

Gender Equity Project Colloquia and Workshops

Marital Equality Topic Discussion and Activities

Read: *Contemporary marriage: Still an equal partnership (Steil, 2001)*

Discusses the current state of contemporary marriage, barriers to equality, and reasons for continued gender inequality in present-day marriage.

Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high, pp. 65 – 92 and pp. 193 – 214 (Patterson, Greeny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002)

Offers useful strategies for initiating and maintaining conversations about difficult or sensitive issues.

When a spousal hire becomes a single mom (Trubek, 2004)

Food for thought; offers a first-hand account of the negative consequences of tying the success of one's career to the success of one's marriage.

Discussion

Negotiation can be as helpful at home as at work, as helpful with friends and lovers as with professional colleagues. Although negotiation with a friend or lover is different in some respects from negotiation with a colleague or a department chair, some of the same skills and principles are applicable. The title of this workshop is "Marital Equality," but in a way that title is a misnomer. Equality is an issue in every adult relationship, and negotiation is necessary for mature interactions. The title also presupposes heterosexuality, which we do not intend.

Factors that are particularly relevant in relationships are: sensitivity to and respect for the other person's point of view; an ability to explain how equality will improve the relationship for both people; a willingness to work through disagreements; a healthy respect for the power you hold (Williams & Valian, 2003).

Think about an occasion where you and your partner successfully worked together to solve a problem you were having. How did you move beyond conflict or disagreement? How did you address your partner's concerns and interests? How did you reach a compromise?

Now think about an occasion that specifically concerns a division of labor at home. If you and your partner successfully resolved the situation so that it more closely approached equality, think about how you did that. If you did not resolve the problem, think about why. Refer to the material in "Crucial Conversations" and in the handout on negotiation to try to understand what went wrong and to think about a better strategy.

With a group of 4, discuss strategies for negotiating for conditions approaching equality at home with your partner. Consider what unexamined assumptions each of you may hold about division of labor at home. Try to articulate what barriers you perceive. Keep the assumptions and barriers in mind as you work on activity 1.

Activity 1: Each group will be assigned a negotiation scenario and role-play a negotiation between partners. We are assuming for convenience a heterosexual marital relationship.

1. Read the assigned scenario and discuss the negotiation with the entire group.
 - a. Consider what the husband's interests in the issue might be and how you can either address his concerns in order to negotiate more effectively, or how you can create a solution that is mutually beneficial.
 - b. Think about the wife's position on the issue. Identify the tradeoffs she has available and how she can use them to generate compromise.

- c. Decide on the best way to conduct the negotiation and come up with a plan of action.
 - i. When and how will the wife raise the subject of the negotiation?
 - ii. How will she respond if the husband seems unwilling to compromise on the issue or even negotiate it to begin with?
 - iii. What counter-arguments can she use to overcome his objections and reservations?
 - iv. How can the wife's desired outcome benefit both partners?
 - v. How can she convince her husband of these benefits?
2. Once the group has decided on the best plan of action, choose two people to act out the negotiation for the entire workshop. One person will negotiate as the husband and the other as the wife.
3. After each group has performed its role-play, we will all discuss the strength and weaknesses of the group's plan of action, the wife's argument, and the overall success of each group's negotiation tactics.

Scenario 1: A has been doing most of the housework, an unproductive – and unfair – use of her at-home time. Despite many attempts on her part, she has been unable to convince her husband to do his share. A has decided that the best solution is to hire a cleaning person, an expense which is affordable if the household curtails expenditures in a few areas, such as eating fewer meals out and reducing the cable package.

A's husband has several reservations.

- He does not want to exploit an immigrant worker by using a potentially illegitimate agency
- He does not want to fill out the necessary tax forms to hire someone independently
- He is uncomfortable with the idea of a stranger cleaning his home
- He does not believe the family can afford to hire a housekeeper
- He thinks that, with time, he will do more housework

Scenario 2: B wants her husband to adjust his work schedule so he will assume more childcare responsibilities, such as picking the children up and dropping them off at school, transporting the children to various extracurricular activities, and after-school care. The immediate reason for her desire is the need to spend more time working on an important project, but B has an overall desire for equal sharing of childcare. B has reviewed the family budget and thinks that hiring a nanny or baby-sitter is not financially feasible. Her husband agrees in principle on the desirability of his doing more childcare, but he does not see changing his work schedule as an option.

B's husband has several concerns.

- Most men at his workplace do not take advantage of the "flextime" policy he would need to use to adjust his schedule
- He believes working different hours will make him seem less committed to his job and impede his future career advancement
- He is less familiar with the children's daily schedules than B is
- He prefers hiring a sitter or a nanny, joining a carpool, or using local after-school programs

Scenario 3: C is dissatisfied with her home workspace, which is in the bedroom. Since the space is prone to interruptions and distractions, she cannot work productively in it for long stretches of time. C's husband's workspace is set aside from the common areas of their home

and well suited for long periods of undisturbed work. Because C's husband rarely works in his study, C wants to trade workspaces with him. That would allow her to work productively at home, commute less, and accomplish more of her work. Her husband is very attached to his workspace and does not want to trade.

C's husband has several objections.

- He may need to do more work at home in the future
- He likes having a quiet space to himself to relax in
- He thinks it will be a large and time-consuming task to move all of his things into a new space
- He would find it difficult to do productive work in the bedroom workspace

Scenario 4: D's husband assumes that D will have the primary responsibility for entertaining a small group of his relatives who are coming to visit for a week. The visit will thus require D to prepare meals, suggest things for the guests to do, and accompany them. D is happy to have the guests but she does not want to interrupt her work for a week to entertain them. D wants her husband to take the primary responsibility for his relatives and to take part of the week off from his work. She is willing to take some time off as well. D's husband is reluctant to take time off from work.

D's husband has several reservations.

- He does not want to interrupt work on an important project of his own and believes that it is easier for D to interrupt her work
- D agreed to have the relatives visit, so he thinks she should be in charge of entertaining them
- He has already planned to take time off later in the summer for another family activity
- He thinks that D will do a better job of entertaining the guests

Take home exercise: Disagreements and minor conflicts are a normal and healthy part of any interpersonal relationship. Arguments can lead to open negotiation and communication around the area of disagreement that may ultimately help both partners develop a more equal relationship (Knudson, Martin, & Mahoney, 1998). Marriage is also a form of cohabitation, similar to that of living with a roommate who maintains different lifestyles and habits. In order to maintain harmony and live together successfully, they must accept and respect each other's preferences. Certain disagreements must simply be tolerated, and certain issues are just not worth fighting over. Think about some of the minor conflicts you have had with your partner, particularly those around housework. Would you handle the conflict the same way if you were dealing with a roommate instead of with your partner?

Reframe the conflict in terms of a roommate dispute, and consider the following questions:

- Is it worth fighting over?
- Is it something you can change?
- Is it a matter of simply having different habits or points of view about the quality of a household task (e.g., how clean is "clean")?
- Is it something that you can learn to accept with minimal consequences to your personal well-being, the well-being of your partner, or the well-being of the family as a whole?
- Is it something you absolutely cannot tolerate and need to change, or will just talking about it make you feel better?

Thinking about these questions whenever you encounter a minor conflict or disagreement with your partner can help put such small disputes into perspective. In addition, it can also help you to find simple resolutions to conflicts that may initially seem insurmountable.

References

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