

Couple Observational Coding Systems



Patricia K. Kerig • Donald H. Baucom

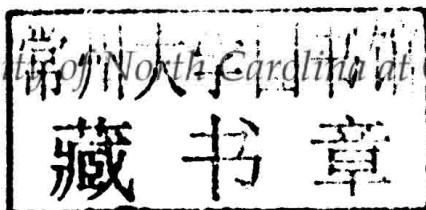
Couple Observational Coding Systems

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To Marge and Fil Argenbright—
For a love that inspires us and ours.

—*PKK*

With great respect and appreciation to Bob Weiss,
Kurt Hahlweg, and John Gottman—
You gave us codes that we might see and hear.

—*DHB*

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Preface

This volume serves as a companion to Kerig and Lindahl's (2001) earlier text, *Family Observational Coding Systems*. In this volume, we have moved from the triad to the dyad and provide a showcase for significant developments in the coding of intimate couple interactions. Just as with the family field, couple investigators are often faced with the complex and time-consuming task of creating a coding system that will allow them to capture their constructs of interest, with evidence for reliability and validity limited by the plethora of measures that are newly minted or "home-grown." We hope that this book will contribute to the broadening and deepening of the field by disseminating information both about the coding systems that have been developed as well as the conceptual and methodological issues involved in couple observational research.

The primary readership for this book is expected to be researchers interested in the study of couple interactions. However, we anticipate that this work also will be of interest to clinicians who work with couples. A number of the contributors to this volume are clinical psychologists, including the editors. Our training in coding couple interactions has benefited our clinical work by making our observations of couple relationships more astute and by refining our understanding of the implications of these interactional dynamics for individual and marital health.

The first three chapters present overviews of conceptual and methodological issues in the study of couple processes. The remaining chapters describe contributions to the field by sixteen teams of researchers. Each chapter provides information about the conceptual underpinnings and structure of the coding system developed by the author(s) as well as evidence for its psychometric properties. To ease the process of comparing across systems, every chapter uniformly addresses a number of key issues, including the theoretical foundations of the measure, the strategic conceptual and methodological choices made in its development, the properties and content of the measure, the task and setting for which the system is appropriate, the processes of coding and training coders, evidence for reli-

ability and validity, limitations to generalizability, clinical applications, and the variety of studies with which the instrument has been used.

Due to our interest in making this volume timely, diverse, and representative of the field, a range of contributions was solicited. Some of these represent the most well-established and widely used measures with a significant history of research behind them. Others represent the most recent developments by leading scholars in the field or the contributions of relatively young investigators who are on the crest of the next wave of couple research. Although the field is growing and changing even as this volume goes to press, it is our hope that this collection will remain pertinent and contemporary for some time to come.

The editors would like to express their appreciation to Bill Webber of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., and his wife, Nancy M. Proyect, who provided us the best of all dimensions of relationship addressed in this volume: astute problem-solving skills, good communication, warm affect, intelligent information processing, and social support. Finally, we thank each of the contributors for their hard work, their patience, and the pleasure of their collegiality.

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I

Conceptual and Methodological Issues

1

Coding Couples' Interactions: Introduction and Overview

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People have been observing couples interact since the dawn of time: “Did you see the way he ignored her at the party?”... “Wasn’t that elderly couple sweet? I hope we’re that affectionate with each other when we get older.”... “I wonder if their marriage is in trouble. No matter what one says, the other disagrees.”... “They’re going to have a hard time coping with the medical problems, but if anyone can do it, they can. They are so supportive of each other.” Over the past several decades, couple researchers have joined the brigade of “people watchers,” focusing on the interactions that occur in these most important intimate relationships.

This emphasis on couple interactions is based not only on our inherent interest in watching people. Instead, the focus on dyadic interactions derives from a broader behavioral commitment to the direct observation of human behavior. If we are going to understand intimate relationships, then we need to observe directly how partners behave toward each other. And as scientists, we must derive systematic ways to rate, describe, and categorize these ongoing flows of complex interaction. Direct observation is not necessarily a superior source of data about couples; the relative utility of various sources of data must be established empirically. How couples respond to questionnaires or their physiological reactions during interactions can be valuable sources of information about relationship functioning. Couple interaction data is one potentially valuable source of couple information, and

we believe that the findings described in this volume strongly support what we all might assume: How individuals interact with their partners tells us a great deal about them as individuals and as a unit.

The challenge for couple researchers committed to developing an interaction coding system is to take an ongoing stream of dyadic behaviors and devise a way to parse it into meaningful units that can be reliably coded, yet capture important aspects of this very rich interaction. We have been fortunate to obtain contributions from the majority of couple interaction researchers who have helped to shape the field since the 1970s. At present, there is no single source for researchers and clinicians to read to gain an understanding of the different ways to evaluate couples as they interact; hopefully this volume will help to fill that void.

