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Professor awarded for research on relationships

By **Liz Lent**, contributing writer

When it comes to love, it seems like nearly everyone gets confused. Oakland University Professor of Sociology Terri Orbuch, also known to WNIC radio listeners as "**the Love Doctor**," has spent her career trying to unravel the mysteries of successful relationships. Now she is being recognized for her pioneering work with the prestigious 2004 Article Award from the International Association of Relationship Research (IARR). Last month, she received the award, given only once every two years, at the IARR conference at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wis.

This recognition marks a new plateau in Orbuch's ongoing rise in the world of sociological study.

"She's really regarded as an extraordinary talent in her field," said David Maines, head of Oakland's department of sociology and anthropology. When Orbuch was recently appointed a full professor of sociology, Maines says, "She was an absolute shoo-in. She didn't get one negative vote."

For Oakland, Orbuch's research has helped focus the spotlight on the university as a place for serious, wide-reaching research.

"She brings a specialization to this department and a huge research project that only a handful of people are doing nationwide," Maines said. "It's so darn hard to do and it requires so much tenacity. She's an extremely rare kind of scholar and it's really paying off now. She absolutely brings new attention to the university and is a model of what big-time university research looks like."

Orbuch's study, "Who Will Divorce Over 14 Years of Marriage: the Effects of Love, Affirmation and Commitment," began in 1986 with 373 couples who had applied for Wayne County marriage licenses. The couples are questioned every two years on a wide range of factors involved in a marriage. The study is one of only three in the nation that has followed couples for an extended period of time, and the only one of its kind to examine differences in African-American and Caucasian relationships.

"I've always been interested in relationships and what breaks them apart," Orbuch said. "Relationships are so important to well-being. People in unhappy relationships are more likely to be depressed, more likely to have health problems. If those relationships are so vital to health and well-being, then what keeps them together and what keeps them apart?"

One of the keys to maintaining a good relationship, Orbuch contends, is to recognize that men and women do not see things the same way. "We know that women and men ask different questions, and they evaluate the health and well-being of the relationships differently." Most men, for example, consider themselves content if they feel appreciated. For women, however, a good relationship means one with a low-level of conflict.

"Women hold on to conflict longer," Orbuch said. "It's important for husbands to realize that's maybe why their wives haven't gotten over particular problems."

The study asked husbands to describe their last marital conflict. Men had a difficult time recalling arguments. Women, however, could remember the subject of the fight as well as details such as time and place where the argument occurred.

"Our study has confirmed that it's extremely important to constructively manage conflict," Orbuch said.

Getting the word out on keeping couples happy and together has become a mission for Orbuch. For the past year and a half, she has been sharing her relationship tips with metro Detroit on WNIC radio's morning show and recently began her Love Doctor column in the Observer and Eccentric newspapers, providing advice to men and women trying

to cope with relationship turmoil.

“Academic research is very important, but for those of us who are researching things that are at the heart of people's lives, it's important that those findings be disseminated to a wider audience,” Orbuch said. “There are so many important things that can help people understand each other better.”

Orbuch will reach out even more in the near future with a new book based on her findings. And she will continue her research, following these couples she has come to know so well.

“I hope this study continues for a long time,” she said. “And I hope it will help everyone in marriages make those relationships happy and successful.”

SUMMARY

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