

**Sound Relationship House Theory and Relationship and Marriage Education**

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## Gottman Sound Relationship House Theory

### **Introduction and Overview of the Research**

Gottman Couples Therapy (GCT) is a research-based therapy developed over four decades of observational research to determine if it was possible to discover reliable patterns of interaction that discriminate between happy couples that are on a stable path, from couples that were unhappy and either eventually divorce or stay together but remain unhappy. The result of Dr. Gottman's research and collaboration with his friend and colleague Dr. Robert Levenson is that we can now reliably predict with over 90% accuracy which relationships would succeed and which relationships would fail if untreated, six years later.

This 40-year research journey has included 12 studies with over 3,000 couples, including seven studies on what predicts divorce. Six of these studies are predictive, longitudinal studies with some couples having been followed for as long as 20 years, including a 12-year study on gay and lesbian couples (Gottman, J. M., Levenson, Gross, Fredrickson, McCoy, Rosenthal, Ruef, & Yoshimoto, 2003) , and a 10-year study with couples suffering from domestic violence (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998) . Treatment and intervention research have involved over 4,000 couples.

More recently, Dr. John Gottman has studied and developed theories on trust and betrayal based on new applications of game theory. This research-based understanding of how couples build trust versus the steps that lead to betrayal and eroding trust, has led to a model of prevention and treatment described in two books, *The Science of Trust* (Gottman, J. M., 2012), and *What Makes Love Last?* (Gottman, J. M., 2012).

**From research to theory to practice.** John Gottman and Robert Levenson had been

studying relationships for over 20 years when John began working with his wife, clinical psychologist Dr. Julie Schwartz Gottman in 1994, developing the Sound Relationship House (SRH) theory and interventions based on John's research. Learning from successful couples what was needed for lasting and thriving romantic relationships, the Gottmans identified seven building blocks for relationships and interventions to deepen friendship and intimacy, strengthen conflict management, and create shared meaning and purpose. The SRH theory became the basis of the design of clinical interventions for couples described in *The Marriage Clinic* (Gottman, J. M., 1999) and in Dr. Julie Gottman's book *The Marriage Clinic Casebook* (Gottman, J. S., 2004).

It is important to note that the Gottman Method is not a school of therapy, rather, it is a research-based theory to practice model that provides a definable explanation of why some relationships are successful, and why others are distressed and either end up in divorce or in distress. Through continuing research and by incorporating other research-based methods created by others that have been proven to be effective, GCT will continue to evolve and develop. There is always more to learn as new findings also raise more questions.

**The implications of Gottman research for educators.** Unfortunately, family life educators, counselors and therapists, clergy, and others in the helping professions are often trained to help couples based on untested ideas and theories about what healthy relationships should look like. For example, one of the most popular and enduring hypothesis in determining relationship and communication health is the "active listening model", using "I-statements, as a basis for developing empathy and creating effective relationship communication and stability. The active listening model, inspired largely by Carl Rogers' was further developed and adapted by Bernard Guerney (Guerney, 1977; Guerney, B. J., & Guerney, L., 1985) and subsequently has

been advocated by countless educators, communication workshop facilitators, and therapists.

While initially Dr. John Gottman recommended this intervention (Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977), it turns out that after researching active listening as a predictive variable in relationship satisfaction, active listening exchanges, as commonly taught to couples in workshops and in the therapy room, occurred only 4.4% of the time for all couples; furthermore, these exchanges didn't predict anything. After qualitative analysis with another research cohort of couples with happy and stable relationships, Gottman found again that couples were not paraphrasing what their partners were saying, nor were they summarizing their partner's feelings. Rather, partner response to negativity was more about processing their own reactions rather than their partner's emotions.

While there was no evidence to support the active listening hypothesis, Gottman did discover in subsequent research that how couples managed negativity was highly predictive of relationship health. He found that negativity was met with negativity in stable relationships, but in distressed relationships the negativity escalated and presented as a very different trajectory (Gottman, 1999a). While active listening undoubtedly is a core therapeutic skill in the therapy room that facilitates empathy and connection between client and counselor, it turns out it is a lot easier to respond empathically when the listener is not the one being talked about.

