to determine when observational methods are and are not appropriate, and best practices for collecting observational data in different contexts.

In a similar cultural adaptation, Sadeghi and colleagues (2012) recognized the need to alter the traditional observational protocol to make Iranian couples feel more comfortable. They served tea and candies to the couples during a break between discussion tasks in a traditional sign of hospitality that made the setting more welcoming. Beyond altering the in-lab experience, another promising methodological innovation involves allowing participants to capture their own videos while they are alone in their home (McNulty et al. 2023). This procedure may allow couples who are unaccustomed to discussing personal and

intimate problems in front of strangers to feel comfortable engaging in observational research, though that hypothesis must be tested.

After video data is collected it must be parsed in some way to make it suitable for analyses. This process involves use of a coding system which describes behaviors of interest and provides rules for categorizing and quantifying these behaviors. Despite some limited use of automated coding software (e.g., Noldus FaceReader), this task overwhelmingly falls to human coders. The primary metric that observational researchers use to assess the work of coders is reliability, which addresses whether all members of the coding team assign the same scores to any given observational sample. Thus, coders typically participate in extensive training on the coding system and must demonstrate proficiency by accurately coding criterion tapes. Reviewers of manuscripts describing observational research know to look for high inter-rater reliability scores as a sign of high-quality observational research. However, reliability and validity are not the same construct (Mueller and Knapp 2018), which means that members of the coding team could reliably apply the coding system and those scores may not necessarily be accurate reflections of the construct they are intended to measure. This recognition points to two major issues with the coding process: (1) the need for coders who can appropriately interpret the meaning of behaviors captured in observational data within the particular cultural milieu, and (2) the validity of coding systems across diverse groups.

2.3 | Cultural Match of Coders to Participants

If coders are not familiar with the cultural context, will they be able to accurately detect behaviors that reflect constructs such as affection, dissent, or problem-solving? There is some evidence that coders' cultural background can lead them to systematically misperceive behaviors. For example, European–American and Chinese observers rated Chinese immigrant parent–toddler dinner interactions differently, with Chinese coders observing more instances of parental affect (positive and negative) than European–American coders (Wang, Wiley, and Zhou 2007). The researchers hypothesized that this difference is likely due to Chinese coders' knowledge of unique social cues, whereas European–American coders required more overt displays of affect before they could register them. Similarly, in a study of African–American mother-daughter dyads, African–American coders rated the mothers as less controlling and the interactions as less conflictual compared with non-African-American coders (Gonzales, Cauce, and Mason 1996). Furthermore, the ratings from ingroup coders, compared to outgroup coders, had higher convergent validity with the ratings of the participants themselves, indicating that the perceptions of the outgroup coders were less accurate reflections of the families' interactions.

Although these two studies show clear evidence that coders who match the cultural background of the participants are better able to accurately code their behavior, there are also some studies with contradictory findings. One study used a fully crossed design in which African–American and European–American coders rated ingroup and outgroup videos of African–American and European–American parent/child dyads. Results show that coders tended to favor other-race, rather than same-race, participants by rating them more favorably on behaviors such as prosocial communication, assertiveness, and contempt (Melby, Hoyt, and Bryant 2003). A similarly designed study of African–American and European–American couples who were rated by African–American and European–American coders found that coders did not code ingroup and outgroup couples differently on positive, negative, aggressive, or distressed affect (Babcock and Banks 2019). Notably, the first study used a macro-coding system in which scores are given at the level of the conversation, rather than a smaller unit such as a speaking turn (IFIRS; Melby et al. 1998), whereas the second study used a micro-coding system which continuously codes for specific behaviors, such as contempt, criticism, affection, and humor (SPAFF; Shapiro and Gottman 2004).

Clearly much more methodological research is needed to determine the best way to accurately capture observed behaviors in diverse couples. However, this small literature is suggestive of the two things: (1) cultural insiders should be better able to identify and understand behavioral cues than cultural outsiders, and (2) small, specific behaviors should be less prone to cultural biases, but as the unit of analysis becomes larger, the polysemic nature of behavior means that the same behaviors could have very different meanings across cultures (Caughlin and Basinger 2015).

