

Accentuating the Negative

By RICHARD CONNIFF, New York Times, Dec 29, 2006

One of the most daunting and widely repeated insights from recent social research holds, in essence, that your marriage is doomed if you and your spouse can't muster up five positive interactions for every negative one.

Five seems like a lot, I suggested to a friend, who promptly rattled off five nice things he had done for his wife before leaving the house that morning to go for a run. It was easy stuff once you put your mind to it, he said, like making the coffee and getting the newspaper.

"Gee, that's terrific," I replied. And I immediately started thinking of his marriage as "The Gottman Wars," after the University of Washington psychologist, John Gottman, who came up with the five-to-one ratio. I imagined my insufferable friend and his wife creeping around the house before dawn desperately racking up positives to cushion the big fat negative that was burning a hole in their hearts. Meanwhile, I was having trouble getting my wife to accept that a grunt can be a positive interaction.

As a journalist, I have always regarded a willingness to state the negatives as a mark of intellectual honesty. Or maybe it was something not quite that admirable. A column I once wrote for The New York Times Magazine dwelt a little too gleefully on the pleasures of audacious speech ("[The Case For Malediction](#)"). But now I had the sinking feeling that Gottman and my do-gooder friend were right.

I thought so because of another much less popular idea from recent social science, called "negativity bias." One reason we need to be so positive -- to groom, to sweet-talk, to flatter, to bring home flowers -- is that people discount the positives. They don't even notice them much of the time. It has to do with "the phenomenological paleness of comforts," according to Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman, University of Pennsylvania researchers who have written about negativity bias in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. People don't generally get pleasure from their central heating, for instance. But they notice when it doesn't work. Or as Arthur Schopenhauer, the 19th-century German philosopher, put it, "We feel pain, but not painlessness."

It is, in fact, our biological nature to accentuate the negative, to dwell on the one cutting remark rather than the three or four sweet nothings. We differentiate between negative and positive events in just a 10th of a second, and the negative ones grab our attention. For instance, when researchers show test subjects a paper with a grid of smiley faces on it and one angry face, the subjects instantly zero in on the angry face. Reverse the pattern, and it takes them a little longer to pick out the solitary smile. Likewise when a boss makes four positive comments in an employee review, and one quibble, the subordinate almost invariably fixates on the quibble.

This tendency might seem perverse. But neurologists say it's a survival mechanism. A heightened focus on what can go wrong helps us deal with danger. An angry face grabs our attention more urgently than a smile because it represents a potential threat.

Negativity bias got built into our minds during millions of years of evolution because early humans who were oblivious to danger often got a brief, bloody lesson in natural selection. As Rozin and Royzman delicately phrase it, "the threat of a predator is a terminal threat." Excessive blitheness tended to get cut short, and thus became less and less common in succeeding generations. Skittishness, or negativity bias, became a distinguishing characteristic of the survivors. And it continues to drive our behavior even now, when the biggest threat in our daily lives is likely to be a difficult boss or a disagreeable spouse.

An exaggerated emphasis on the positive – Gottman's five-to-one ratio -- is apparently the natural antidote at home. A long-term study of corporate management suggests that it's true in the workplace, too. Despite the ample lore about fierce executives driving up profits with their "mean business" scowls, the study found that ***the most productive teams managed 5.6 positive interactions for every negative*** [emphasis added]. Other research has demonstrated that even chimpanzees, despite their reputation for belligerence, actually spend about 15 to 20 percent of their time grooming one another and just 5 percent fighting -- a three- or four-to-one ratio.

So it starts to look like a basic primate need: To cultivate good relationships, you need to ease the innate animal skittishness of the people around you and provide them with a sense of safety, comfort and reciprocity. This is not perhaps such a startling revelation. And it is unlikely to produce an epidemic of Scrooge-like

seasonal epiphanies. But for me, there is something compelling about the idea that being nice is a biological imperative, and not just sentimental humbug.

Five good deeds before breakfast still seems like a bit much. But when I grunt at my wife these days, I am striving