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6

Unwanted Escalation of Sexual Intimacy

Pursuing a Miscommunication Explanation

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Within relationships, there are several variations of one partner wanting a different level of physical intimacy than the other. While any version of this asymmetry can be unfortunate, the most problematic, according to both common lore and social research, is the heterosexual dating situation in which the male wants to escalate physical intimacy beyond his partner's threshold. Sometimes, when she indicates that she wants to go no further, he ceases his advances. But sometimes he attempts to escalate the intimacy despite her wishes to the contrary.

These attempts—whether "successful" or not, and regardless of whether they occur at more preliminary or more advanced levels of intimacy—are almost always bothersome for the female, often extremely so. And they are extremely common. Among college women, for example, about 70% to 85% have had the experience, usually more than once, of a male attempting to escalate physical intimacy beyond the point that she has said "stop," and the large majority of these experiences have been unpleasant (Byers, 1988; Davis, George, & Norris, 2004; Kanin, 1957; Motley, 2008; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992).

If she says "stop," then why does he try to take the intimacy further than she wants? Traditionally, there have been three explanations: (1) the "biological explanation" that hormones and physiology make males inherently more inclined toward escalated intimacy (e.g., Byers, 1988), (2) the "sociological explanation" that social roles, norms, peer scripts, and so forth incline males toward assertiveness or aggression regarding sexual intimacy (e.g., Muehlenhard & McCoy,

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1991; Shotland & Goodstein, 1992), and (3) the "evolutionary-psychology explanation" that aggressive social roles, in sexual intimacy and otherwise, have long been inherent in male primates (e.g., Barash & Lipton, 1997).

Notice that these explanations are of little comfort to women who might appreciate a pragmatic solution to the problem. They say, in effect, that there is little they can do to prevent the situation because—for biological, sociological, or evolutionary reasons—men can be expected to pursue unwanted levels of sexual intimacy.

A more recent "communication explanation" for male pursuit of unwanted levels of intimacy suggests a solution, however. Motley and Reeder (1995) hypothesized that some of the common ways women say "stop" during physical intimacy—that is, women's "sexual resistance messages"—are misinterpreted by men to mean something other than to stop. In effect, a woman says something meaning "stop" (e.g., "It's getting late"), the man doesn't realize it meant "stop," so he continues to pursue intimacy beyond her threshold and—unlike as described in the biological, sociological, and evolutionary accounts—is oblivious to her having wanted to stop. Certainly, there are cases where the male is well aware that the female wants to stop yet pushes on nevertheless, inconsiderate of her wishes. There are cases where resistance messages are understood, but if it is true that there are cases where resistance messages are misunderstood, then part of the solution would be to increase men's understanding of women's resistance messages.

More specifically, the miscommunication explanation points out that women's resistance messages have varying degrees of directness. Some resistance messages are very direct. That is, the intended meaning and literal translation are the same—as in "Please don't do that," meaning "stop." But many common female resistance messages are indirect. An indirect message is one where the intended meaning and the literal translation are not the same, as in "It's stuffy in here," meaning "Please open a window." As an example from female sexual resistance messages, "It's getting late" is almost always intended to mean "stop," but that meaning must be derived indirectly, since it is not the literal translation. Thus while there is virtually no ambiguity or room for misunderstanding in direct resistance messages, it seems possible that women's indirect resistance messages might sometimes be misinterpreted to mean something other than "stop."

Indeed, research has supported this notion. While "stop" is by far the most likely male interpretation of women's *direct* resistance messages ("Please don't do that," "Let's stop," "I don't want to do this"), it is *not* the most common interpretation of women's *indirect* resistance messages, despite their intent. For example, when a woman attempts to indicate "stop" by saying "I'm not sure we're ready for this," the man is less likely to correctly interpret that she means "stop" and more likely to believe she means either (a) that she wants to go further but wants him to think that she doesn't usually go this far this fast or (b) that she wants to go

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further but wants him to reassure her that the relationship has reached the point where higher levels of intimacy are appropriate. With this particular example, he is more likely to misinterpret her message to mean some version of "go" than to correctly interpret "stop." And it is the same for several other common indirect resistance messages (Motley & Reeder, 1995).

These findings not only have explanatory value in partially accounting for males ignoring females' sexual resistance messages but also seem promising pragmatically. If men understand direct resistance messages ("Please stop," "I don't want to do this," etc.) but misunderstand indirect versions ("It's getting late," "I'm confused about this," etc.), then one implication is that we should advise women to eschew indirect resistance messages in favor of direct versions and should educate men as to the intended meaning of common indirect resistance messages.

This may be easier said than done, however. Women, at least through their mid-20s, are often reluctant to use direct resistance messages out of concern for negative relational consequences—thinking the partner will be hurt, angered, offended, and so forth—and believe these consequences to be less likely with indirect versions (which they expect to be understood as resistance messages). There is evidence, however, that women overestimate the relational consequences of resistance in general and also overestimate the relative advantage of indirect versions. The likelihood of the male partner being offended, angered, hurt, and so forth by any kind of resistance message apparently is far lower than most women imagine (Motley & Reeder, 1995). Nevertheless, the practical advice that women have much to gain (i.e., disambiguation of their resistance) and little to lose (i.e., very low probability of relational consequences) by favoring the more direct resistance messages is not always well received.