The importance of familiarity with relationship research for marriage and relationship educators, in this case, highlights the importance of normalizing the dynamic that negative interactions tend to lead to more negative responses in all relationships. However, escalating anger with physiological arousal, determined by changes in heart rate, skin conductance, gross motor activity, and blood velocity, leads to pervasive patterns of negative communication which is predictive of relationship dissatisfaction and divorce. Rather than emphasizing active listening

in managing conflict, this research suggests the importance of teaching couples ways to manage physiological arousal and escalating anger.

Differentiating evidence-based theories about relationship health from the myths, the assumptions, and the untested hypotheses, provides relationship and marriage educators empirically-based principles, methods, and practices for helping couples strengthen, maintain, and repair relationships.

### **Empirical Basis for Gottman Couples Therapy**

The Sound Relationship House Theory emerged out of the systematic analyses of patterns and dynamic processes in couple interactions. Furthermore, the SRH theory outlines steps to help couples get on a healthier path. Gottman Couples Method Therapy has been tested and shown to greatly improve relationships, including help for very distressed couples, for couples transitioning into parenthood, and for couples experiencing minor domestic violence. A version of Gottman couples Therapy has proven to be effective for couples suffering from the traumatic effects of poverty. Gottman Couples Therapy has been taught worldwide, including Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Americas. To date there have been over 30,000 therapists and educators who have received training in the Gottman Method.

### **The Discovery of Reliable Patterns of Interaction.**

In 1938 Louis Terman researched the question of what makes some couple relationships work, while other couples are unhappy? His research methodology included the use of questionnaires and interviews. Systematic observation only started in the 1970s, in Gottman's lab and a few others. At the time efforts to establish reliable patterns in personality theory were not met with success, so there was very little support for research aimed at finding reliable patterns

in relationships, seemingly exponentially more difficult. Additionally, marriage and relationships had been the area of study for sociologists, not psychologists. A new era was starting in understanding relationships because it turns out that while individual behavior is hard to predict, the research would reveal the fact that there is tremendous regularity in relationship behavior.

By definition, observational research is atheoretical, at least initially, in that the researcher draws conclusions only after comparing subjects, in this case, determining differences between happy and unhappy couples. Observing and analyzing interactions requires a system of psychometrics and mathematical modeling to determine empirically what is actually being measured so that patterns can be identified (Gottman, Murray, Swanson, Tyson, Swanson, 2005). Additionally, as with other methods of research, reliability of the measuring instruments needs to be well established (Bakeman & Gottman, 1997).

John Gottman teamed with Roger Bakeman to develop a mathematical model and methodology for sequential analysis to differentiate satisfied from dissatisfied couples based on Jim Sackett's ideas (Gottman, 1979). This new system of cataloging codes to measure interaction and relationship behavior led to a remarkable discovery. Gottman and Bakeman began to find consistent sequences of interactions that differentiated happy marriages from unhappy marriages.

The Gottman lab used different observational coding systems in various studies examining: problem solving, affect, physiology, power, non-problem-solving conversations, positive and negative reciprocity, and distance and isolation (Gottman 1994). Gottman developed with his students Cliff Notarius and Howard Markman, the Couples' Interaction Scoring System (CISS), designed to separate dimensions of behavior from affect and to differentiate satisfied

from dissatisfied couples. The lab continued to apply new methods for studying sequences of interaction and continued to modify and improve those systems.

Gottman also applied, for the first time, an application of game theory to couples' interactions. Influenced by Thibaut and Kelley's book *The Social Psychology of Groups* (1959), he devised the "talk table", a system for individuals to rate how positive or negative their intentions were, and how positive or negative were the effects of the messages they received.

The Gottman lab used these methods to define reliable patterns of interaction and thought during conflict. Following a series of peer-reviewed journal articles, in 1979 Gottman published these results in a series of scientific papers and a book called *Marital Interaction: Experimental Investigations* (Gottman, 1979).