ORGANIZATION AND CONTENT OF THE CHAPTERS

Before focusing on specific coding systems, it is important to understand the state of the field of couple interaction research: the issues it confronts, the successes and limitations of the field to date, methodological issues that must be understood in evaluating couple coding systems, and a variety of strategies that can be employed to analyze the data that are derived from the coding systems. Weiss and Heyman provide the reader with a frank and thoughtful perspective on the current state of the field. Although describing themselves tongue-in-cheek as the village idiots of the couple coding village, we believe the reader will recognize the wise sages who challenge us not to rest on our laurels and to integrate our impressive technologies with theories of relationship functioning that will guide future research. Anyone who has delved into coding couples' interactions likely has experienced the following: "This stuff is complicated. I have this huge amount of detailed data on couples, but I'm not quite certain what to do with it." There is a great deal of complicated methodological and statistical information to understand to make good use of interactional data. Floyd and Rogers do an excellent job of explaining in understandable language the variety of methodological issues to consider in creating, evaluating, and employing a couple coding system. Whereas the vast majority of this volume is about the coding systems themselves, once "raw data" from interactions are boiled down into codes or ratings, an investigator must know how to analyze the data. There are a variety of strategies for such purposes, ranging from statements about the frequencies with which couple phenomena occur during the interaction to complex analyses that take sequences of behaviors and contingencies among behaviors into account. Sayers and McGrath provide a clear and thoughtful discussion of these data analytic strategies, along with essential references for more detailed discussions of technical, statistical issues for couple interaction researchers.

The second section of this volume is devoted to the coding systems themselves, with a separate chapter describing each of the 16 measures. To assist the reader in comparing various coding systems, each chapter employs the same subdivisions.

First, the authors introduce the coding system with a brief summary description and then discuss the theoretical foundations guiding the research. Next, the authors describe the development of the coding system and the strategic decisions that they made along the way. Following this, the authors present details of the coding system, including the task and setting for which the coding system is appropriate, the dimensions and categories that are coded, and the coding process, including how coders are trained and what training materials are available. The authors then provide information about the psychometric properties of the measure, including reliability and validity as well as limitations to, or evidence of, the generalizability of the coding system across different tasks and samples. We also asked the authors to discuss ways in which their coding systems might be used clinically. Finally, the authors give an overview of the range of studies that have been conducted using the coding system.

Dimensions of Coding Systems

Deciding on the sequence of chapters for the coding systems was complicated, reflecting the multifaceted nature of coding systems themselves. As Floyd, Baucom, Godfrey, and Palmer (1998) pointed out in their review of issues to consider in creating an observational coding system, any couple observational coding system involves a large number of decisions by the investigator creating the coding system. These decisions shape the coding system and what information can be obtained from it. For example, the constructor must decide what aspects of couple interaction are important to him or her (e.g., specific behaviors such as interruptions, patterns of interaction such as mutually avoiding addressing areas of concern, supporting each other during difficult personal times, etc.). Second, the coding system must be applied to some interaction, and the constructor, researcher, or clinician must once decide on the type of interaction or instructions for interaction, if instructions are provided to the couple. Thus, couples might be asked merely to talk to each other, to try to resolve some relationship problem, to support each other as individuals, to share feelings openly with each other, or interact with each other as naturally as possible in a laboratory apartment over a number of hours. After deciding on the aspects of a couple's interaction to code and the instructions or "task" presented to the couple, the constructor must decide whether to create a coding system that looks at the interaction in an extremely detailed, microanalytic manner (e.g., coding every few seconds) or in a more global, macroanalytic manner (e.g., rate the entire interaction on some dimension). In addition, someone has to rate or evaluate the couple's interaction. In most of the coding systems described in this volume, outside trained raters are employed—an outsider's perspective; however, at times the partners themselves are asked to rate their behaviors and interactions—an insider's perspective. Clearly, insiders' versus outsiders' perspectives provide potentially different information about the interaction. As a result of

the many decisions made during the development of a coding system, any coding system exists in multidimensional space, just as couples' interactions themselves are multidimensional. As a result, grouping the wide variety of coding systems described in this volume into broad categories is somewhat arbitrary because two coding systems might be quite similar in that they are both microanalytic, yet they might be very different in the content of what they are assessing in a detailed manner. In this volume, we have grouped the coding systems into broad categories based on the specific domains, or dimensions that they assess.

Problem Solving and Communication

We begin with a set of coding systems that were developed primarily to assess a broad range of couple behaviors that occur while partners are problem solving or discussing conflictual issues. Historically, this is where couple observational coding systems began within a social learning perspective. In the 1960s and 1970s, couples' communication was almost synonymous with problem solving or conflict resolution. Behavioral couple therapy (then called behavioral marital therapy) and couple observational research developed "interactively," with basic observational research shaping treatment, and treatment findings setting the way for additional basic research on couple interactions. At present, there are over 20 controlled treatment outcome investigations of behavioral (or cognitive-behavioral) couple therapy (Baucom, Hahlweg, & Kuschel, in press). Almost all of these treatment studies included communication training, which fundamentally meant strategies for resolving problems or conflict. Three major microanalytic coding systems evolved to assess couples' abilities to problem solve: the Marital Interaction Coding System (MICS; Hops, Wills, Patterson, & Weiss, 1972), the Couple Interaction Coding System (CISS; Gottman, 1979), and the Kategoriensystem für Partnerschaftliche Interaktion (KPI; Hahlweg, Reisner, et al., 1984). In this volume, Hahlweg provides a description of the KPI, along with an impressive set of validation studies which demonstrate that coding systems initially developed for a specific purpose often have much broader applicability.

These microanalytic coding systems have the virtue of providing detailed information about couples' interactions and have resulted in many valuable findings. On some occasions, however, investigators do not need or want this level of detail, and the time and labor required for microanalytic coding is considerable. As a result, a new generation of less detailed coding systems that focus on partners' communications during problem solving or conflict resolution conversations has been developed. Even among these less detailed coding systems, the level of specificity varies considerably. As an example of a coding system that retains an intermediate level of detail, Heyman describes the Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System (RMICS), the successor to the MICS. The RMICS provides codes for a number of positive, negative, and neutral behaviors, and raters provide a code each