2.4 | Testing for Measurement Equivalence

Another important aspect of determining whether existing coding systems are appropriate for use with new groups is to test whether the coding system functions the same way across groups using measurement equivalence analyses (also referred to as measurement invariance). To date, this approach has not been utilized with observational data from couples' interactions, but examinations of measurement equivalence in observational studies of parenting seem to be more common. Parenting coding systems have been examined for their equivalence across various dimensions, such as mothers versus fathers, families of different races, and presence or absence of postnatal depression (Piskernik and Ruiz 2020; Skinner et al. 2011; A. C. A. C. Stuart et al. 2023).

However, in one example from the couples communication literature, Williamson and colleagues (2011) examined the factor structure of an existing coding system when it was applied to a novel sample of low-income, primarily ethnic minority couples. This study confirmed that the existing factor structure of the observational codes, which had been established using samples of White middle-class couples, was present in the new sample, providing more confidence in its application to this new population. However, this study would have been strengthened if they had a comparison sample of White middle-class couples to allow direct tests of measurement equivalence. Additionally, this study included Spanish- and English-speaking couples, and could have tested for measurement invariance across these two linguistic groups. Little attention has been paid to whether

coding systems are invariant across language, despite the fact that many studies combine observational data from different languages (e.g., Fischer et al. 2015; Williams and Rueda 2016).

Another approach to assessing validity of coding systems across groups is to examine the extent to which scores assigned by coders converge with self-report measures of the same construct. Melby et al. (1995) used this approach to examine the validity of various types of discussion tasks (e.g., problem-solving vs. social support) but this analysis could be easily adapted to compare across groups instead. Though self-report measures contain their own biases, this type of methodological triangulation could point researchers towards important areas for theoretical and methodological development, such as possible behaviors that are not being captured by the coding system, or cultural differences in display rules around public and private behaviors.

Overall, lack of attention to measurement invariance is a widespread problem in psychology (Maassen et al. 2023), but fortunately a number of helpful tutorials are available to help researchers determine the best approach for examining measurement equivalence across groups in their study (Boer, Hanke, and He 2018; Dyer 2015; Luong and Flake 2023).

2.5 | Development of New Coding Systems

The discussion thus far has focused on instances in which the coding system seems to contain codes that are relevant across groups, but lack of cultural awareness in the coders, or different behavioral expressions, may impact the application of the coding system. Another possible source of inaccuracy in observational research with diverse groups lies in the content of the coding system itself. As we have already discussed, there is strong evidence to suggest that there are culturally-relevant behaviors exhibited by couples outside of the White American hegemony that are left out of the current observational paradigm. In this case, a new coding system that includes the behaviors likely to be exhibited by couples in that cultural ecology needs to be developed.

An excellent example of this comes from researchers in Iran who wished to conduct observational research with Iranian couples (Sadeghi et al. 2012). Rather than applying an existing (Western) coding system to Iranian couples, as most observational research on non-Western couples has done (Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe 2007; Williamson et al. 2012) they developed a coding system that would capture the types of behaviors displayed by these couples. They collected detailed qualitative data, including conducting a focus group with Iranian couple and family therapists, observing interactions of distressed couples in an Iranian clinic, and interviewing distressed Iranian couples. They also coded videotapes of Iranian couples with an existing coding system (SPAFF; Shapiro and Gottman 2004) and noted the behaviors that did not fit well into the coding system. They triangulated across these sources of information to define new codes that capture culturally-relevant behaviors and incorporated these into the SPAFF coding system to produce the Iranian Couples Interaction Coding System. The codes that were added reflected important aspects of Persian culture, including Family Contempt and Criticizing, Self-Contempt, Condemning the Relationship, and Gender Rules.