### **Divorce Prediction Research**

The research on the longitudinal course of relationships began in 1975 when John Gottman first teamed with Robert Levenson to research on divorce prediction, involving measures for perception, interaction, and physiology. At the time there were only six longitudinal prospective studies, and those studies were very poor at prediction with correlations around .25 or so (Gottman, 1999).

Gottman and Levenson conducted their first study in 1980 using their multimethod approach by combining the study of emotion with psycho-physiological measurement and video-recall method (Levenson & Gottman, 1983). Thirty couples came to their lab and were instructed to have two conversations: a low-conflict discussion involving a neutral "reunion conversation" talking about the events of the day, and a high-conflict discussion of an issue in their relationship that was creating a major source of disagreement.

While Gottman and Levenson did not make any predictions in this first study, they were very interested in the linkage between physiology, emotions, and relationship distress. In a previous study simple physiologic measurements suggested a relationship between relatedness and physiology (Kaplan, 1964). Gottman and Levenson thought this might be linked to negative affect in couples, and they were right.

Couples were videotaped during discussions as the research team took physiologic measurements: heart rate, skin conductance, gross motor activity, and blood velocity, all synced to video time code. The couples separately returned later to the lab and watched a video of their reunion and conflict conversations. They were asked questions about what they were thinking and feeling and to make guesses as to what they thought their partner was thinking and feeling, while using a rating dial to measure what emotions and how strongly the participant felt the emotion during the interaction.

Gottman also began applying time-series analysis to the analysis of interaction data. Gottman and Levenson then got their first grant together and began attempting to replicate their observations from the first study. In 1983 they completed the longitudinal study, computing first the amount and direction of changes to the initial marital satisfaction scores. Then they determined which of the affective and physiological variables measured three years earlier were predictive of change in marital satisfaction. After controlling for the initial levels of marital satisfaction the results indicated that the more physiologic arousal there was in couples three years earlier, the more relationship satisfaction declined during the three years (Levenson & Gottman, 1985).



The researchers were amazed that in their first study with 30 couples they were able to predict the change in marital satisfaction almost perfectly with the physiological measures. The results were that the more physiologically aroused couples were in all channels (heart rate, skin conductance, gross motor activity, and blood velocity) the more their marriages deteriorated in happiness over a three-year period, even controlling for the initial level of marital satisfaction. The rating dial and their observational coding of the interaction also correlated with differences in relationship satisfaction. Gottman and Levenson had never seen such large correlations in their data. They also found that a harsh, critical beginning by women in the conflict discussion was associated by the male partner's disinterest or irritability in the events of the day discussion. In a reciprocal dynamic, they also found that the quality of the couple's friendship and closeness, especially as maintained by men, was critical in understanding conflict and most likely related to the harsh start. This finding supported the "attack-defend" pattern characteristic of ailing marriages. The ability to rebound from conflict to the positive conversation became a marker of emotion-regulation ability of couples.

Both Robert Levenson and John Gottman had discovered Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen's Facial Affect Coding System (FACS), and Gottman subsequently developed the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF), which was an integration of FACS and earlier systems in the Gottman lab. The SPAFF became the main system that Gottman used to code couples' interaction giving greater precision in describing the positive-negative affective interactions (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) by adding other channels to facial coding such as language, voice inflection, body movement, and the context of the interaction (Gottman, 1994). SPAFF codes classify at each turn of speech as affectively negative, neutral, or positive. Gottman's work in the lab, coined by the press as the "Love Lab", gained attention and interest as the divorce prediction

outcome studies were publicized. The two trajectories of marriage, characterized as the “Masters and the Disasters”, defined the differences between couples on a stable path, who wanted to be together, versus couples that either divorced or if they stayed together were unhappy.

The core findings identify four negative and corrosive patterns of interaction highly correlated with divorce called the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”.

