20

The What, When, Who, and Why of Nagging in Interpersonal Relationships

KARI P. SOULE

A particular communication ritual occurs in many relationships, creating responses ranging from humor to exasperation to anger. That interpersonal ritual is nagging. Yet, the term nagging seldom appears in interpersonal communication or conflict textbooks. It appears that "nagging" is commonly used in everyday conversation but it rarely makes it into academic print. A traditional understanding of the word suggests, "to annoy by constant scolding, complaining or urging." An online contest for the best description of nagging revealed this winner—"Whenever you open your mouth, you are either criticizing or complaining about me or something to do with me." (Yahoo! Answers, 2009)

If you read newspaper cartoons or watch sitcoms regularly, you are very familiar with examples of nagging. You may also experience it in your friendships or family relationships, situations in which you may be the nagger or the naggee. Everyone has stereotypical information on who nags or is nagged, how nagging is interpreted, and the function it plays in a relationship; these generalizations are reinforced by popular culture. But few research studies have addressed nagging behaviors.

Currently a large body of communication research, including work on self-presentation theory, perceptual contrast theory, and indebtedness theory, attempts to explain why people comply when others make requests of them. Self-presentation theory suggests that, when asked to do something for others, people monitor the image that others will have of them. They may feel bad about not complying. If so, they are motivated to comply in order to avoid being judged negatively.

Perceptual contrast theory is based on two principles—anchoring and contrast (Cialdini, 1993). When people experience a certain amount of something (e.g. money or happiness) and then expect that amount as typical or normative, they have "adapted" to that level. Essentially we anchor our expectations to our experiences. After such an anchor is established, a contrast effect occurs when one judges others against his or her standard for characteristics such as wealth, intelligence, politeness, and is disappointed. Essentially the other is displaced away from the anchor. Language creates expectations for how people anchor experience to expectations. Contrast

effects are common in relationships. Consider the following example:

A: "Honey, could you do me a really big favor?"
B: "What?" (Expecting a really major request to be stated.)
A: "Could you bring in the mail when you come back from the store?"

No doubt B will comply with this request. After all, in contrast to what B was expecting to be asked, bringing in the mail is a small favor.

Indebtedness theory utilizes the idea of reciprocity (Bell, Cholerton, Davison, Frazcek & Lauter (1996). *This theory is based on the idea that we come to feel indebted (a felt obligation to repay another) when that person has done something for us. If B brings in the mail, perhaps A will feel indebted and comply with B's next request. Obviously, there is a level of equality here. A might feel obligated to get B a soda from the refrigerator but not to buy B a new car.*

What if the person does not comply with such a request? What are the options then? Research by Kari Soule suggests that one of the options is to nag the other person. She suggests that nagging is a fairly common phenomenon in attempting to gain compliance. In one of the first attempts to examine the pattern of nagging in close relationships, Soule categorizes nagging as "persistent persuasion" and tries to discover how it is similar to or different from other types of ongoing persuasion. She studied nagging experiences of friends and marital partners; her findings are contained in the following piece.

As you read this, you will see that some respondents believe nagging indicates caring while others view it as a way to get partner compliance. We have included nagging in this section of the book because it is frequently viewed as a type of caretaking communication. Although nagging might be considered a negative and controlling interpersonal behavior, Soule presents nagging as a method of persuasion, with sequential, logical steps involved. From this perspective, she discusses the circumstances under which nagging occurs and explains that it is a product of the actions of both parties (the nagger and the naggee). The chapter concludes with an emphasis on the function of nagging in relationships, why it occurs, and both its positive and negative impacts.

As you read this chapter think about how you interpret or enact nagging. Consider your general reaction to being nagged. Under what conditions are you more or less likely to comply with a first request? If you wish to avoid complying, you may wish to consider the importance of nondefensive responses to nagging, such as taking responsibility, avoiding the "summarizing-self syndrome," or reframing the message (Gottman, 1994). Ask yourself the question: To what extent should I reconsider the messages contained within nagging behavior in my family or friendship relationships?

REFERENCES

Bell, R. A., Cholerton, M., Davison, V., Fraczek, K. E., & Lauter, H. (1996). Making health education self-funding: Effectiveness of pregiving in an AIDS fundraising/education campaign. *Communication Quarterly, 8*, 331–352.