In this writer's experience, conference and classroom efforts to share the research findings on males' misinterpretation of resistance, and to urge women toward more direct resistance messages, are sometimes opposed. Despite the research evidence, a few female students and colleagues persist in believing that male partners are more likely to become upset ("He'll get mad," "He'll think I'm a bitch," etc.) upon hearing a direct resistance message than an indirect message. And even more students find it difficult to believe that males can assign meanings so different than their intended "stop."

With respect to the first of these challenges—the relational consequences of direct versus indirect resistance—the Motley and Reeder (1995) study was not as complete as it might have been. Males' reactions to three direct and three indirect messages were compared, with no significant difference on any of seven relational consequences (anger, hurt, disappointment, etc.). But the three indirect messages tested constitute only about one fourth of the common repertoire of indirect resistance messages, so it is possible that these were not representative and that different results would occur with different indirect

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resistance messages. This should be easy to test, however, simply by replicating the relevant parts of Motley and Reeder (1995) but using a more complete and representative set of indirect resistance messages. That will be one objective of the present study. Accordingly, consider the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Women view negative relational consequences to be a more likely outcome of direct sexual resistance messages than of indirect sexual resistance messages.

Hypothesis 2: The likelihood of negative relational consequences from direct sexual resistance messages is perceived to be greater by women than by men.

The second challenge by laypeople (or at least some female students) hearing about misinterpretations of indirect resistance messages is more difficult to answer. Essentially, the issue takes the form of incredulity over common male misinterpretations. There are always a few students who ask, in effect, "How on earth can guys think that when we're making out and I say, 'I'm seeing someone else,' that I mean 'So don't take the intimacy as a commitment,' instead of 'stop'?" Or "How can he think 'I'm not sure we're ready for this' means 'Tell me that it's okay to go that far at this point in the relationship' instead of 'stop'?" And so forth.

There is a sense in which this is asking a question that has challenged language philosophers for decades, namely, how do people correctly (or incorrectly, in our case) infer the intended meaning of indirect messages, since the intended meaning is not found in its literal meaning? This is not the place to review over a quarter century of thought on the question except to say briefly that none of the popular theories provides a satisfactory account of misinterpreted indirect messages of the sort we are discussing. Grice's (1975, 1989) notion that listeners infer an implicature based on assumptions about the speaker's veracity, efficiency, relevance, and so forth hardly explains a correct interpretation of "I'm confused about this," meaning "stop," and certainly does not explain the common misinterpretation (Motley & Reeder, 1995) whereby males take it to mean "I'm a 'nice girl' who doesn't usually go this far this fast." Tannen's (e.g., 1986, 1990) popular discussion of male and female indirectness addresses indirectness in terms of politeness and vagueness versus honesty and rudeness, assumes that differences result from individual or cultural styles, and does not ask how meaning is assigned to nonliteral messages. Gibbs's (e.g., 1999, 2002) direct-access account would imply that males—since they have access to the same background knowledge and contextual factors as females—should interpret indirect resistance messages correctly, not incorrectly. The configuration model of Cacciari and Tabossi (1988) works well for idiomatic and well-learned indirect messages—for example, "Do you know what time it is?" meaning "Please tell me what time it is"—but does not explain how we derive correct or incorrect meanings for new indirect messages (such as "It's getting late" meaning "stop" versus meaning "So let's skip the preliminaries").

While established treatments of indirect messages do not seem to provide an answer, an intuitively attractive possibility is suggested by ordinary accounts

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of meaning whereby messages are interpreted via (a) semantic meaning, that is, the literal meaning of the words, (b) personal knowledge meaning, that is, knowledge about the subject, object, speaker, context, and so forth, and (c) pragmatic meaning, which is a guess or assumption as to the sender's goal or intention (e.g., Motley, 1978; Osborn & Motley, 1999). Thus, for example, if Jack says to Jill, "My French fries are bland," semantic meaning tells her what French fries are, what "bland" means, and so forth; personal knowledge tells her that he probably thinks they need salt or catsup, not, say, maple syrup or lemon juice. And *pragmatic* meaning has her guessing why he is telling her this—does he want her to pass the salt, is he just making a declarative statement to make small talk, is he trying to discourage her from snitching his fries, is he trying to criticize the restaurant in general, or what? In the case of familiar indirect messages, the pragmatic meaning may have been learned (e.g., "Can you reach the salt?" meaning "Please pass the salt"). But in the case of unfamiliar messages in unfamiliar contexts, *it seems reasonable that our pragmatic-meaning guesses are determined in large part by speculating upon what we ourselves might have intended by the same statement in the same context.*

Thus part of the answer to "How could he think I mean anything but 'stop'?" might be "Because of what he would have meant if he had said the same thing in that situation" (or perhaps even, "Because of what he has meant when he has said the same thing in that situation"). If, for example, the only reason he can imagine *himself* saying "I'm seeing someone else" while making out is to mean "So please be discreet about this so that she won't find out," or if the last thing he would ever mean by "I'm seeing someone else" is "So let's stop," then his misinterpretation of her indirect message might be at least partially explained.