- **Criticism.** Patterns of blame expressed in attacks of the partner’s character or personality. Criticism is often expressed with “you always” or “you never”.
- **Defensiveness.** Refusing to accept responsibility or acknowledging fault. Characterized by either counter attacks or defending innocence.
- **Contempt.** The most destructive of the four negative interactions is defined as adding contempt, superiority, or disgust to the criticism.
- **Stonewalling.** Occurs when the person feels overwhelmed and unable to respond. The person shuts down and doesn’t offering verbal or nonverbal responses because of a high arousal state. In the research 85 percent of the stonewallers were men.

The subsequent research on divorce prediction, including collaborative work in other labs, eventually spanned the entire life course from a study following newlyweds through the transition to parenthood (Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Gottman, Coan, Carrère, & Swanson, 1998), a study in the Levenson Berkeley lab on the transition through retirement, following couples for as long as 20 years (Jacobson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994), and one study with violent couples (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998).

The predictions replicated, Gottman could predict whether a couple would divorce with an average of over 90% accuracy, across studies using the ratio of positive to negative SPAFF codes, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling), physiology, the rating dial, and an Oral History Interview (asking how the couple met), as coded by Kim Buehlman's coding system assessing in particular the husbands responses to six different dimensions related to positivity or negativity (Gottman, 1994). They could predict whether or not the stable couples would be happy or unhappy using measures of positive affect during conflict, which Jim Coan and Gottman discovered would physiologically soothe the partner. How couples manage conflict is highly predictive of relationship trajectory.

The research indicates during conflict discussions happy, stable couples are able to maintain a 5:1 ratio of positivity to negativity. They also discovered that men accepting influence from women was predictive of happy and stable marriages. Bob Levenson with Anna Ruef also discovered that humor was physiologically soothing, that empathy had a physiological substrate with using the rating dial.

Gottman and Levenson discovered that couples interaction had enormous stability over time (about 80% stability in conflict discussions separated by 3 years). They also discovered that most relationship problems (69%) never get resolved but are "perpetual" problems based on personality differences between partners. That was discovered by follow-up and seeing couples in the lab every 3 years

In 1986 Gottman built an apartment laboratory at the University of Washington in a park-like setting overlooking Montlake Cut, a canal connecting Seattle's Portage Bay to Lake Washington. Volunteer couples from every major ethnic and racial group in the USA were

observed in the apartment lab for a 24-hour period. Couples were encouraged to act as naturally as possible and to relax and to do whatever they might do on a typical weekend. They could bring groceries to cook, games to play, movies to watch, read the newspaper, basically just to be together.

Gottman discovered how couples create and maintain friendship and intimacy and how it was related to conflict. For example, newlyweds who divorced 6 years after the wedding had turned toward bids (the partner's attempt to connect) 33% of the time, while newlyweds who stayed married 6 years after the wedding had turned toward bids 86% of the time. The idea of the friendship "emotional bank account" was verified. It was related to repair of negativity, and, amazingly to the quality of sexual intimacy.

When 14-year longitudinal data became available Levenson & Gottman discovered a second dysfunctional pattern, emotional disengagement. It was marked by the absence of positive affect during conflict (no interest, affection, humor, or empathy). Now they could predict not only *if* a couple would divorce, but *when*. Couples who had the Four Horsemen divorced an average of 5.6 years after the wedding, while emotionally disengaged couples divorced an average of 16.2 years after the wedding.

## **Intervention Research**

**Bringing Baby Home.** The Gottmans first began testing their interventions by exploring what happened to a couple when the first baby arrived. In this longitudinal study they began studying young couples in first marriages a few months after their wedding, following couples into pregnancy and studying parent-infant interactions. They discovered that 67% of couples experienced a precipitous decline in relationship satisfaction in the first 3 years of the baby's life.

Gottman's student Alyson Shapiro compared the 33% of couples who did not experience the downturn in satisfaction with the 67% who did.