Cialdini, R. B. (1993). *Influence, science, and practice* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Gottman, J. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

"Take out the trash."
"I asked you to take out the trash."
"When are you going to take out the trash?"
"I need you to take out the trash now."

Does this sound familiar? Though your experience with this type of communication may not be in the context of taking out the trash, I am sure that you are familiar with its pattern. In fact, it is probable that someone with whom you share an interpersonal relationship has nagged you just as I have described, or that you may have been the one doing the nagging. While you may be quite familiar with nagging, have you ever really thought much about it, besides perhaps to make jokes or laugh about it? (Just think how many cartoons and comics you have probably been exposed to depicting an aggressive wife nagging a browbeaten husband.) My goal in this essay is to make you more aware of this everyday behavior and the purpose it may serve in your interpersonal relationships. To this end, I am going to answer four basic questions

about nagging, particularly the what, when, who, and why of nagging. I turn to "What is nagging?" first.

WHAT IS NAGGING?

As you can tell from the above description of someone nagging another person to take out the trash, the goal of nagging is to persuade someone to perform or, depending on the situation, stop performing some behavior. So an easy way to think of nagging is as a form of persuasion. We can further categorize nagging as an example of persistent persuasion. Persistent persuasion implies that a persuader tries several times to get another to comply. In effect, the person receiving these persuasive attempts is not doing what the persuader wants, so the persuader keeps trying to gain his or her compliance. This may be your experience when you try to persuade someone to do something; people rarely do what we want the first time we try to influence them. Indeed, in this chapter's opening description of a nagging interaction, the persuader made not just one request to get the trash taken out but four.

So what exact form of persistent persuasion does nagging take? Kozloff (1988), a researcher, helps to answer this question by identifying the sequential steps that occur in a nagging interaction. These steps are as follows:

1. A nagger gives a naggee a signal to perform (or stop performing) a specific behavior (such as asking him or her to take out the trash).
2. The naggee does not cooperate or comply with the nagger.
3. In response, the nagger repeats his or her initial signal in a further effort to gain the naggee's compliance.
4. The naggee again responds by being noncompliant.

Kozloff argues that this exchange of the nagger's signal to comply and the naggee's noncompliance continues until either the nagger gives up and stops trying to persuade the naggee or the naggee eventually gives in and does what the persuader wants.

There are several important processes that Kozloff identifies in his description of a nagging interaction. The first is that a naggee does not immediately comply with a nagger. Noncompliance is necessary for a persuader to be persistent, since once a naggee complies there is no need for a persuader to continue trying to influence him or her. The second, as was previously discussed, is that a persuader reacts to this noncompliance by being persistent or continuing to try to influence a naggee; he or she does not at first give up. However it is *how* the persuader is persistent in a nagging interaction that is interesting. Specifically, the nagger repeats the initial message. Now this is not to say that a nagger repeats the previous message word for word. It is likely, as shown in the example of someone nagging another to take out the trash, that subsequent attempts will be worded differently but will still communicate the same essential message. Moreover, a nagger may also change paralinguistic cues, such as beginning to whine or to speak in a pleading tone.

A persuader choosing to be persistent by repeating himself or herself is at odds with research indicating that individuals often become more aggressive when trying to influence someone who will not comply (deTurck 1985, 1987). Particularly, persuaders usually start trying to influence someone using polite strategies, such as asking them to do something. However, when polite strategies are not successful, persuaders may become more aggressive by making threats, harassing the other, or, in rare cases, turning to violence (Pruitt, Parker, and Mikolic 1997). Throughout your life, you have probably seen examples of a persuader "escalating" to more aggressive strategies. Just think of a parent trying to persuade a child to pick up toys. The parent probably starts out by using requests or by asking the child several times to pick up the toys. When this strategy does not work, the parent may threaten the child with a time out or spanking if the child does not cooperate. If the child still does not comply, the parent may then follow through on his or her threat.

Through my research I sought to determine whether nagging could be differentiated from other instances of persuader persistence by a nagger

repeating himself or herself rather than escalating to more aggressive strategies. I asked two different groups of people to complete a questionnaire about nagging. The first group was composed of 103 students at a Midwestern university (63 females and 40 males, ranging in age from 19 to 49). The second group included 101 married couples (202 individuals whose ages ranged from 25 to 84 years; the number of years the couples had been married ranged from 1 to 59 years). Consistent with what was expected, both groups described nagging as more repetitious than aggressive (Soule 2001).