This admittedly intuitive answer seems to satisfy many skeptics about male misinterpretation of women's resistance messages. Moreover, it may shed light on the general theoretical question of how we attribute meaning to novel indirect messages. But it is untested and thus becomes a second issue for the present study. Specifically, consider the following:

Hypothesis 3: Males' inferred meanings for women's indirect sexual resistance messages will be more similar to the meanings males would have intended by those same messages than to the meanings women intend.

Method, Analysis, and Results

The Motley and Reeder (1995) study began by identifying common female resistance messages via interviews and questionnaires asking college women to recall all of the things they have said to indicate their resistance when "you have been on a date with a male and have engaged in at least preliminary physical intimacy, or even more advanced intimacy [and where] you do not want to 'go

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further,' but you think he does," both in situations where they did and did not hope to see or date the male again. Sixteen common resistance messages were identified, as presented in Table 6.1. These were used in the present study.

PART I

This chapter will present an abbreviated account of Part I. Details, for purposes of replication or explication, are available from the author.

Undergraduate students (45 male, 36 female) completed a disguised-purpose questionnaire asking that they imagine themselves in a physical intimacy situation during which the woman indicates that she does not want the intimacy to go further by uttering each of three direct and six indirect resistance messages (Table 6.1, Items a, b, c, e, f, h, m, o, p). For each message, participants indicated on a 7-point yes or no scale the likelihood that they (for males) or the male partner (for females) would become hurt, angry, offended, and so on by the resistance message.

Each participant received two "scores"—the mean of his or her three direct resistance messages and the mean of his or her six indirect resistance messages. These were compared via 2 (male/female) × 2 (direct/indirect) ANOVA.

Table 6.1 Common Female Resistance Messages

Direct:

a. Please don't do that.
b. I don't want to do this.
c. Let's stop this.

Less direct:

d. We can do other things, but not that.
e. I'm confused about this.
f. I'm not sure we're ready for this yet.
g. I can't do this unless you're committed to me.
h. Are you sure you want to do this?
i. It's against my religion.
j. I'm saving myself for marriage.
k. I don't think I know you well enough for this.

Indirect:

l. Let's be friends.
m. It's getting late.
n. I'm having my period.
o. I'm seeing someone else.
p. I don't have protection.

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Results

Means are presented in Table 6.2. Note that all differences between means are in the predicted direction. The negative consequences imagined by females exceed those stated by males in every case, usually significantly so.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that women view male partners' reactions to be more negative (i.e., lower scores) for direct resistance messages than for indirect messages. The cell comparisons on Table 6.2 (direct vs. indirect for females) show that this prediction was supported in every case. Notice that when the same comparison is made for males—that is, consequences of direct versus indirect messages—the differences are in some cases not even in the direction that favors indirect messages (e.g., for becoming angry, thinking she's a bitch, and deciding to not date her again). In any case, the direct versus indirect differences for males are not statistically significant except for one consequence—his disappointment—which in the Motley and Reeder (1995) study was the least of women's concerns among the seven potential consequences examined. The implication is that while women perceive a significant relational advantage for men's responses to indirect (vs. direct) resistance messages, men do not actually respond accordingly.[1]

Hypothesis 2 predicts that for direct messages in particular, women's predictions of men's negative relational consequences exceeds the experienced consequences reported by men. Table 6.2 shows this prediction to be supported via significant differences in the predicted direction for every case (males vs. females for direct). (Indeed, even for indirect messages, the negative consequences imagined by women exceed those reported by men, usually significantly so.)

Discussion

Even with a different and more complete set of indirect resistance messages, this replication confirms the Motley and Reeder (1995) observations. Women consider certain negative relational consequences to be likely outcomes of their sexual resistance messages and view these as especially likely for direct resistance messages. This implies a relational advantage for indirect messages, and for some women this may compete with the clarity advantage of direct messages. It appears, however, that from the point of view of the male partner, the relational consequences predicted by women are exaggerated even for indirect resistance messages, but especially so for direct resistance messages.

The primary pragmatic implication is that if women, once aware of the relative ambiguity of indirect sexual resistance messages, remain inclined to opt for them out of concern for negative consequences from direct resistance messages, then that concern may be unnecessary. Apparently, women have more "freedom" than is realized to use direct messages. Males are much more likely to interpret direct resistance messages correctly as "stop" than they are indirect messages and

Table 6.2 Perceived Male Reactions to Resistance Messages

Means			*Main Effects and Interactions*	*F(1, 79)*		*Cell Comparisons*			
						Direct vs. Indirect		*Males vs. Females*	
						For Males	*For Females*	*For Direct*	*For Indirect*
Thinks she's a PRUDE									
	Direct	Indirect	Sex	13.95	**		**	**	
Males	**4.50**	**5.01**	Directness	63.44	**				
Females	**3.17**	**4.68**	S × D	17.01	**				
Be DISAPPOINTED									
	Direct	Indirect	Sex	9.85	*	**	**	**	**
Males	**2.51**	**3.43**	Directness	74.39	**				
Females	**1.82**	**2.71**	S × D	0.03					
Be OFFENDED									
	Direct	Indirect	Sex	8.83	*		**	**	
Males	**4.46**	**4.57**	Directness	10.88	*				
Females	**3.34**	**4.27**	S × D	8.23	*				
Becomes ANGRY									
	Direct	Indirect	Sex	18.97	**		**	**	**
Males	**5.12**	**4.86**	Directness	1.20					
Females	**3.67**	**4.28**	S × D	14.40	**				

