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Research on the Nature and Determinants of Marital Satisfaction: A Decade in Review

Scientific study of marital satisfaction attracted widespread attention in the 1990s from scholars representing diverse orientations and goals. This article highlights key conceptual and empirical advances that have emerged in the past decade, with particular emphasis on (a) interpersonal processes that operate within marriage, including cognition, affect, physiology, behavioral patterning, social support, and violence; (b) the milieus within which marriages operate, including micro-contexts (e.g., the presence of children, life stressors and transitions) and macrocontexts (e.g., economic factors, perceived mate availability); and (c) the conceptualization and measurement of marital satisfaction, including 2-dimensional, trajectory-based, and social-cognitive approaches. Notwithstanding the continued need for theoretical progress in understanding the nature and determinants of marital satisfaction, we conclude by calling for more large-scale longitudinal research that links marital processes with sociocultural contexts, for more disconfirmatory than confirmatory research, and for research that directly guides preventive, clinical, and policy-level interventions.

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Even when compared with the high level of scholarly output in previous decades, the 1990s witnessed a vast number of papers published on a wide array of topics pertaining to marital satisfaction. The sheer magnitude of this work attests to the continued importance placed on understanding the quality of marriage, as an end in itself and as a means to understanding its effect on numerous other processes inside and outside the family. The rationale for studying marital satisfaction stems from its centrality in individual and family well-being (e.g., Stack & Eshleman, 1998), from the benefits that accrue to society when strong marriages are formed and maintained (e.g., desistance from crime; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998), and from the need to develop empirically defensible interventions for couples that prevent (e.g., Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998) or alleviate (e.g., Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998) marital distress and divorce.

The present analysis comes at a time when the American divorce rate has declined for the eighth straight year, owing, perhaps, to the sharp increase in the age at first marriage over this same period (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Nonetheless, about half of all first marriages are projected to end in permanent separation or divorce, the level of satisfaction in intact first marriages has declined since at least the mid-1970s (National Marriage Project, 1999; Rogers & Amato, 1997), and

there is growing recognition that marital strife prior to divorce accounts, in part, for the widely publicized differences in functioning between children who do and do not come from households marked by divorce (see Amato, this volume; Amato & Booth, 1997). Further tempering any optimism elicited by the slowing divorce rate is recent evidence that, on average, marital satisfaction probably does not follow a U-shaped function over the marital career, as was once believed (e.g., Rollins & Feldman, 1970), but instead drops markedly over the first 10 years of marriage on average and then drops more gradually in the ensuing decades (Glenn, 1998; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993). Systematic study of marital satisfaction therefore remains vital, and the social significance of studying how and why marriages vary in their quality is matched only by the complex range of factors that must be considered when doing so.

The impressive breadth and scope of work on marital satisfaction in the 1990s shows that research on this topic is not a literature unto itself but is dispersed over several overlapping, yet generally distinct, literatures. These focus, for example, on psychological factors, sociodemographic variables and trends, parenting, physical health, and psychopathology, or some combination of these, all in relation to some aspect of marital quality. It is not possible to capture the subtleties and nuances of each of these literatures in a single review and, arguably, little would be gained from a large-scale integration of specific findings.

In view of these constraints, the task we have set for ourselves in this article is to identify and explore a series of key ideas and emerging trends that may be germane to scholars who approach the study of marital satisfaction with diverse goals and agendas. The article is organized around two themes that we believe represent the sine qua non of a thorough understanding of variability in marital satisfaction, namely, the interpersonal processes that operate within marriages and the sociocultural ecologies and contexts within which marriages operate. We adopt this distinction because we believe it serves well in organizing research conducted on marital satisfaction in the 1990s and because doing so draws attention to the constraints to understanding that arise from analyses of interpersonal processes bereft of their environmental milieus and from ecological or contextual analyses that fail to consider what transpires between spouses. A third and final theme emphasized in the article is the conceptualization and measurement of marital satisfaction,

a topic that continues to attract attention from marital and family scholars and that has evolved in important ways in the past 10 years. In addressing these three themes, we acknowledge and emphasize at the outset that we are psychologists by training with strong interests in refining theory, collecting data, and developing interventions with the applied goal of bringing about stronger marriages and families. This probably leads us to focus more on marital processes and differences between couples in marital processes than is typical of prior reviews of marital satisfaction appearing in this forum, and it yields an analysis that complements rather than updates explicitly the most recent decade review written by Glenn (1990).

INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES IN MARRIAGE

Detailed analysis of the behaviors exchanged by spouses was instigated more than 25 years ago, in part by Harold Raush and colleagues' assertion that "Studying what people say about themselves is no substitute for studying how they behave Questionnaires and scales of marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction have yielded very little. We need to look at what people do with one another" (Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974, p. 5) and in part by research-oriented clinicians who sought to study how maritally discordant spouses shaped each others' coercive behaviors and thereby caused or perpetuated their discord (e.g., Stuart, 1969). Interest in understanding interpersonal processes in marriage remains strong, yet research reported in the 1990s indicated that, despite some advances, these processes are not easily studied, and a comprehensive understanding of them is not yet at hand.