Let us turn back to the original question of "What is nagging?" The answer is that nagging is a form of persistent persuasion that involves a persuader repeating himself or herself rather than escalating to a more aggressive persuasive strategy. You may now be asking yourself, why would a persuader choose to be repetitive rather than become more aggressive? It probably seems an annoying and less successful way to try to persuade someone. The answer to why a nagger relies on repetition may lie in the actions of the person being persuaded; when this individual behaves in a specific manner, a persuader replies by nagging. Thus, we next turn to the question "When does nagging occur?"

WHEN DOES NAGGING OCCUR?

You are aware that people's communicative behaviors do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they are affected by and in turn affect the communicative behaviors of others; thus, a persuader may nag in response to the actions of a naggee. Indeed, we already know that a naggee must be noncompliant in order for a persuader to continue nagging. However, just as it is *how* a persuader is persistent that differentiates nagging from other types of persuader persistence, *how* a naggee reacts to a persuader's initial and subsequent influence messages can bring about and continue nagging behavior.

An individual who is not complying with a persuader can enact this noncompliance in one of two ways. The first is that he or she can be verbally noncompliant. Verbal noncompliance involves a persuasive target telling a persuader through words that he or she will not comply. For example, when asked to take out the trash, a verbally noncompliant person could simply say "No," or "It is not my job to take out the trash." On the other hand, this individual could be behaviorally noncompliant. When being behaviorally noncompliant, an individual does not necessarily verbalize an intent not to comply; he or she simply does not do what the persuader wants. For example, when asked to take out the trash, a behaviorally noncompliant person may just calmly say nothing and continue the activity in which he or she was engaged, such as watching TV or reading. Moreover, being behaviorally noncompliant could also be accompanied by a verbal agreement to comply without actually doing so. For example, when asked to take out the trash, a behaviorally noncompliant person might simply say "Okay" or "All right" without doing what the persuader wants. This individual could also communicate a plan to take out the trash in the future (perhaps without intending to do so) by saying "I'll do it in a minute," or "I'll take it out at the next commercial break" when watching TV.

When thinking back to your own experiences with nagging, you can probably guess which type of noncompliance, behavioral versus verbal, most often occurs in nagging interactions. If you said behavioral, your response would be consistent with the results of my research. When I asked the sample of married couples to think about a nagging interaction they have had with their spouse, most of them indicated that the naggee's most common response was behavioral noncompliance (Soule 2001).

Why do nagging interactions more often entail behavioral rather than verbal noncompliance? The answer to this question may have to do with the repetitive nature of nagging. By not making a verbal refusal to a persuader, a behaviorally noncompliant person makes it difficult for a persuader to use a more aggressive or less polite method of persuasion. Indeed, if a behaviorally noncompliant individual has apparently agreed to do what the persuader wants (e.g., says "I'll do it in a minute"), a persuader may feel that it is inappropriate to use a more aggressive strategy (such as threats or harassment). In effect, the persuader

may believe that this person has seemingly done nothing to deserve such a response. Even if a person simply says nothing when being behaviorally noncompliant, a persuader may feel (either consciously or unconsciously) that it is not appropriate to use a more aggressive strategy in response. As a result, since escalating to a more aggressive influence method seems inappropriate, a persuader is left with no choice but to repeat the original message and therefore nag.

Thus, nagging occurs as a product of the actions of both the nagger and naggee. When a naggee responds to a persuader's initial influence attempts with behavioral noncompliance, a persuader is ostensibly left with no other option than to nag. This reasoning suggests that nagging may not always occur because someone is simply a nag or nags because it is his or her personality to do so, but rather as a result of the situation. You may have made this assumption (i.e., that nagging is a personality trait) about some of the people in your life, for example stating that "My husband/wife is such a nag," or "All my mother/father knows how to do is nag." If nagging is in part a result of the actions of a naggee, this would suggest that a variety of people might nag. To further investigate this idea, the next question is "Who nags?"

WHO NAGS?

