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Contextualizing the Study of Marital Transformation: Points of Convergence

We are heartened that our effort to stimulate a broadly based discussion of future marital research has attracted such a distinguished response. Each of those writing a commentary joins us in welcoming an expanded focus for our field. The level of discourse in the commentaries indicates that the marital area is ready for a new level of integration that weaves together many disparate threads of inquiry into a brilliant, new tapestry. It is also clear that there is a willingness to engage one another across many of the usual divides in our field. We thank each of the participants for their openness to our proposals and their constructive contributions to this emerging discussion. Despite clear differences in theoretical commitments and conceptual starting points, there is striking convergence on the desirability of moving beyond a unidimensional focus on salient, negative aspects of marital interaction as we attempt to better understand the determinants of strong, healthy marital relationships and the way they benefit husbands and wives. Below, we highlight points of convergence

and difference between our position and those offered in the comments. Even when there are points of potential disagreement, there is much in the responses to stimulate our thinking and to suggest fruitful future directions for the field.

One striking point of convergence is that social context is likely to influence transformative processes. The comments extend our analysis in three important ways. First, the comments (especially Amato, 2007; Hill, 2007; Karney, 2007) suggest specific contextual domains, such as social disadvantage, race, and gender that may influence or constrain the transformative processes we highlight, and that connect our analysis outward to social structure. Second, the comments (especially Karney; Howe, 2007) highlight processes, such as situational or chronic priming effects, that may account for contextual effects on transformative processes, and that connect our analysis inward to intraindividual mechanisms. Third, the comments (especially Amato, 2007; Hill) highlight historical features, such as the growth of individualism, to explain why transformative processes are particularly important now. Together, the comments provide clues for a cross-culturally and cross-temporally relevant theory of successful marital relationships, a goal well beyond the one we set for ourselves but one we wholeheartedly endorse.

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SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE, RACE, AND GENDER

Building on the existing literature and embedding a discussion of transformative processes in the

context of social inequality and race is likely to have important conceptual ramifications, and is a welcomed and crucial challenge to the field. One important opportunity to respond to this challenge is offered by examples of resilience within the African American community. In finding ways to survive racism and nonsupportive governmental policy, married couples in the African American community may have developed strategies to sustain marriage that are, of necessity, stronger than those utilized by their counterparts in White America. In particular, marriage is held in very high regard in the African American community, and this community is eager for culturally sensitive approaches for strengthening marriage (Karney, Garven, & Thomas, 2003). Recognition of the value placed on marriage in social contexts where one might have anticipated apathy (based merely on demographic trends) suggests the potential for scholars in the marital area to learn important new lessons about resilience and the role of social context. The strong correlation between religious involvement and healthy marriage in the African American community (Brody & Flor, 1996; Taylor, Mattis, & Chatters, 1999) is remarkably understudied by sociologists and social psychologists, and is worthy of additional examination. Examination of this effect may provide another window on possible antidotes to the unintended negative side effects of individualism, or perhaps may help identify specific practices that can induce the transformative processes we identify in our article.

Gender is also highlighted for special consideration in the commentaries. We agree that examination of gender differences in the interplay of transformative processes is critical for future marital research. Although there is little evidence to date that the transformative processes we highlight are the exclusive province of one gender—or even that they are more likely to be engaged by one gender than another (Fincham, 2000)—there is good reason to expect gender-linked differences in response to particular problems and the way that transformative processes are utilized (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). At present, it seems safe to assume that overcoming selfishness and accessing potentially transformative processes will be an important goal for both men and women in close, long-term relationships. It also seems safe to assume that difficult personal circumstances such as those reflected in poverty, discrimination, and disadvantage might make it

more difficult to access certain transformative processes or to utilize them sufficiently to produce relationship benefits. In addition, one might expect that negative life events might exert a similar dampening effect (cf. Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Neff & Karney, 2004). This represents another area of empirical investigation that might be stimulated by the current dialogue, with important conceptual implications emerging.