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Means			Main Effects and Interactions			Cell Comparisons			
						Direct vs. Indirect		Males vs. Females	
			F(1, 79)			For Males	For Females	For Direct	For Indirect
Thinks she's a BITCH									
	Direct	Indirect	Sex	5.71			**	**	*
Males	**5.63**	**5.37**	Directness	0.50					
Females	**4.78**	**5.06**	S × D	5.82					
Feels HURT									
	Direct	Indirect	Sex	5.05			**	**	
Males	**4.47**	**4.64**	Directness	8.01	*				
Females	**3.61**	**4.25**	S × D	3.03					
Decides NOT TO DATE her again									
	Direct	Indirect	Sex	13.28	**		**	**	**
Males	**5.27**	**4.96**	Directness	0.71					
Females	**4.00**	**4.59**	S × D	16.26	**				

NOTE: *Higher* scores represent judgments of *less perceived likelihood* for the relational consequences. Potential range of scores is 1–7. Cell comparisons are via Newman-Kuels.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

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are comparatively less likely with direct messages to experience negative relational responses such as feeling upset, angry, hurt, and so forth.

PART II

Participants

Participants were 91 students of various undergraduate communication courses at the University of California, Davis, all of whom had lived in the United States for at least the past 15 years, none of whom had heard or read about earlier research on resistance messages, and none of whom had participated in Part I.

Procedure

Participants completed one of three versions of a questionnaire providing four potential multiple-choice interpretations of all three direct and all 13 indirect messages identified earlier. The potential interpretations were the same ones used by Motley and Reeder (1995) with a few (~6) modifications based on conference and classroom discussions of likely resistance-message interpretations. In addition to the 16 resistance messages, 6 presumably encouraging or ambiguous filler items, with multiple-choice interpretations, were included to disguise the resistance message focus of the questionnaire (e.g., "That feels good," "You're turning me on," "That tickles").

The female version of the questionnaire was intended to measure women's intended meanings for the targeted resistance messages. The questionnaire asked the participant ($n = 30$) to imagine the same make-out situation as in Part I and recall whether she had said any of the 22 resistance and filler messages. In cases where the message was something that she had indeed said in the past, she was to indicate, by circling all the potential interpretations that apply, "what you meant when you said it." (For others, she was to indicate "what you probably would mean *if* you [were to say it in those circumstances]," but these responses were ignored in the present study so as to focus on actual rather than hypothetical meanings when women use the messages.) Participants also indicated whether the message was or was not something they had ever said in the target situation, so that analysis could focus on messages participants had actually used.

Response options for each resistance message included "You don't want to go further" plus three alternate interpretations, these varying from message to message, plus space to write in alternate meanings (which was uninformative on this and the other questionnaires). For example,

> *5. You say, "I'm seeing someone else." YOU MEANT, OR PROBABLY WOULD MEAN—*
>
> *A. You want to go further but want him to know that it doesn't mean that you're committed to him.*

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B. You want to go further but want him to be discreet, so that the other guy doesn't find out.

C. You want to go further but want him to realize, in case you end up "going together," that you may do this with someone else while you're seeing him.

D. You don't want to go further.

E. OTHER: _____

Also HAVE YOU SAID THIS WHILE MAKING OUT? (Circle One) HAVE HAVEN'T

Males completed one of two remaining questionnaire versions, randomly assigned. One of these (n = 31) was designed to determine common male interpretations of women's sexual resistance messages. This questionnaire was matched to the female version except that for each of the 22 resistance and filler messages, the participant was to recall whether a female partner had ever said the message to him within the target scenario. If so, he was to indicate how he had interpreted the message, circling any interpretations that applied from the four potential interpretations for that message (e.g., in case he had heard the message more than once) or to write in a different interpretation. If not, he was to skip to the next item, this being designed to focus on actual male interpretations rather than speculations. (Sender-oriented wording of the female version was switched to receiver-oriented wording, for example, "You want . . . him . . ." → "She wants . . . you . . .")

Another group of males (n = 30) completed a version of the questionnaire virtually identical to the female version and designed to determine what males would mean by the same messages if they were to speak them themselves during physical intimacy. That is, they were asked to indicate whether they had ever spoken any of the 22 messages while making out with a female; if so, they were to indicate what they had meant, and if not, to indicate what they probably would mean if they were to say it.[2]

Analysis

The objective of the analysis was to determine the extent to which males' interpretations of female indirect resistance messages differ from females' actual meanings and the extent to which those interpretations differ from males' meanings if they were to say the same thing in similar circumstances.

