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Source: *Family Relations*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Jul., 1990), pp. 266-273
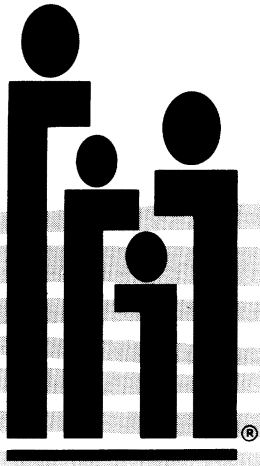Published by: National Council on Family Relations
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/584870
Accessed: 08/12/2013 23:52

Beyond I-Statements in Family Communication*

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The concept of "I-statements" was introduced to family science in 1970, and it is now used widely in family life education, family enrichment, and family therapy. This article introduces a new concept, "We-statements," that is similar but slightly different from I-statements. Basic assumptions made with these two concepts are discussed, and theorizing is done about the effects they have in family systems. Several guidelines for using these concepts also are suggested.

Thomas Gordon (1970) made an important contribution to family science when he introduced the concept of I-statements. Simple, effective, and helpful, it quickly became a central concept in the field. It is now used extensively in family life education (Klemer & Smith, 1975; Lamana & Reidmann, 1985), in a large number of marriage and family enrichment programs (Albert & Einstein, 1986; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1984; Popkin, 1983; Zener, 1981) and in family therapy (Guerney, 1977).

A number of developments in the field since 1970 (Beutler, Burr, Bahr, & Herrin, 1989; Miller, Wackman, Nunnally, & Miller, 1988) make it possible to extend Gordon's reasoning by adding an additional concept. The new concept is "We-statements," and it can improve the ability of families, family life educators, and family therapists to understand family processes and improve the quality of communication. It also is useful for scholars who are writing family texts and developing family life enrichment programs. Before the new idea is introduced it seems helpful to review what I-statements are and some of the advantages they have in family communication.

What Are I-Statements?

I-statements are declarative sentences that describe a thought, feeling, or other experience in a singular first person manner. Several examples are: "I'm upset." "I'm thrilled by . . ." "I'm angry when . . ." I-statements can be used to describe subjective reactions, ideas, aspirations, hopes, beliefs, and so forth. A main aspect of I-statements is that they locate the feelings or concerns inside the person who is making the statement. This communicates the feeling or reactions are "owned" by the person who is making them.

I-statements are an effective way to bring up a "problem" in interpersonal relationships. They are effective because they locate the problem inside the person making the statement. Also, they communicate that the individuals who bring up the problem recognize that their view of it is a subjective belief rather than an objective fact, and this leaves room for other perceptions or definitions.

I-statements are different from You-statements. You-statements are declarative sentences that try to locate a thought, feeling, problem, or other experience inside someone else rather than inside one's self. They are used when people say things like: "You make me mad when you . . ." "You're not being fair when . . ." If a parent is tired and does not feel like playing with a child, a You-statement could be: "You're being a pest." Some I-statements that could be used in this situa-

tion are: "I'm tired" or "I don't feel up to playing."

I-statements have a number of advantages over You-statements when a family member is trying to bring up a "problem." According to Gordon (1970), I-statements are less apt to provoke resistance and rebellion and they are less threatening. They help children grow and learn to assume responsibility for their own behavior, and they tend to influence children to send similar messages. They also promote honesty, intimacy, and openness in relationships.

Skillful I-statements also are specific rather than general and focus attention on problems rather than personalities. Another advantage of thinking with I-statements and You-statements is that they are simple concepts that can be understood by children, lay groups, and people with little education or sophistication.

When the concept of I-messages was first introduced, it was assumed that they were relatively simple statements, and their only purpose was to identify a "problem." However, after the concept had been used for a few years, it was gradually realized that they could have other uses. For example, in Gordon's 1976 book he describes the "Appreciative I-Message" that is designed to express positive feelings and the "Preventive I-Message" that is designed to inform others ahead of time about things that are desired or needed.

Another development that gradually emerged was that I-statements can have several parts. For example, Gordon (1976) stated that a "complete I-message contains: (1) a description of the unacceptable behavior, (2) the feeling experienced by the parent, and (3) the tangible, concrete effect on the parent" (p. 127). This idea led some practitioners to advocate that a good I-message includes *feeling, when,* and *because* parts. "I *feel* angry *when* the barbecue is left on *because* it wastes gas." This three-part approach to I-statements is now taught explicitly in many structured family facilitation programs (Zener, 1981).