A randomized clinical trial study with long-term follow-up indicates that the preventative psychoeducational intervention of the two-day "Bringing Baby Home" (BBH) workshop, designed by the Gottmans (Gottman, J. M., & Gottman, J. S., 2007), was effective in achieving positive results. Based on comparisons with the couples who declined and did not decline in relationship satisfaction after baby, workshop participants showed improvement in the domains of marital quality, wife and husband postpartum depression, and wife and husband hostile affect observed during conflict (Shapiro, A. F. & Gottman, J. M., 2005). The BBH workshop has now been taught to 1,000 birth educators from 24 countries. The effects have been replicated in Australia and Iceland.

**The emotion-coaching intervention.** This intervention is described in *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child* (Gottman, J. M., & DeClare, J., 1998). That intervention has been evaluated in 3 randomized clinical trials by Australian psychologist Sophie Havighurst (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, & Prior, 2009; Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Prior, & Kehoe, 2010; Wilson, Havighurst, & Harley, 2012) and has also been found effective in a study in South Korea led by certified Gottman therapist Dr. Christina Choi both in 2 orphanages in Seoul and in Busan. Emotion coaching is now being taught to teachers throughout South Korea. Research and training is also taking place in the UK on emotion coaching.

**The couples workshop.** Exit studies surveys from couples attending the Gottman Art and Science of Love Workshops, indicate that 86 percent of people completing the two-day workshop report making significant progress on conflicts. A one-year follow-up study was done to see if the results would stand the test of time. A randomized clinical trial of a couples' group

psycho-educational intervention, the “Art and Science of Love”, with 80 distressed married couples randomly assigned to one of four conditions: 1) Friendship enhancement alone – day one of the workshop, 2) conflict management alone – day 2 of the workshop, 3) Both friendship enhancement and conflict management – both days of the workshop, and 4) bibliotherapy only.

Outcome assessment included three dimensions: 1) relationship satisfaction, 2) friendship quality, and 3) destructive conflict at pre-, post- and one year following the intervention. While all conditions were found to increase relationship satisfaction with couples demonstrating fewer problems with friendship and destructive conflict at the one-year follow-up, the combined condition suggests the greatest changes in marital satisfaction and in decreases in problems in friendship and conflict. (Babcock, J. C., Gottman, J. M., Ryan, K. D., & Gottman, J. S., 2013).

**Plans for current intervention studies.** Plans for collaborative research studies are in process for the following projects:

- Effectiveness of a relational approach to addiction recovery, integrating Dr. Robert Navarra’s research-based theory the Couple Recovery Development Approach (CRDA) (Navarra, 2007, 2009) with interventions taken or adapted from the SRH model (Navarra & Gottman, 2011).

### **The Sound Relationship House (SRH) Theory**

John Gottman began working with his wife, Julie Schwartz Gottman in 1994, co-creating the Gottman Institute, moving the science from predicting divorce to preventing divorce. Experimenting with research-based interventions, the Gottmans began working with couples, developed the Art and Science of Love Workshop, and developed training programs for therapists, and more recently for educators, on the research-based findings and tools to help

couples (Gottman, J. M. & Gottman, J. S., 2006). Combining John's research with Julie's years of clinical experience was the perfect blend of the scientist-practitioner model.

The Sound Relationship House Model (SRH) serves as a blue print to help couples deepen their closeness, manage conflict, and share in what is meaningful to both of them, individually, and as a couple. The findings from the research supported in the SRH model leads to two essential conclusions about what makes for happy relationships:

1. Partners treat each other like good friends, with the relationship characterized by respect, empathy, affection, and positivity.
2. Partners manage conflict in gentle and positive ways, literally maintaining a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative comments during the conflict discussion.

There are seven levels to the SRH described in three components: the Friendship System, The Conflict System and the Meaning System. As opposed to a hierarchical model starting at the bottom before moving to get to the next level, the SRH is an interactional model, with each level impacting other levels. There is a bidirectional influence between the three levels. The first three levels of the SRH describe the Friendship system.

**Trust and Commitment.** Subsequent to John Gottman's research on trust and betrayal, Trust and commitment were added to the SRH Model, supporting the seven levels, or building blocks of the components needed for a happy relationship.