Each participant received a score representing the number of interpretations *other than* "*stop*" that he or she assigned to the indirect resistance messages. For each participant, the resistance messages actually spoken or heard were identified, the number of other-than-stop meanings/interpretations on these items were tallied (since participants could circle all that applied), and these frequencies were multiplied by the proportion of the 13 messages represented by the relevant items. Thus for 13 messages, each with three possible interpretations other than "stop," the potential range of scores was 0 to 39. This approach was used to score meanings and interpretations for women's use of the messages,

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men's interpretations upon hearing women use the messages, and men's own use of the messages (which was relatively rare). To score men's meanings *if* and when they were to speak these messages, a simple tabulation of all other-than-stop responses for all 13 messages was made for each participant (i.e., tallies on those messages he had spoken, if any, as well as those he had not, since on these, participants were to indicate what they probably would have meant).

Results

Table 6.3 shows the means for this analysis. Males interpret females' indirect resistance messages to mean something other than "stop" far more frequently than women mean something other than "stop." (The female mean of 5.16 comes mostly from a few female participants having sometimes meant something other than "stop" *in addition to* sometimes meaning "stop" for certain messages.)

As predicted by Hypothesis 3, Table 6.3 shows that while males' other-than-stop interpretations of female resistance messages are quite different from females' actual meanings, they are not very different from the meanings males have intended on the relatively rare occasions where they have spoken the messages themselves nor very different from the meanings they project when imagining what they would mean if they were to speak these messages.

Descriptive Analysis

Table 6.4 presents the relative frequency with which the various potential female meanings and male interpretations were assigned to women's resistance messages.[3] For comparison purposes, Motley and Reeder's (1995) data are included also.

Table 6.3 Means of Interpretation Scores for *Indirect* Resistance Messages

Comparisons	*Female's Meaning When She Says It*	*Male's Interp. When She's Said It*	*Male's Meaning When He's Said It*	*Male's Meaning If/When He'd Said It*
Other-than-stop	5.16	12.90	12.70	11.30
	-------*--------			
	----------***ns***----------			

NOTE: For other-than-stop scores, higher values indicate more instances of interpreting a resistance message to mean something other than "Stop." Possible range is 0–39. Differences evaluated via *t*-test, $df = 59$; * = $p < .01$, $t > 2.40$.

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Table 6.4 Relative Frequency of Meanings/Interpretations for Sexual Resistance Messages

Male Interp. (M&R 1995) (N) %	*Male Interp. (This Study) (N) %*	*Female Meaning (This Study) (N) %*	
			Direct Female Resistance Messages
	(30)	(25)	**"I don't want to do this."**
	93.1	100.0	D. SDWTGF.
	(28)	(20)	**"Let's stop this."**
	100.0	100.0	D. SDWTGF.
	(30)	(19)	**"Please don't do that."**
	93.1	94.7	D. SDWTGF.
			Less Than Direct Female Resistance Messages
(52)	(28)	(21)	**"I'm not sure we're ready for this."**
23.1	39.3	19.1	A. SWTGF, but wants him to think/know that she usually only does this with guys she has known longer.
37.2	78.6	23.8	C. SWTGF, but wants him to reassure her that the relationship has reached the point where this is expected or appropriate.
25.6	35.7	76.2	D. SDWTGF.
(22)	(25)	(4)	**"This is against my religion."**
30.0	36.0	0.0	A. SWTGF, but wants him to think/know that she's a "nice girl" who doesn't do this with everyone.
32.5	60.0	25.0	B. SWTGF, but wants him to know that she has some moral reservations about it.
12.5	24.0	0.0	C. SWTGF, but wants him to reassure her that it's okay to go against her religion's views.
25.0	40.0	75.0	D. SDWTGF.

(Continued)

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Table 6.4 (Continued)

Male Interp. (M&R 1995) (N) %	*Male Interp. (This Study) (N) %*	*Female Meaning (This Study) (N) %*	*Less Than Direct Female Resistance Messages*
(39)	(27)	(11)	**"I don't think I know you well enough for this."**
37.9	29.6	0.0	A. SWTGF, but wants him to think that she usually only does this with guys she has known longer.
27.7	37.0	0.0	B. SWTGF, but wants him to reassure her that it's okay despite not knowing each other very long.
25.8	63.0	90.9	D. SDWTGF.
(47)	(29)	(6)	**"I'm confused about this."**
NA	17.2	0.0	A. SWTGF, but she's surprised that the two of them are making out like this.
31.1	51.7	66.7	B. SWTGF, but is confused about what it implies for the relationship.
36.5	51.7	50.0	C. SWTGF, but wants him to reassure her that it isn't purely physical.
18.9	17.2	66.7	D. SDWTGF.
(44)	(29)	(18)	**"We can do other things, but not that."**
12.7	20.7	16.7	A. SWTGF, but wants him to know that she doesn't let everyone else do "that."
7.3	10.3	0.0	B. SWTGF, but wants to wait until she's more turned on before doing "that."
49.1	37.9	27.8	C. SWTGF, but in other ways.
30.9	41.4	61.1	D. SDWTGF.
(30)	(27)	(6)	**"I'm saving myself for marriage."**
NA	33.3	0.0	B. SWTGF, but expects a commitment now.
44.2	77.8	66.7	D. SDWTGF.
(44)	(28)	(11)	**"Are you sure you want to do this?"**
38.9	60.7	45.5	A. SWTGF, but only if he really wants to.