What Are We-Statements?

We-statements are declarative sentences that try to locate tendencies, patterns, problems, thoughts, feelings, or other experiences in a relationship or a group rather than in a person. An I-statement about a problem indicates that an *individual* has a problem. A We-statement indicates that someone thinks a *group* or a *relation-*

ship has a problem. For example, a parent who is trying to help solve a family struggle about which TV program to watch may observe that the children are being too inconsiderate of each other. If the parent were to use a We-statement to try to identify the new problem, she/he could say something like: "We have a problem that is bigger than just what to watch on the TV. It's that we're not being considerate of each other." The other two possibilities would be to make an I-statement or a You-statement. They would be something like:

> An I-statement: "I have a problem that is bigger than just what to watch on the TV. I'm bothered when I see so little consideration of others."
> A You-statement: "You have a problem that is bigger than just what to watch on the TV. It's that you're not being considerate of each other."

Several examples of the three different ways to define problems in families help illustrate the difference between I, You, and We-statements. If members of a family were having difficulty with the amount of affection in their relationship, they could say:

> I-statement: "I'm not getting enough affection."
> You-statement: "You're not giving enough affection."
> We-statement: "We don't have enough affection."

If members of a family felt uncomfortable with the rigidity of the family routines, traditions, or rituals, they could say:

> I-statement: "I think it is too rigid."
> You-statement: "You are too rigid."
> We-statement: "We have too much rigidity."

Or, to emphasize the solution aspect rather than the problem aspect:

> I-statement: "I want more flexibility."
> You-statement: "You ought to have more flexibility."
> We-statement: "We ought to have more flexibility."

Differences in I, You, and We-Statements

The concept of We-statements in family communication is so new that we are still in the beginning stages of

understanding how it is different from other ways of communicating. Also, the effects that We-statements have in family systems are just beginning to be understood. It is possible, however, to begin theorizing about some of the differences between I, You, and We-statements and some of the different effects these three ways of communicating have in the family realm.

In parent-child relationships, You-statements seem to be the least effective because they tend to create distance between the parent and child, place all of the blame on others, and usually create defensiveness and resistance. They also tend to create or maintain an I-you relationship with the parent as an outsider who is a disciplinarian. These effects usually mean You-statements tend to start or expand conflicts, controversies, and fighting rather than move a family toward peaceful, loving, and harmonious management processes and solutions to problems.

Most of the time I-statements are more effective and helpful than You-statements. They locate the problems inside the person who is trying to declare there is a problem. They subtly communicate a warmer and more accepting type of concern for the individuals who are perceived as the creators of the problem, and they create less defensiveness and resistance. These effects usually mean I-statements tend to move a family or group toward healthy problem-solving processes.

We-statements usually have different effects than I-statements and You-statements. One difference is in where the problems exist after the statement is made. When people make I-statements they start out by asserting they "own" a problem. Then, as they add the other two parts of a "complete" I-statement they identify the source of the problem and why it creates a problem. In most of the examples of I-statements in the family science literature, the source of the problem is the behavior of the other person in a relationship. What the I-statement does in these situations is to create a "problem" for the other person because the other person is then aware something they are doing is creating a problem for the person making the I-statement. The net effect is both individuals then have a "problem," but the two problems are defined as the concerns of the two separate individuals rather than as one problem they share. Even though the

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two problems deal at least somewhat with the relationship between the two people, the definition of the problems is that they are the concern of the two people individually and separately. It is a situation of "I have my problem and you have yours. I ought to take care of mine, and you ought to take care of yours." This emphasizes the individualistic aspects and minimizes the relationship aspects of the situation. We-statements, on the other hand, define the problem as one rather than two problems, and it is something that is a mutual concern. This minimizes the individualistic aspects and emphasizes the mutuality, togetherness, and relationship aspects.

Several of the other differences between I-messages and We-messages have to do with what Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) call the *content* and the *relationship* messages sent in all communication. The content part of a message is the information that is denoted. For example, when someone says "I am angry" the content message is they have a certain amount of anger. All messages also have a large number of nonverbal messages about the nature of the relationship between the people who are communicating. For example, the relationship messages usually are different when a police officer says "stop" and when a spouse says "stop." When the officer says "stop," the relationship messages communicate the officer is in charge, can give commands, and expect orders to be obeyed. When a spouse says "stop," the relationship messages usually communicate more equality, closeness, and a lack of a commanding approach to each other.