Think for a moment about the numerous interpersonal relationships you share with the variety of people in your life. In which ones do you and/or the other person in the relationship nag? Many of you may think that this behavior only occurs in intimate relationships, such as with a spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, or your parents. Though this may be the case for some, the results of my research indicate that a large variety of people nag one another.

I asked the sample of students to list the people who nag them and the people they nag, indicating the relationship they share with each. For example, participants could list their father, roommate, friend, and so forth. Surprisingly, the persons in this study listed a large assortment of people. Among those whom they nag, participants included not only the people we would expect, such as significant others (i.e., boyfriends, girlfriends, spouses, ex-boyfriends and girlfriends) but also persons in less obvious relationships. For example, several participants indicated that they nagged superiors (e.g., professors, teachers, bosses at work, and coaches), roommates, friends, best friends, coworkers, siblings, neighbors, and subordinates (e.g., the children they babysit). When participants indicated who nags them, many of the same people were listed, such as roommates, friends, superiors, and significant others. In addition, participants indicated that their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were likely to nag them.

Thus, it appears that nagging occurs in a wide variety of interpersonal relationships. But when you think of nagging, with whom do you most often associate this behavior, men or women? Turning back to the opening of this chapter, which depicts someone nagging another to take out the trash, did you picture a man or woman saying these words? If you pictured a woman as the nagger, your perception may be consistent with that of many people in Western culture. We often stereotype nagging as a feminine behavior and believe that women are more likely to nag than men. To gain a greater understanding of sex differences in nagging, I first examined whether most people really do view nagging as a feminine behavior. The point was not to look at which sex actually nags most but whether society views nagging in general as more feminine or masculine. Thus, I asked individuals in both of the samples (the married couples and students) whether they perceive or think of nagging as a more feminine or more masculine behavior. Not too surprisingly, both samples viewed nagging as more feminine than masculine (Soule 2001).

Though many people may view nagging as more feminine, I was curious as to whether one sex is more likely than the other to nag. In effect, I wanted to see whether the perception of nagging as a more feminine behavior is accurate; specifically, do women really nag others more than men? An examination of the lists generated by the sample of students concerning whom they nag and who nags them indicated that nagging not only depends on the sex of the nagger but on that

of the naggee as well. Specifically, women were found to nag similar numbers of men and women, whereas men were more likely to nag other men than women (Soule 2001). Therefore, it appears that both sexes engage in nagging behavior, but men tend to be more selective than women in that they are more likely to nag other men.

It appears, then, that a variety of people in a variety of interpersonal relationships nag. Moreover, though we may think of nagging as a more feminine than masculine behavior, men do nag, although they are more likely to nag other men than women. Perhaps this is why nagging is perceived to be feminine. Since women nag a greater variety of people, we may tend to stereotypically associate this behavior with them. We now have an idea of who nags; however, we still do not know exactly why nagging occurs in such a diverse group of relationships or why men tend to nag other men rather than women. Thus the last question is, "Why nag?"

WHY NAG?

Think back to the opening of this chapter; why do you think the persuader is nagging another to take out the trash? The persuader's motive may seem obvious—he or she simply wants the trash taken out. Thus, the most apparent answer to the question "Why nag?" is to influence another. Indeed, when asked why they nag their spouse, the majority of subjects in the sample of married couples reported that it was to gain the naggee's (their spouse's) compliance (Soule 2001). However, nagging may serve several other important functions in our interpersonal relationships. Think back to instances where you have nagged someone you care about. Though your primary goal may have been to gain compliance, did you also nag this person out of feelings of concern or love? Perhaps you even used nagging as a means of showing your affection. For example, nagging your significant other about calling you when he or she stays out late may be a way for you to express how you worry about this person's safety and well-being. In the context of parent/child relationships, Youniss and Smollar (1985) found that many children and adolescents view their parents' nagging as annoying and intrusive. Surprisingly, they also view it as a sign of caring, concern, and love. Rosenfeld (1985) interviewed a 17-year-old boy who complained about his mother's nagging but then added that it showed her concern for him, since, "You only nag someone you care about." In my own research, when I asked married participants to describe something about which they nag their spouse, their responses appeared to be motivated by love and a concern for their spouse's well-being (Soule 2001). For example, several of these individuals reported that they nagged their spouse about taking his or her medicine, going to the doctor, stopping smoking, or starting to exercise for health reasons.