2.6 | Video-Mediated Recall

The traditional observational paradigm is often favored because it is free from the biases inherent to self-report data, such as sentiment override, by virtue of using third parties and standardized definitions to interpret the behaviors exhibited in the videos (Baucom et al. 2017). However, participants themselves are a rich source of information about their thoughts and intentions which cannot be accessed in any other way. The use of video-mediated recall, in which participants watch the video of their conversation and provide ratings of the internal states they were experiencing during the interaction, has a long history stemming back to the early days of research on couple interaction (Gottman and Levenson 1985). Although this method seems to have fallen out of favor in recent years, it is extremely powerful for capturing the types of interaction processes missed by coding systems which only consider overt behaviors.

For example, Boiger and colleagues (2022) used video-mediated recall to great effect with a cross-cultural sample of Belgian and Japanese couples. Partners first discussed an area of disagreement for 10 min then went into separate rooms to watch the video of the conversation and rate how they felt on a range of emotions during the interaction. This data allowed the researchers to examine the emotional states that were most prominent during the conversations for couples from both countries. They found that the primary emotional states experienced by couples during a disagreement differed across the two countries and were consonant with their respective cultural contexts, with Belgian couples foregrounding self-assertive emotions, such as anger or feelings of personal strength, and Japanese couples foregrounding other-focused emotions such as empathy or shame.

2.7 | Building New Methodologies for Studying Communication

The preceding sections offered advice for improving the ability of observational research to capture couple communication in diverse populations. However, as we have already discussed, not all communication processes can be detected through direct observations of behavior. For this reason, it is important that we develop more culturally consonant methods for studying communication in couples who are not well-served by the current observational paradigm. Building an understanding of couple communication from the ground up will require use of methods that are less valued in psychological science, including qualitative and mixed method research and basic descriptive research (Syed and McLean 2022; Yarkoni 2022).

Qualitative methods can overcome researcher myopia by identifying areas that are missing from existing measures and theories. For example, Atari and colleagues (2020) used qualitative methods to identify a dimension of morality in Persian

participants that was not part of the existing Moral Foundations Theory. Similarly, Lewis and colleagues (2020) conducted focus groups with low-income Latino participants that revealed that the items in their self-report measure about environmental concerns did not include many of the key concerns of this community. Thus, they needed to revise their survey instrument in order to adequately capture the issue across racial groups.

These two examples illustrate the fact that as researchers, we often need qualitative work to know what to ask in quantitative research. In the same way that our existing coding schemes don't adequately represent all possible behaviors, our existing self-report measures do not either. However, qualitative research is not just valuable as an antecedent to quantitative research, it also yields valuable insights on its own. For example, Schouten and colleagues (2023) used focus groups with partnered individuals in Belgium and Japan to examine whether disagreements are considered an inevitable part of relationships. They found that Belgian participants did view disagreement between partners as inevitable, but Japanese participants viewed disagreements as avoidable. Japanese participants cited various strategies that they use to avoid disagreements with their partner, including adjusting to and accepting the differences of their partner.

The overarching value that should guide future research on couple communication is that of Indigenous or Multicultural Psychology, in which groups build methods and theories from the ground up in a manner that is appropriate for themselves (Hall, Yip, and Zárate 2016; U. Kim et al. 2000). This is what White Americans and other Western researchers have had the opportunity to do for the past 50 years in the field of relationship science. Now researchers from the Global North must ensure that researchers from other cultural contexts have the opportunity to develop their own understanding of couple communication without being expected to build on the existing theories and methods that define our current conception of "good science" (Lewis Jr 2021).

3 | Conclusion

To date, the study of couple communication has been a robust, yet insular field. Theoretical and methodological developments focus on digging deeper and deeper into the nuances of various communication processes for samples comprised overwhelmingly of affluent, heterosexual, White American couples and building more efficient ways to capture and parse the behavioral exchanges of these couples (Bulling, Heyman, and Bodenmann 2023). Although more is left to learn about this population, this untapped knowledge pales in comparison to what is yet to be known about communication processes in couples from different backgrounds and cultural ecologies. To build this knowledge we must move beyond epistemologies that have centered the communication norms of White Americans and embrace the diversity of perspectives about what makes a good relationship.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

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