One of the differences in the *relationship* messages sent with I-statements and We-statements is in the amount of emotional or relationship "distance" (Kantor & Lehr, 1975) created. I-messages emphasize the individuality, autonomy, separateness, and independence of the people involved. They assume problems are "owned" and solved by individuals in a manner that has considerable independence. This tends to create a certain degree of emotional or interpersonal "arms length" or distance in the relationship. In a figurative sense, it is as though the "we" in the relationship is spelled with two i's rather than a "w" and "e." We-statements, on the other hand, seem to communicate slightly different relationship messages. They communicate that the two people are

jointly involved in the situation; and this emphasizes the mutuality, connectedness, and interinvolved aspects of the relationship. This tends to decrease emotional distance, or maintain it at a lower level.

Another aspect of We-statements is they usually create less defensiveness and resistance than compound I-messages. There are several reasons this probably happens. Since compound I-statements tend to emphasize the I-you aspects of a relationship at the same time a problem is being raised, it tends to create a little more of a competitive or adversarial situation, and this tends to create some defensiveness. We-statements, on the other hand, define the situation as one where the perceiver and the other person are both involved in the problem situation, and this minimizes the competitiveness or adversarial aspects of the relationship. It tends to foster the cooperative, mutually facilitating aspects of the relationship.

Another difference between I-statements and W-statements has to do with what is usually communicated nonverbally about the responsibility for doing something about the problem. Compound I-statements usually communicate that the person who is making an I-statement expects the other person to adapt or change what they are doing to eliminate the "problem" the person making the I-statement has. In Gordon's (1976) thinking, this is the main purpose for most I-messages. "Remember, the whole purpose of sending I-messages is to influence children to change whatever they are doing at the time" (p. 128). Thus, when complete I-statements are made they tend to place the responsibility on the other person to do something about the problem. The implied message in We-statements is quite different. It puts the responsibility for doing something about the problem in the group, but does not imply any one person has more responsibility than another.

Another difference between I-statements and We-statements is in the amount of "power" the statement maker assumes. Gordon (1976) argues "an I-message is a nonpower method for getting what you need" (p. 139). Gordon is correct if I-statements are compared to You-statements, and he is correct when comparing I-statements to using rewards and punishments. Also, I-statements are relatively low-power methods when they are used in nonfamily realms such as in work, educa-

tional, and military settings. However, in the family realm I-statements actually have a great deal of power. As Beutler et al. (1989) have pointed out, the family realm is unique in the way emotion, privacy, experiential processes, gender, generations, decision making, development, and altruism are experienced; and these differences make I-statements relatively powerful statements when they are used in the family realm.

Processes and relationships in most nonfamily settings have relatively neutral affect, and they are relatively temporary. Also, they deal more with tangible and economic rather than interpersonal ends (Foa, 1971). Relationships in most nonfamily settings tend to be relatively superficial, voluntary, role-specific, and exchange oriented rather than grant oriented (Boulding, 1973), and they are governed by "public-realm" rules and ethics (Beutler et al., 1989). In these situations, the *relationship* messages sent with I-statements do not ask for much power. However, in the intimate parts of the family realm, many of the processes are very different. Family members experience intense affect for each other, and there is an emotional reciprocity that is very complex and enduring (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Relationships are more permanent, bonded, and complicated; and they involve total persons and revolve around developmental and nurturing processes. In these family realm conditions, compound I-statements have a great deal of power. When a parent says to a child: "When you ____, I feel ____, because ____," this is a very powerful message. When one spouse says to the other "I feel ____ when you ____ because ____," this is not a nonpower method of trying to change behavior. *These statements have a great deal of power.* We-statements, on the other hand, tend to have a different set of relationship messages about power. They tend to send more equalitarian messages. They communicate "We have a problem." "We're in this together." "I'm bringing up a problem, but it is something *we* need to deal with rather than a situation where I have already figured out what the problems and solutions are."

These differences have a number of implications for how people can and should use I, You, and We-statements. They also have implications for how people can abuse them, *but before* these implications are discussed some attention should be given to the assumptions behind these concepts.

Differences in the Assumptions That Underlie the Two Concepts

There are many reasons why it is helpful for family theorists, researchers, and practitioners to be aware of the assumptions they make when they are thinking with their theories, developing intervention strategies, and intervening. It helps them to be able to relate to colleagues and families that have different assumptions and value systems than they have, to be consistent, and to make judgments about which ideas and strategies to use in different situations. When they do not understand their assumptions, they cannot rise above the level of technicians who mindlessly use gimmicks and techniques.