ACCOUNTING FOR CONTEXTUAL EFFECTS

One of the commentaries (Howe, 2007) also suggests an extension of our analysis to intraindividual processes that may account for contextual effects. We welcome these suggestions as well. Treating transformative processes as socially situated cognition, and so potentially reflective of shifts in motivation triggered by ongoing events, is fully consistent with our theoretical predilections (Fincham & Beach, 1999a, 1999b), and we welcome the suggestion that this theme might be developed further in future research. Doing so has the potential to further connect the marital area to cutting edge developments in social psychology. We also endorse the potential for *care-taking* motives to influence conceptualization of the set of transformative processes we identified. In addition, this suggestion provides an excellent opportunity to tie marital processes not only to socially situated cognition but also to evolution and biology. Examination of variability in caretaking styles as it relates to transformational processes would also help reintroduce person variables in models of marital functioning, albeit in a new form, perhaps increasing their predictive power by linking them closely to processes more proximal to marital dynamics and marital interaction.

The suggestion that we attempt to understand the factors that prime particular motivational or goal states, particularly those involving caretaking or partner benefit, seems likely to provide a useful framework for developing interventions to help couples better tap into transformational processes. For example, in our work with African American couples (Hurt et al., 2006), we have noticed that prayer with or for the partner appears to have the potential to enhance many of the transformative processes we highlight in our analysis. This has led us to suggest that prayer may be additive to traditional skill-based programs, and where culturally appropriate, may provide an important avenue for enhancing marital outcomes

associated with community intervention programs. Experimental work utilizing social psychological methods and testing the potential for motivational priming to influence key transformative parameters in marriage has the potential to put such speculation on a sound theoretical footing. In addition, experimental approaches have the potential to explicate mechanisms of change.

Although we welcome this extension of our analysis “inward” to include cognitive and motivational systems, a note of caution is necessary. Whenever we study cognitive and motivational processes in interpersonal relationships, there is a potential danger. Such processes need to be directly linked to overt interpersonal behavior lest we develop a science of relationships subject to the same criticism leveled against social cognition research, namely, that study of the lone individual responding to interpersonal stimuli fails to capture the essence of social behavior. We are not advocating a science of marital transformation that exists only “in the heads” of spouses. One of the advantages of the current dialogue is that it is broad enough to help us avoid that particular pitfall.

INDIVIDUALISM RULES . . . AND IT MATTERS

The rise of a culture of individualism, a social change that is highlighted in the commentaries, has been gaining ground over the past several hundred years in Western societies, and may provide an important historical context for understanding the potential effect of transformative processes. That is, transformative processes such as forgiveness, commitment, and sacrifice may have been less consequential and less predictive of marital outcome when marriage was more deeply embedded in a social structure, affording it numerous supports, or when collective interests were more automatically put before individual interests. An individualistic society likely accentuates the impact of couple characteristics that transcend social pressure to view marriage in terms of personal advantage or disadvantage. Perhaps, this is the source of the rising power of constructs such as forgiveness, commitment, sacrifice, and sanctification in predicting marital outcomes. Unfortunately, conjectures about historical changes and their impact on marital dynamics are difficult to test empirically, despite their plausibility. The same considerations, however, suggest that transformative processes may be less predictive in cultural contexts that are more collectively oriented or less individualistic

in their orientation. These considerations lead to empirically testable predictions that would have broad theoretical implications.

An increasingly individualistic social structure may also lead to the increased importance of other factors such as perceptions of equity in marriage or issues surrounding the division of labor (see Amato, 2007). If so, these other processes may have an interesting and complex relationship to the transformative factors we identify, perhaps representing different or complementary ways of maintaining marital satisfaction when one’s marriage must be justified in the context of an increasingly individualistic cultural context.

In a culture of individualism and personal happiness, love emerges as central to marriage (cf. Coontz, 2005). Should love be added to the list of potentially transformative constructs, as is suggested in one of the commentaries (Amato, 2007)? Despite its conceptual complexity, love does seem to be a natural target of study in the context of transformative processes. Of particular interest from the standpoint of marital transformation, and in keeping with the other potentially transformative constructs highlighted in our review, *unselfish love*, the sort of love that implies motivation to benefit the partner for the partner’s sake, might be a particularly good candidate as a transformative process in marriage. In a similar vein, should the study of *commitment* as a transformative process focus on “dedication commitment” (cf. Rhoades et al., 2006; Stanley & Markman, 1992)? Again, if the theme is benefiting the partner, perhaps restricting the focus to dedication commitment would increase the internal consistency of the constructs identified as transformative. Similarly, one might wonder if “beneficent forgiveness” (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004) might have greater transformative potential than mere reduction of avoidance and desire to punish. Again, there are interesting and potentially theoretically important distinctions that can be examined empirically. These distinctions, suggested in one of the comments from a sociological perspective (Amato, 2007), also have considerable resonance with one of the comments from a social psychological perspective (Howe, 2007), tying our suggestions to caretaking motives.