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Male Interp. (M&R 1995) (N) %	*Male Interp. (This Study) (N) %*	*Female Meaning (This Study) (N) %*	*Less Than Direct Female Resistance Messages*
37.5	53.6	9.1	B. SWTGF, but wants him to tell her how much he wants to.
NA	57.1	27.3	C. SWTGF, but wants to be able to say it was because ***he*** wanted to.
5.6	17.9	27.3	D. SDWTGF.
(45)	(27)	(8)	**"I can't do this unless you're committed to me."**
29.6	40.7	12.5	A. SWTGF, but wants him to know that she considers them to be committed to each other.
33.8	44.4	12.5	B. SWTGF, but wants to let him know that she will interpret it as a commitment.
33.8	74.1	5.0	C. SWTGF, but wants him to assure her that he's committed to her.
2.8	11.1	37.5	D. SDWTGF.
			Indirect Female Resistance Messages
(47)	(30)	(8)	**"I'm seeing someone else."**
29.6	30.0	12.5	A. SWTGF, but wants him to know that it doesn't mean that she's committed.
35.2	33.3	0.0	B. SWTGF, but wants him to be discreet, so that the other guy doesn't find out.
11.4	33.3	25.0	C. SWTGF, but wants him to realize, in case they end up "going together," that she may do this with someone else while she's "seeing" him.
23.9	43.3	75.0	D. SDWTGF.
(49)	(30)	(24)	**"It's getting late."**
14.7	23.3	0.0	A. SWTGF, but wants to skip past the "preliminaries" and get to the "heavy stuff" because they're running out of time.

(Continued)

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Table 6.4 (Continued)

Male Interp. (M&R 1995) (N) %	*Male Interp. (This Study) (N) %*	*Female Meaning (This Study) (N) %*	*Indirect Female Resistance Messages*
26.7	23.3	8.3	C. SWTGF, but only if he doesn't mind how late it'll be if they continue.
40.0	73.3	100.0	D. SDWTGF.
(54)	(31)	(24)	**"I'm having my period."**
30.9	35.5	12.5	A. SWTGF, but wants to give a "heads up" on how to proceed.
NA	12.9	4.2	B. SWTGF, and wants him to know that it's a relatively "safe" time with respect to pregnancy risks.
20.0	38.7	33.3	C. SWTGF, but wants to adapt the intimacy behaviors accordingly.
25.5	61.3	54.2	D. SDWTGF.
(50)	(28)	(12)	**"Let's be friends."**
NA	21.4	0.0	A. SWTGF, and wants to see if a "friends with benefits" arrangement is okay with him.
21.7	17.9	8.3	B. SWTGF, but wants him to know that he's making no emotional commitment.
18.8	17.9	8.3	C. SWTGF, but wants him to assure her that it's okay for friends to do this.
46.4	71.4	91.7	D. SDWTGF.
(48)	(25)	(12)	**"I don't have protection."**
NA	36.0	16.7	A. SWTGF, but not as far as intercourse.
47.5	44.0	50.0	B. SWTGF, but only if he has protection.
26.3	36.0	0.0	C. SWTGF, but wants him to know that there'll be risks if they go all the way.
16.3	32.0	50.0	D. SDWTGF.

NOTE: (Messages are presented by approximate directness categories. The actual questionnaire order was random.) M&R 1995 = Motley and Reeder (1995). SDWTGF = "She doesn't want to go further"; SWTGF = "She wants to go further." These abbreviations were **not** used on the questionnaires.

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While these data do not allow probability tests, several observations are noteworthy. First, it is clear that males' interpretation of resistance messages is reasonably accurate for *direct* resistance messages. Second, it is clear that for most *indirect* resistance messages, men interpret "stop" far less frequently than women mean "stop." Third, while Motley and Reeder (1995) implied that all 13 of these indirect messages almost always mean "stop," Table 6.4 suggests that a few have fairly common meanings other than "stop." Indeed, one or two of them (e.g., "Are you sure you want to do this?") perhaps should not be labeled as a resistance message. This does not take away, however, from the primary observation that when women *do* mean "stop" via indirect messages, men are likely to interpret otherwise. Fourth, even for resistance messages that usually do mean "stop," there are rare instances where some women may mean something other than "stop." And fifth, the male interpretations in the present study, while still remarkably inaccurate, generally are not as inaccurate as those in the Motley and Reeder (1995) study. Implications of some of these observations will be discussed below.

Discussion

Part II was instigated by the lay question of how males come up with some of their ostensibly far-fetched interpretations of messages that women intend as clear requests to halt their physical intimacy. In particular, we have examined the possibility that these male interpretations are derived by searching for a pragmatic meaning, guided in large part by imagining their own pragmatic meaning for the same message under similar circumstances. This explanation is supported by the similarity between the range of interpretations men give to women's resistance messages and the range of interpretations they would have as senders of the same messages. (In the case of female resistance messages, this explanation, of course, neither changes nor justifies the fact that, regardless of the source of the interpretations, they are usually wrong interpretations.)