When Gordon (1976) developed the idea of using I-statements to improve family communication, there were a number of assumptions that led to his ideas. Later, when the concept of We-statements was developed, there were a number of different assumptions that led to this idea. Those who use these concepts should be aware of the similarities and differences in these assumptions because they have important implications for when and how to use them. They help in understanding when I-statements are more effective than We-statements and when We-statements are more effective than I-statements. Also, they help in knowing when to use and not use these concepts to help families attain goals such as communication, love, intimacy, and healthy development.

Assumptions Behind I-Statements

To understand the assumptions behind I-statements, the assumptions that seemed to be guiding the thinking of Thomas Gordon and the colleagues he was working with in the 1960s need to be identified. Gordon was trained as a psychologist, and the perspective and assumptions of contemporary psychology seem to be central assumptions in his thinking. Psychology is the discipline that uses mental phenomena to explain individuals' behavior. This perspective led Gordon to focus on the nature of *individuals* and what it is about the way *individuals* behave, think, feel, and aspire that can help them have productive and effective lives. Had Gordon been a cultural anthropologist, he probably would have had a different perspective, and he would have focused on different

phenomena. He probably would have focused on the nature of cultures and cultural change in his attempts to understand and help people. Had he been a physician, he probably would have focused on physiological, anatomical, and chemical sources of physical health and illness. Being trained as a psychologist, Gordon learned to focus his attention on the ways the psyche influences what people do, how they behave, and what helps them.

There are several different schools of thought in modern psychology, and Gordon seems to have been influenced by the humanistic and behavioral schools. He appears to have adopted the humanistic theories and counseling methods of scholars such as Carl Rogers (1951) as his main way of viewing the world. This led him to develop a number of assumptions about the nature of people, families, and societies. One of the assumptions that seems to be a central idea in his thinking is that people have a great deal of goodness in them, and this leads to innate and pervasive desires to strive for healthy, cooperative, and humane ways of living and relating. Also, his writings indicate that he assumes that the best way to relate to others and help them grow is to show unconditional positive regard by being respectful, considerate, understanding, trusting, and hopeful.

There are also indications in Gordon's writings (1983) that he was influenced by behaviorism in the sense that he concluded that it is an unwise, inhumane, and harmful type of psychology. In all of his writings he is opposed to the philosophical ideas that led to behavioristic thinking. One of the behavioristic ideas he seems to oppose is the assumption that the way people learn how to avoid bad ways of behaving and seek good ways is through the manipulation of the reinforcing parts of their environment.

Given these assumptions, it is not surprising that the ideas that Gordon developed suggest that problems are and ought to be owned by individuals. Also, it is not surprising that he advocated I-statements as a way of relating to others. It is an accepting, facilitating, and warm but relatively individualistic way of relating. I-statements are effective ways of creating a helping relationship with others when the goals are to emphasize the individualistic, autonomous, trusting, and independent aspects of how to relate,

identify problems, and cope. It also is not surprising that he did not emphasize how different settings, such as family systems, influence what individuals do because his main emphasis was on the individualistic aspects.

Assumptions Behind We-Statements

The assumptions that led to the idea of We-statements are quite different. They began with a group of intellectual rebels in the 1940s and 1950s who moved away from traditional ways of thinking in the older social sciences. Some of the scholars who pioneered these developments were Nathan Ackerman, Evelyn Duvall, Gregory Bateson, Virginia Satir, Murray Bowen, Elizabeth Force, and Ernest Osborne. All of these scholars had been trained in disciplines that emphasized the importance of the individual, but they pioneered the search for *familogical* explanations rather than relying primarily on individualistic, economic, or social explanations. They developed ideas about how the unique ways emotional, experiential, gender, and communication processes in the family realm help us understand how people live, react, behave, feel, and cope.

The construction of familogical explanations developed gradually during the 1960s and 1970s, and in the last decade a growing number of scholars have realized that this point of view has emerged into a new basic discipline (Burr & Leigh, 1982; Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Keeney, 1979). There is still some ambiguity about what to call the new discipline. Some people prefer to focus on one branch of it and call it family therapy, and others prefer to call it family science. The author's preference is to call it familogy (Burr, Day, & Bahr, 1989) and view it as one of several basic disciplines that are integrated in the interdisciplinary field of family science. Whatever it is eventually called, it is a new *perspective* that has different assumptions than the psychological perspective Gordon used.