SOME ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The extension of our discussion of dynamical systems by Howe (2007) highlights the potential

for this conceptualization to bridge the traditional divide between sociology and social psychology as well as the divide between those interested in long-term, macrolevel variables and those interested in short-term, microanalytic approaches. Howe also adds the concept of *hysteresis* to our discussion, and we agree this is a very useful addition. Hysteresis is critical to the discussion of positive processes and relationship repair because it describes the often observed fact that it is harder to recover from some problems than it is to prevent them, and that couples may need to find a new pathway to recovery from an episode of discord rather than simply retrace the steps that got them into trouble.

Comments from both sociological and social psychological perspectives also remind us that we will do best to articulate the role of transformative processes as they relate to variables already being studied by family sociologists and social psychologists. In particular, Hill (2007) astutely notes that marriages have become *deinstitutionalized* and are currently based much less on social norms, laws, and religion than on the quality of the emotional bond between couples (Amato, 2000; Cherlin, 2004; Coontz, 2005). This may, of course, be just another way of saying that modern, Western marriage has become more subject to the demands of an individualistic calculus. As a consequence, to the extent that a particular marriage is embedded in a matrix of inequality, that may influence its functioning and stability to a greater degree than might previously have been the case; similarly, as marriage becomes increasingly *deinstitutionalized*, particular marriages may become more vulnerable to the challenge of perceived inequality. To the extent that deprivation in one area may prime feelings of deprivation in other areas, one might also expect that socioeconomic disadvantage would exert a corrosive effect on marriage in the context of an individualistic world view in which each person is intent on maximizing outcomes for the self, suggesting additional avenues for empirical investigation.

We also endorse Karney's (2007) observation that we should not leave conflict behind (and presumably not leave behind the study of individual characteristics that predict relationship outcomes or the cognitive processes that mediate effects in these other domains). Similarly, the potential challenges of collecting the sort of data that could directly examine nonlinear, or *transformative*, change over time are nicely explicated in Karney's comments. We agree that the conceptual

and methodological challenges are formidable, although Howe (2007) suggests a variety of empirical strategies that could be utilized in addition to, or in lieu of, ambitious longitudinal designs also suggested by Karney.

As Karney (2007) notes, making the case for ambitious longitudinal research designs in the marital area will require making the case for marriage and its benefits. We believe the most straightforward argument for strong marriages that last and are valued by partners is twofold. First, we should make the case for strong marriages on the basis of social equity. As noted by Hill (2007), the burden of marital dissolution is not evenly distributed across economic classes or racial groups. The desire for strong, lasting marriage, however, is, if anything, greater among disadvantaged groups who often see it as beyond their reach (Karney et al., 2003). Second, we can and should make the case for strong, healthy marriage on the basis of mental and physical health benefits, benefits that extend to both men and women, and when offspring are present, to their healthy development. Again, because these benefits are not distributed evenly across economic and racial groups, they contribute to widening health disparities and uneven opportunity structures.

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, these commentaries suggest the potential for a much grander integration than the one we attempted. The conceptual integration hinted at in the commentaries could unite disparate threads of research from personality, dyadic interaction, attachment, social psychological, and sociological perspectives. We are particularly excited by the potential for transformative processes to serve as a bridge between social structure and historical change on the one hand, and intraindividual processes and motivation structure on the other. We are also excited by the potential for nonlinear dynamic models to find their way into and to exert a broader influence on the marital area. Transformation is one interesting process that can be modeled in such systems, but many other interesting properties of dynamic systems can be examined as well. If it turns out that we are tapping into biologically grounded, discrete motivation systems, as Howe (2007) suggests, we may find that the resulting conceptual integration is broader even than we had imagined. It is to be hoped that all the commentators are correct and that we are on the verge

of an interesting, continuing discussion in which we can all participate. Even if not all the conjectures are supported, however, the empirical yield from the various avenues of research suggested in the commentaries promises to be tremendous.

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