In addition to showing affection, another function of nagging may be to avoid becoming aggressive toward a relational partner. As noted earlier, nagging is different from other instances of persuader persistence in that a persuader repeats himself or herself rather than escalating to a more aggressive influence strategy (such as angry and abusive statements, threats, or even physical violence). Though a persuader may not consciously choose to nag in order to avoid hurting a naggee, it might be a way to be a persistent persuader while avoiding conflict, destructive statements, or even violence. This reasoning may explain why men tend to nag other men rather than women. Indeed, men may choose to nag other men as a way to avoid conflict. Since men are thought to be more aggressive than women (e.g., Clarke-Stewart, Friedman, and Koch 1985; Maccoby and Jacklin 1980), a persistent male persuader who escalates to a more aggressive strategy to try to influence another male could cause a verbal conflict or even a physical fight. Moreover, since women have traditionally held less power than men in society, they may be likely to comply immediately with a male persuader. As a result, men may rarely have to resort to nagging with a female naggee.

Thus, nagging may serve a variety of functions in our interpersonal relationships. It may allow us not only to influence someone but also to show caring and to avoid acting aggressively. These functions indicate that nagging may play

an important role in helping to maintain harmony in a variety of relationships. However, it should be noted that interactions involving nagging are not always positive. Repeatedly nagging another person could cause him or her to feel irritation or annoyance. In extreme cases, a naggee could become irritated enough to respond to a nagger with violence (Gelles 1972). Though nagging may be an important part of most healthy relationships, in some cases it can cause problems.

CONCLUSION

I trust that this chapter has given you a greater understanding of nagging in your own interpersonal relationships. Though you might not have given much thought to nagging (besides to wish that a nagger would go away or that a naggee would just comply), you may now recognize what constitutes this behavior and how the actions of both the nagger and naggee can cause and continue a nagging interaction. Moreover, not only may nagging occur in a variety of our relationships, but it might also serve several important functions, such as showing affection and helping us to avoid acting aggressively. Therefore, as strange as this idea may have seemed to you at first, everything we do in our interpersonal relationships has meaning and serves a purpose, even nagging.

REFERENCES

Clarke-Stewart, A., Friedman, S., & Koch, J. (1985). *Child development: A topical approach.* New York, NY: Wiley.

deTurck, M. A. (1985). A transactional analysis of compliance-gaining behavior: Effects of noncompliance, relational contexts, and actors' gender. *Human Communication Research, 1,* 54–78.

deTurck, M. A. (1987). When communication fails: Physical aggression as a compliance-gaining strategy. *Communication Monographs, 54,* 106–112.

Gelles, R. J. (1972). *The violent home: A study of physical aggression between husbands and wives.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kozloff, M. A. (1988). *Productive interaction with students, children, and clients.* Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

Maccoby, E. E., & Jacklin, C. N. (1980). Sex differences in aggression: A rejoinder and reprise. *Child Development, 51,* 964–980.

Pruitt, D. G., Parker, J. C., & Mikolic, J. M. (1997). Escalation as a reaction to persistent annoyance. *International Journal of Conflict Management, 8,* 252–270.

Rosenfeld, A. A. (1985). Parents who nag. *Human Sexuality, 19,* 133–142.

Soule, K. P. (2001). Persistence in compliance-gaining interactions: The role of nagging behavior (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

Youniss, J., & Smollar, J. (1985). *Adolescent relations with mothers, fathers, and friends.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS

1. Define "nagging." in your own words and give a clear example. Ask five other people to define it as well, including an example. What are the similarities in the definitions? The differences?
2. Describe two different patterns of nagging you have witnessed in close friendships or romantic relationships. How do the targets of the nagging differ? (For example, a child, partner, employee). How do you interpret the goals of the naggers? What is the effect on their relationships with the naggees?
3. Are there some "nagging lessons" or conclusions you can draw from considering who nags you and who you nag? Design your own list of five recommendations to break a nagging pattern.
4. How might nagging appear in relationships in the digital age? Give examples of how nagging may occur online or through other communication media. How might it change the perception of nagging?

Kari P. Soule, "The What, When, Who, and Why of Nagging in Interpersonal Relationships." Copyright © 2011 by Oxford University Press, Inc. All rights reserved.