Beutler et al. (1989) and Burr, Herrin, Day, and Leigh (1988) helped clarify what the familogical perspective is. It is a way of thinking that assumes that *family processes are unique and familial phenomena that have much more influence on human lives than most people realize.* Therefore, this perspective focuses on ways familial factors influence individuals, families, and society. Most people in contem-

porary society agree with the statement that the family is important, but for most people this is merely a glib agreement with a cliché rather than a fundamental belief that influences how they think. When most people in our society encounter problems such as substance abuse, mental illness, crime, violence, deviance, irresponsibility, closeness avoidance, delinquency, problems with the educational system, they appeal to psychological, political, or economic factors to try to understand why the unfortunate conditions exist. The familial factors are thought about so little that they are virtually ignored. Also, when most people try to do something about these problems, they turn to government programs, medical care, or psychotherapy as the methods and places to intervene. The idea of thinking about ways familial factors may be helpful in coping with these problems is almost ignored—except, of course, trying to think of ways governmental programs can help families through economic and bureaucratic changes.

A familogical perspective assumes that the *family realm* is a complex area where a unique set of experiential processes occur, relationships are permanent, there is highly charged affect or emotion, development is continuous, gender is important, ecosystemic factors are always relevant in understanding what is going on, and generational processes make an important difference. According to this perspective, it is helpful to think about these familial processes if we want to understand humans. Those who use this perspective believe that many of these familial processes are not just psychological, sociological, biological, genetic, or economic factors. There are familial phenomena that are just as fundamental and important as these. For example, there are affective (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), generational (Nagy & Sparks, 1973), experiential (Rich, 1976), spatial and temporal (Kantor & Lehr, 1975), and developmental (Falicov, 1988) factors that are familial phenomena that not included in the intellectual nets of the older disciplines, and seeking to understand the role of these familial phenomena gives new insights about the origins of and solutions for many of the most serious human problems.

The familogical perspective that has emerged in the last four decades emphasizes intimacy, connectedness, generational connections, privacy, total persons, nurturing, affect,

development and so forth (Beutler et al., 1989). With this emphasis on the connectedness of humans in a unique and natural system that is more than just a social or psychological system, it is understandable that familogists who have tried to use the concept of I-statements have a mixture of appreciation and discomfort. From a familogical point of view, the fact that I-statements create less defensiveness than You-statements makes them attractive. Also, the emphasis on the affective part of processes is attractive. However, the emphasis on such things as the individual being the owner of problems, the autonomy, the separateness, and the independence of the individual is relatively inconsistent with the connectedness, involvement, systemic, whole-person, nurturing, developing, and intimacy processes that are fundamental parts of the family realm. These differences led a number of familogists to have a disconcerting type of ambivalence as they used the concept of I-statements. As one of them said,

I taught students and wrote about it. On the one hand I appreciated the concept because it is a helpful tool. Yet, in some family situations I had a vaguely felt and poorly understood feeling that it sometimes had an "unnatural ring" to it. In the situations where it fit, it was helpful, but when it didn't fit it was like trying to put a square peg in a round hole.

The debates in the 1980s about the nature of the familogical perspectives (Bardis, 1983; Beutler et al., 1989; Sprey, 1983) helped clarify the source of these frustrations because they helped clarify what it means to think with a familogical perspective. This led to the realization that I-statements are inconsistent with some family realm situations, and this led to thinking about which aspects of I-statements are helpful and which aspects are incongruent with some family processes. Gradually it was realized that it is the subtle but pervasive emphasis on the *individuality* that seemed to be the main limiting aspect. This then led to the insight that there are some family situations where I-statements are not the best way to communicate. This led to a further analysis of communication processes in the family realm, and eventually to the development of the concept of We-statements as a way of communicating that is, *in some situations*, more consistent with the connectedness, enduring intimacy, and emotionality of the family realm.

Suggestions for Using I-Statements and We Statements

Using Simple I-Statements

Simple I-statements merely identify the existence and ownership of a problem, feeling, or idea. They do not identify the source of the perceptions or the reasons the source creates the problem, feeling, or idea. Some examples of simple I-statements are: "I'm feeling discouraged." "I am angry." "I'm elated." "I have a problem and it is important to me."