General Discussion

Inferring the complexities of reality from mere questionnaire responses is often suspect. Certainly, the questionnaires of the present study have omitted direct examination of certain factors that may be assumed to affect real-life responses to sexual resistance messages. It is obvious, for example, that real-life resistance messages are accompanied by nonverbal vocal and nonvocal cues that can sometimes help to disambiguate the pragmatic intention. Similarly, such factors as the couple's past intimacy levels (with others and with each other), the point to which the intimacy has advanced when resistance is attempted, and so forth can affect her intended meaning and his interpretation of the messages we have examined here. While this study did not examine these

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factors explicitly, it did attempt to account for them implicitly. By asking female participants what they *usually* have meant by the messages, and asking males how they *usually* have responded, the groups presumably were describing similar composites of real-life phenomena that included a natural range of nonverbal behaviors, intimacy thresholds, levels of past intimacy, and so forth. The study's design assumes that these variables balance out, both across the groups' experiences and across a normal range of resistance episodes.

It is worth noting that the male misinterpretations in the present study were not as dramatically misguided as in the Motley and Reeder (1995) study. Examples of the differences can be seen in Table 6.4. Three explanations come to mind. One is the possibility that some of the participants in this study had heard about the earlier study, along with hearing the "correct" interpretations (i.e., "stop") for indirect resistance messages. Even though the study excluded former students of courses known to have discussed the earlier study, it is possible that some participants had indeed heard about the earlier research from friends taking those courses. This possibility becomes more reasonable when noticing that the most dramatic shifts toward correct "stop" interpretations in the present study (compared with the 1995 study) happened on the very items that constitute the most common classroom examples at the participants' institution (namely, "It's getting late" and "I'm seeing someone else"). A second possibility for the shift toward fewer misinterpretations is that the 1995 study used male participants from two different institutions, half being from a reputed "party school" university and the other half being from the same relatively straitlaced institution as in the present study. It is possible that interpretations actually have not changed so much at the latter institution since 1995 and that the difference between the two studies is because of considerably more misunderstanding at the other institution. A third possibility is that times are changing such that men are much more sensitive to the meanings of women's sexual resistance messages today than in 1995. Assuming that the first two explanations probably have some validity (even if in combination with the third), the point is that the participants' responses in the present study may not be as representative as we would wish and may reflect less misinterpretation of resistance messages than actually exists.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study sheds light on two questions that social scientists have asked for decades. One of these is the question of why, in heterosexual intimacy situations, do men so frequently attempt to escalate physical intimacy after the partner has indicated her unwillingness to do so? The present study does not rule out the traditional biological, sociological, and evolutionary-psychology explanations for

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this form of "male sexual aggression" (e.g., Kanin, 1957). But this study emphatically supports the alternative "miscommunication explanation." Strong evidence has been provided for a model whereby women sometimes try to communicate their resistance to continued or escalated intimacy via messages that are very likely to be misinterpreted by their male partner to mean something other than resistance (and, indeed, in some cases are even likely to be interpreted as a request for escalated intimacy). As discussed at some length by Motley and Reeder (1995), it is possible that miscommunication interacts with biological and sociological factors, but a key difference is that the miscommunication explanation suggests a course of action whereby episodes of unwanted escalation efforts might be reduced.

The second theoretical question illuminated by this study is that of how people solve for the pragmatic meaning of novel indirect messages. The specific variant in this study asked, in effect, How is it that he can think, for example, that during intimacy, "I'm seeing someone else" means "It's okay to escalate the intimacy if no one finds out," when in fact women virtually never mean this and almost always mean "stop"? The potential answer examined here is that perhaps the cognitive process of deciphering a novel indirect message is based largely on one's own likely meaning under similar circumstances, and "It's okay if no one finds out" is what he would have meant (or because "stop" is the last thing he would have meant). The study supports this explanation of deriving meaning for novel indirect messages, at least in the case of male misinterpretations of female indirect sexual resistance messages. The data summarized in Table 6.3 suggest both that males almost never mean "stop" when *they* say any of the indirect messages during physical intimacy and that the very large range of other-than-stop interpretations they attribute to women's indirect resistance messages duplicates the meanings they have had, or would have had, as senders of the same messages. (There may be a wishful thinking component as well, where, in addition to thinking in terms of his own meaning, his interpretation is further biased by hoping she means what he would mean.)

It seems intuitively likely that this approach to solving for the meaning of novel indirect messages goes beyond the specific context we have been concerned with here. For example, if two people are talking by cell phone and one says, "I don't think my battery has much charge left," the likelihood that the other will interpret this to mean (correctly or incorrectly) "So let's say goodbye and hang up now" (vs. "So let's keep talking, but don't be surprised if we're disconnected," etc.) may be higher if that is what he or she would have meant by the same statement, and perhaps even more so if he or she wanted to terminate the conversation anyway. This "introspection" account of how people attribute meaning to novel indirect messages generally may be worth pursuing via future research.