Trust is a state that occurs when a person knows that his or her partner puts their own interests and benefits secondary to the partners own interests and benefits. This translates to the couple feeling "My partner has my back and is there for me". Commitment is cherishing one's partner, the belief that this is the relationship I want to be in. This is the person I want to be with

### **Levels of the Sound Relationship House**

1. **Build Love Maps.** Love Maps refers to how well each partner knows each other. It refers to the partners' knowledge and interest in each other's internal world of thoughts, hopes, ideas, and feelings. Knowing the partners likes and dislikes, aspirations, hopes, dreams, creates a sense of connection and of being known. Having this map is the most basic level of friendship, but when this level is not working well, partners feel distant, uncared for and the emotional distance creates feelings of alienation.
2. **Share Fondness and Admiration.** This level describes partners' ability to notice and express what they appreciate about each other, building affection and respect for one another. Noticing and expressing the things partners admire and appreciate in each other creates feeling of being cared for and valued. Contempt is the antithesis of respect, and when partners feel attacked or criticized they are not likely to feel loved.
3. **Turn Toward Instead of Away.** This is the smallest measurable unit of intimacy reflected in how partners attempt to reach out or connect with each other. These attempts, referred to as bids, are opportunities for connection when the other partner turns toward the bid, thus building the emotional bank account. When bids are made and either not responded to, or responded to negatively, it takes money out of the emotional bank account. In the latter case, after a while partners are likely to stop making bids.
4. **The Positive Perspective.** When the first three levels of the SRH are working well, couples will be in Positive Perspective. Partners are able to let things go more easily and not take things personally. There is more humor, affection, and less reactivity. When one or more levels of the Friendship system is not healthy, the couple will most likely be in Negative Perspective where perceptions are colored by negative thoughts



and feelings; neutral and even positive interactions will still be perceived as negative and partners will be hypervigilant for negativity. Negative Perspective can be reversed by strengthening the first three levels of the SRH.

5. **Manage Conflict.** The term “manage conflict” versus “resolve conflict” is used to normalize conflict as a natural and positive aspect of healthy relationships. The research indicates that 69% of couples’ problems were perpetual relating to differences in individual personalities, preferences in life style and differences in needs. Only 31% of couples’ problems fall in the category of solvable. The Masters of relationships manage conflict with the 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions. They are gentle toward one another, they avoid blame, they accept influence, they are more calm, they repair and de-escalate, and they are able to offer compromise.
6. **Making Life Dreams Come True.** A level of building Love Maps, partners inquire and are able to talk honestly about their dreams, values, hopes, convictions and aspirations. They feel that the relationship supports those life dreams. Often times when perpetual problems become gridlocked at the root are hidden stories and core needs at the deepest levels of meaning that need to be expressed and understood.
7. **Create Shared Meaning.** This level refers to another existential perspective, one that involves shared meaning and purpose. Couples define roles, goals, and values that are meaningful. We return once again to building Love Maps, at that deeper level. It is about building a life together, creating formal and informal rituals that bring integration and connection.

## Conclusion

The SRH theory emerged out of the systematic analyses of patterns and dynamic processes in couple interactions. Furthermore, the SRH theory outlines steps to help couples get on a healthier path. Gottman Couples Therapy has been tested and shown to greatly improve relationships, including help for very distressed couples, for couples transitioning into parenthood, and for couples experiencing minor domestic violence. A version of Gottman couples Gottman Couples Therapy has been taught worldwide, including Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Americas to over 30,000 counselors, therapists and educators.

The Gottman Institute provides educator training for three different community-based programs. Gottman Seven Principles Educator Training provides tools for educators to facilitate community-based classes for couples, based on Dr. Gottman's book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (2000). A second program, *Bringing Baby Home*, offers educators with a two-day training to provide workshops designed to help pregnant couples prepare for the transition to parenthood. Lastly, the *Emotion Coaching Program*, provides a resource for parents and parent groups on how to equip children to understand and regulate their emotional world. To date, about 2000 Educators world-wide have been trained in the Bringing Baby Home Program and The Gottman Seven Principles Program.

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