Simple I-statements are often the least threatening of all of the types of statements discussed in this article. This is because they only involve the person making the statement. We-statements about problems also communicate that someone else is "involved" in the problem, and this additional idea often has an element of threat in it. Therefore, I-statements are probably the best type of message to send when a person is in a situation where they want to identify that there is a problem and it is likely that identifying the problem will create defensiveness in others. In these situations, the simple I-statements are the least threatening when they are stated in a tentative, unassertive, and hypothetical manner.

One situation where simple I-statements are helpful is when someone wants to identify the personal perception of a problem, and they want to gradually turn their personal problem into a couple or family problem. They can make an I-statement as a prelude to making a We-statement. The simple I-statement can be made to identify the person's feelings, and they can then observe the feedback they get from others before trying to turn their problem into a family problem. For example, they can observe feedback about how receptive the others are to recognizing and accepting the idea that the individual has a problem. If the others are receptive, the person who has made the I-statement can then make a We-statement if they want to help the group define the problem as a group problem rather than as one that is just existing in the person who brought up the problem. If the simple I-statement generates defensiveness, the person can then determine whether it would be better to wait, try another approach, or pursue the issues even though there is defensiveness.

Another situation where simple I-statements are enabling is where

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there are differences of opinion and it seems helpful to identify the different ideas, feelings, or perceptions. A simple I-statement is a person's subjective perception of something that is inside his/herself, and most people agree that a person is usually in the best position to know what is going on inside themselves. In these situations even when someone else thinks they know what a person is "really" feeling or thinking, they are willing to accept a simple I-statement as the person's "perception" of their feelings or ideas.

Using Compound I-Statements

Compound I-statements have three parts: I *feel* ___ when ___ because ___. For example, I *feel* angry *when* my ideas are ignored *because* it shows I'm not respected as a person. There are some situations where compound I-statements are the most effective. For example, after a couple or family has agreed there is a problem, but while they are still trying to understand and define the problem, compound I-statements can be helpful. They minimize defensiveness because the "I" aspect of them reveals the ideas are merely perceptions. Also, they deal with specific behaviors and possible reasons the behaviors are undesirable, and this helps identify ideas about sources of problems, reasons why the problem is created, and solutions.

Another situation where compound I-statements are helpful is when there is a small amount of time and parents are trying to discipline children. A parent packs a great deal of information into a short space of time when they use compound I-statements. Also, when the parent states the reasons for the problem, this provides considerable legitimation of the implied request for a change in behavior.

Compound I-statements also are helpful in situations where simple changes in behavior will help and there isn't a need for a complicated problem-solving discussion. In the dynamic, complicated, and multifaceted process of family living, there are many situations where minor problems can be handled with one person making a request that someone else change how they are behaving. Many of these situations can be handled quickly and comfortably with compound I-statements. And, this can be done by anyone in the family system. Small children can make requests of their parents, and after they learn how to use compound I-statements they can be very effective in making requests of older siblings and parents.

Using We-Statements

There are some situations where We-statements are more effective than I-statements. For example, We-statements are better when someone wants to enhance the *togetherness* aspect of a family system. Familogists such as Hess and Handel (1959), Kantor and Lehr (1975), and Bowen (1976; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) have pointed out that families are continually managing the togetherness versus individuality dimension of their family system. In some stages of the family life cycle many families have so many processes that push toward individuality that it is helpful to promote the togetherness. This often happens, for example, when there are teenage and young adult children in a home. The children in these stages are moving toward individuation, but it is occasionally desirable to promote the togetherness aspect of the system. In these situations, the family may realize some of their goals more effectively by using We-statements rather than I-statements. The reason for this is that We-statements tend to define problems in a way that promotes togetherness in dealing with the problems rather than autonomous, adversarial, or independence-producing relationships.

Another situation where We-statements are better than I-statements is when the sender does not want to send some of the subtle, nonverbalized, implicit messages that are sent with compound I-statements. Some of these nonverbal messages are what Watzlawick et al. (1967) call relationship messages, and others deal with strategies for dealing with the situation. An analysis of many of the compound I-statements that are given as examples in the literature reveals that they usually have the following implicit messages.

• We have the kind of relationship where it is OK for me to identify my problems and the reasons for them.
• I have observed the present situation, timing, surroundings, and emotional readiness, and from the feedback I have I've decided that you're ready to communicate about a problem I have, the behavior that is contributing to my problem, and why I think the behavior is creating the problem.
• I am assuming that the source of my problem is your behavior, and there is a linear type of causation in this situation. What this means is that it is your behavior that is causing me a problem, and my behavior is not the problem. Also, we are not involved in a reciprocal cycle, feedback loop, or circular process in which what we are both doing is contributing to the problem.
• I am assuming that the solution to my problem will be for you to change your behavior.
• After I make my I-statement, the next thing that should occur is that you should realize the accuracy of my analysis of the situation and change your behavior.
• The problem and solution are fairly clear-cut, so I don't perceive a need to begin a complex problem-solving process. What I'm doing is making a fairly concluding type of comment, and I don't perceive a need to talk further about the problem or ways to solve it.