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PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This study has addressed a phenomenon that most young women experience and most find to be unpleasant, namely, the situation in which a man and woman are engaged in physical intimacy, she indicates to him that she wants to stop or go no further, yet he attempts to escalate the intimacy anyway. Both common lore and earlier scientific explanations have assumed that this happens with his complete awareness that he is violating her wishes. No doubt, that is sometimes the case, and unfortunately there may be little that can be done to reduce those violations. But this study suggests that these transgressions also often occur *without* his awareness. And if we assume that many, if not most, males will respect the line they believe to be their partner's threshold, especially if that threshold has been expressed, then this study does suggest ways to reduce these transgressions. Moreover, the suggestions are fairly simple and straightforward.

The primary suggestion to men is to become aware of the many ways that women can say "stop" without saying "stop." Not only should men become acquainted with the messages of Table 6.1 as ways that women indicate resistance but perhaps should give the benefit of the doubt to other ostensibly irrelevant or ambiguous statements that have not been identified here. When he asks himself during intimacy "Why did she say that?" he should not assume the answer that he derives by wondering what he would have meant himself. It might be helpful to adopt a sort of "when in doubt, ask" rule. Male responses such as "So it's getting late; does that mean you want to stay over, or does it mean I should take you home soon?" should be helpful. If in fact she does *not* want to stop, she presumably will let him know.

The first suggestion to women is to realize that direct resistance messages are likely to be interpreted correctly, but *indirect resistance messages are not.* It may be worthwhile for women to examine Table 6.4 in light of the specific messages with which they would be likely to attempt resistance and to notice the likely male misinterpretations of those messages (keeping in mind the possibility that typical misinterpretation frequencies may be closer to those of the 1995 data than to the present study).

Second, those who find it incredible that men would assign the interpretations of Table 6.4 should remember the strong possibility that their male partner is deciphering resistance messages according to the meaning he derives when imagining himself saying the same thing, and in most cases that probably is not "stop."

So far, the advice to women is to avoid indirect resistance messages and use direct resistance messages instead, because these are so much more likely to be interpreted as resistance. But there may be some who find this advice difficult to follow because of (a) the perception that direct ways of saying "stop" are too blunt, impolite, or forceful and (b) the notion that male partners will therefore be offended or put off by direct messages. The results presented in Table 6.2

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suggest that this simply is not the case. Apparently, males accept direct resistance messages easily and without negativity and in some cases even more so than for indirect messages. It appears that there is little to lose and much to gain (i.e., clarity and effectiveness of resistance) for women to indicate their resistance more directly. Except for perhaps wishing that she wanted to go further, most men are fine with her saying simply, "Let's stop" or "Let's not do this" or "I don't feel comfortable doing this" or "I don't want to do this," and so forth.

Finally, for those who remain skeptical of the assertion that direct resistance messages are not offensive to males and who put a premium on politeness, an untested but intuitively attractive compromise can be suggested: if the assumption is that an indirect resistance message is more acceptable because it lets him down more gently, or some such, then it might be useful to combine the presumed softness of the preferred indirect message along with the disambiguity of a direct message. For example, instead of "You know, it's getting late," try "You know, it's getting late; *we need to stop.*" Presumably, that would avoid the possibility of his interpreting a direct "Let's stop" as being ". . . because I don't like you" or ". . . because I'm not attracted to you" or whatever reaction is trying to be avoided by not using a direct message, but at the same time would avoid his interpreting the simpler "It's getting late" as meaning ". . . so let's skip to the heavier stuff." The same applies to virtually any indirect message: "I'm confused about this, *so I'd like to stop,*" "I'm in a relationship with someone else, *so I need for us to stop,*" "I can't do this unless I'm in a committed relationship, *so I'd like to stop,*" and so forth.

The bottom line on the practical applications of the present study is that it may be possible to reduce the incidence of unwanted attempts to escalate intimacy. Many men need to realize the indirect ways that women try to indicate resistance, many women need to realize that indirect resistance messages are likely to be misinterpreted as something other than resistance, and many women need to realize that most males will not resent a clear expression of resistance.

Conclusion

Some sexual aggression episodes are not a matter of misunderstanding, of course. And without an empirical intervention-type study, there is no direct evidence that the elimination of the misunderstandings highlighted by this study would seriously impact the unwanted physical escalation phenomenon. But it seems most reasonable to assume, given the results of this study, that a significant subset of unwanted escalation attempts occur where the male has unknowingly pursued intimacy beyond the threshold his partner has tried to express and that a significant subset of these could be avoided, without consequences to the relationship, if her initial resistance efforts were better understood.

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Notes

1. It is worth noting that for all seven relational consequences, the most negative male responses were on "I'm seeing someone else." This is probably because this revelation causes the male to feel that he has been led on.

2. Wording was adjusted, of course. "You want him to . . ." on the female version became "You want her to . . ." on this version, for example. The only substantive change necessary to an actual resistance message or interpretation was that the "I'm having my period" resistance message was changed to "Are you still having your period?" for this version of the questionnaire.

3. For simplicity, and to highlight misinterpretations, Table 6.4 omits responses on which fewer than 10% of the males interpreted incorrectly. The data are available upon request.

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