These messages communicate a great deal of information, and there are some situations where people may not want to send some of these messages. We-statements avoid all of the above nonverbalized messages because their purpose is to identify the existence of a problem; to try to locate the problem in the relationship, group, or the system; and to try to initiate a problem-solving process in the system. They do not try to identify the source of the problem or imply solutions.

Thus, an important difference between We-statements and compound I-statements is that the person who makes I-statements takes a great deal of initiative in moving the group well into the problem-solving process. They do this by identifying their perception of the source of the problem and their perception of the solution. We-statements are more effective when a person wants to identify the existence of a problem but wait until there is a group consensus about whether it is a good time to begin dealing with the problem.

Another issue in determining when to use I-statements and when to use We-statements is related to the amount of "power" a person wants to have in the relationship. It was pointed out earlier that compound I-statements put a person in a relatively powerful position when they are used in the family realm. There are some situations where this is desirable. For example, when parents are helping young children learn attitudes, behaviors, or values that are important, the parent has a great deal of power, and compound I-statements are consistent with this power. There are, however, many situations in the family realm where people want to have more equalitarian

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relationships, and in these situations it seems helpful to use We-statements. For example, as children approach adulthood, it is important for their development to gradually shift power to them until they eventually have complete control over their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, parents of teenage children may want to gradually increase their use of We-statements and decrease their use of compound I-statements. Also, couples who want equalitarian relationships in marriage would want to use We-statements rather than I-statements.

Another idea that can help us determine when to choose We-statements and when to choose I-statements is that they probably have different effects on such things as the intimacy, individuality, independence, and sense of cooperation in relationships. We-statements tend to increase the intimacy, togetherness, and sense of cooperation in relationships and I-statements tend to increase the autonomy, independence, and individuality. I-statements tend to create less intimacy because the two individuals are relating in a more separate, autonomous manner. The individual owning the problem owns it as an individual, and that person then gives the other person a problem by making the compound I-statement. The second person is then dealing with her/his problem as an "individual" more than is the case when the problem is defined as something that exists in the "we-ness."

The difference in the level of cooperation that is established with the two kinds of statements is also a very subtle process. We-statements tend to create and emphasize the "we're in this together" aspects of the situation, but I-statements tend to create and emphasize the "I and you" aspects. I have my problem, and you have your behavior, and I have a problem that I'd like dealt with. Thus, an I-statement approach is more effective in helping children learn to stand on their own feet, be independent, be responsible for their behavior, and function autonomously; and these also are desirable goals. A We-statement approach is more effective in creating a cooperative way of relating, increasing a sense of togetherness, promoting mutuality, increasing bonds, and increasing cohesion.

Another situation where it is helpful to use We-statements is when a person wants to turn a problem they "own" as an individual into a problem that is "owned" by a relationship. I-statements keep the ownership with the individual, but We-statements try to transfer the ownership to the group. One person continues to "own" the problem when they are in the process of trying to bring it up so it is known by all of the family members involved. However, as soon as the individual owner has brought the problem to the attention of the others and they understand that the person has a problem that involves the others, it is then a group problem. In Gordon's writings, he communicates that I-statements are designed to unilaterally modify the other person's behavior, and if they are not successful then it is appropriate to "move into" a problem-solving situation. We-statements by-pass the unilateral attempts to change the other person's behavior.

Guerney (1977) has pointed out that tentativeness and hypothetical statements are sometimes helpful in intimate relationships when there is a "problem" situation. Using tentativeness has implicit messages such as: "I'm not sure about this, but . . . ," "This is only one view of the situation, but . . . ," and "I may not be seeing the whole picture here," and these messages can be sent nonverbally without taking more time or energy. Tentativeness is an orientation toward others that is sometimes helpful in identifying problems. I-statements and We-statements can both be stated so they are tentative and hypothetical, but We-statements are more tentative than compound I-statements for several reasons. They make assertions about fewer things, and this leaves more things undefined and open-ended.

There are some situations where We-statements are inappropriate. For example, We-statements are incongruent when a relationship is relatively superficial and temporary. An example of this is the nurse-patient relationship when someone is in a hospital. Comedians have capitalized on these incongruities by doing many sketches of nurses making incongruent comments such as: "And how are *we* doing today?" "*We're* not feeling as well today are *we*?" And, "It looks like *we* need a bedpan." Another situation where We-statements would be inappropriate would be when a person tries to avoid their own responsibility or accountability by trying to redefine a situation as being a group problem when it is an individual's problem.

There also are some situations where We-statements can be used in destructive and disabling ways. Some of these situations are that family members could use We-statements to try to coerce agreement or consensus. Also, they could use them to try to include some people in a problem situation when they do not want to be included, and they could be used to try to get inappropriate control, to divert attention, and to conceal intentions and feelings.

For example, if a parent were to say something like "We don't believe that in our family," this type of comment usually would be an attempt to stifle the expression of differences in opinion, and this would have several undesirable effects in family interaction. It would decrease the openness of the communication, indicate to those who wanted to disagree that their ideas are less important, and it would tend to keep the differences covert. One of the reviewers of this article recalled a similar situation where We-statements were destructive rather than *constructive*.

> I can think of a former boss who used a lot of We-messages, such as "We're a very close department; we get along very well here." These were attempted to foreclose discussion about the kind of group we really were.

These unhealthy uses of We-statements occur when individuals are using a "we-orientation" to manipulate others against their will, covertly control the family, or speak for other family members when someone doesn't have permission to speak for them. Part of the problem in these situations is that the speaker is trying to speak *for* the family rather than *about* the family.

A way of communicating that avoids these problems is to combine simple I-statements and We-statements. For example, if the above parental comment were modified slightly the parent could say something like: "I don't think we believe that in our family." This would introduce a subjective quality that allows others to have different beliefs while still focuses the conversation primarily on the family belief. Also, using the example cited earlier about consideration while viewing television, a parent could say something like: "I think we have a problem that is bigger than just what to watch on TV. It seems to me that we're not being as considerate of each other as we *should* be." This indicates the person is communicating a subjective belief or impression delivered from a particular

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vantage point in the family and also attempts to locate the problem in the group rather than in a person. Thus, when simple I-statements are combined with We-statements it adds tentativeness and subjectivity and minimizes the likelihood that family members will use We-statements in disabling, exploitive, or unhealthy ways. It may be that as further research and use increases understanding of these communication processes, we will learn that coupling We-statements with I-statements is a more enabling and helpful way to communicate than previously thought.

A final aspect of We-statements is that when they are effectively used they require more sophisticated interpersonal skills than I-statements. To be effective, a person who tries to make We-statements has to be able to think about a group characteristic rather than just individual characteristics, and that type of cognition demands an ability to think abstractly, empathize with others, and understand the level of intimacy, independence, interdependence, and cooperation that exists in a group. These are demanding abilities that require considerable maturity and complicated mental processes. One of the implications of this is that some people in families will always be more proficient than others, and, as with so many things in families, considerable patience and understanding is needed as people struggle with learning these skills.

Summary

The concept of I-statements has become a widely used and effective idea in family science. This article attempts to add to this conceptualization by discussing a concept that is similar to, but slightly different from, I-statements. An I-statement indicates that an *individual* has a problem. A We-statement indicates that someone thinks that a problem exists in a *group* or a *relationship*. Thus, We-statements are declarative statements that try to place problems in relationships rather than individuals. The concept of "We-statements" adds to rather than replaces I-statements. This article also attempts to describe the psychological assumptions that led to the development of I-statements and the familogical assumptions that led to the development of We-statements. The assumptions then serve as a basis for describing the relative advantages and disadvantages of each and developing several guidelines for their use.

The addition of We-statements to the concepts that are used in family science is useful for family therapists, family life educators, and leaders in marriage and family enrichment programs. It broadens the aspects of communication they will be sensitive to and gives them a tool that can be understood by people with little training and easily incorporated into daily family life. The concept also has implications for scholars who are writing family texts and developing intervention programs because it allows them to deal with a wider range of family communication processes.

A few scholars who examined the manuscript for this article have asked whether We-statements are "better than" I-statements. The answer is that I-statements are better in some situations and We-statements are better in some situations. They have different effects in family systems, and having both concepts improves our conceptual frameworks, understanding, and ability to help families attain their goals. It is possible that coupling I-statements with We-statements may be most effective strategy most of the time.

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