In keeping with its applied clinical origins, recent research on interpersonal processes in marriage retains a strong focus on behaviors exchanged during marital conflict and marital problem-solving discussions. To understand this focus and the findings that accumulated in the 1990s, it is necessary to consider research trends from earlier decades. The need to capture interdependencies between husband and wife behavior, as distinct from the raw number or proportion of behaviors displayed by the husband and the wife, became evident early in this line of work. The resulting methodological sophistication yielded compelling findings about the sequential patterns of behavior that differentiated maritally distressed and nondistressed couples. For example, Margolin and Wampold (1981) showed that, compared with

those of happy couples, the interactions of distressed couples were characterized by higher levels of negative reciprocity (i.e., increased likelihood of negative behavior following negative behavior by the partner) and by higher levels of negative reactivity (i.e., suppression of positive behaviors below base rates following negative behavior by the partner). In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers extended this work by focusing on less immediately observable aspects of marital interaction, (including interpretations of interactional behaviors, emotions experienced and displayed during interaction, physiological responses to interaction) and on global patterns of interaction, neglected prosocial dimensions of marital behavior, and marital violence. We highlight key findings in each of these areas below.

Cognition

The strong focus on marital cognition in the 1980s, which was supported by longitudinal studies of spouses' maladaptive attributions or interpretations for negative partner behaviors (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1987a) and their autonomic physiology before interaction (presumed to be an indicator of the meaning spouses assign to their interactions; e.g., Levenson & Gottman, 1985), has carried through into the 1990s. Major developments in the literature on spouses' attributions include cross-cultural evidence for the association between maladaptive explanations for marital events and marital satisfaction (Sabourin, Lussier, & Wright, 1991), continued elaboration of the internal structure and organization of attributions and other cognitive factors (e.g., Sayers & Baucum, 1995), and further longitudinal data linking attributions to marital deterioration (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 2000). There also is now evidence that maladaptive attributions covary with elevated rates of negative behaviors during marital problem-solving discussions (e.g., Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996), and a series of studies shows that key associations in this literature are not an artifact of such potential confounds as neurotic personality, self-esteem, physical aggression, depression, or measurement procedures (see Fincham, in press). As a result, attributions now figure prominently in models of marital disruption (e.g., Gottman, 1993a) and in programs designed to prevent adverse marital outcomes (e.g., Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994).

Although research in the 1990s has satisfied much of the speculation in the 1980s about the

importance of attributions in marital functioning, a host of new and important questions now present themselves. These include questions about attributions themselves, such as whether specific patterns of attributions correspond with distinct emotional expressions (e.g., anger versus sadness) and whether the manipulation of attributions can yield enduring changes in marital functioning. Other questions pertain more broadly to cognitive variables in marriage, such as how spouses' understanding of their specific negative marital interactions affects future interactions and how broader cognitive schemas (e.g., lay theories about relationships, stories that couples form about their marriage) organize and guide marital functioning.

Affect

Occurring largely in parallel with this work on cognition is a dramatic surge in research on the affective dimension of marital interaction (e.g., Johnson & Greenberg, 1994; Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996; Newton, Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, & Malarkey, 1995; Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997). As a result of this work, there is now reasonably clear evidence that this is an essential dimension to consider in accounting for variability in the quality of marriage. Nevertheless, the details of this association remain to be clarified because some studies show, for example, that negative affect is detrimental for marriage, whereas others show that it promotes marital quality or is unrelated to it (for discussions, see Fincham & Beach, 1999a; Gottman & Notarius, this volume). The lack of replication across laboratories and even within laboratories underscores the need for further theoretical development and the low yield that is likely from further atheoretical descriptive work. More specifically, definitive statements about the role of affect in eroding or supporting marital satisfaction await refinements in the conceptual underpinnings of affect-related constructs and in the methods used to observe emotional expressions and to discern their effects on marriage over time.

Physiology

Developing in conjunction with the increased emphasis on affect in marriage is a rapidly growing literature on physiological concomitants of interaction. For example, recent research addresses questions about marital influence attempts and blood pressure changes (Brown, Smith, & Ben-

jamin, 1998), heart rate and skin conductance changes displayed by spouses while listening to their partner talk about chronic low back pain (Stampler, Wall, Cassisi, & Davis, 1997), and gender differences in endocrine and immune functioning during marital problem solving (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1996). Some of these findings are intriguing; Thomsen and Gilbert (1998), for example, found greater synchrony or correspondence in physiological systems among maritally satisfied couples than among maritally dissatisfied couples. Malarkey, Kiecolt-Glaser, Pearl, and Glaser (1994) found increases in pituitary and adrenal hormones as a function of increased levels of hostility in newlyweds' marital conflict (see Booth, this volume, for an expanded discussion). This line of work is significant because it provides an expanded, multisystems view of events arising within marital interaction, and it promises to delineate the specific mechanisms by which physiological processes mediate the widely acknowledged link between marital functioning and physical well-being (see Burman & Margolin, 1992; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). At the same time, this literature shows that it can be difficult to obtain reliable physiological data during spontaneous social interaction (e.g., Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999) and that, perhaps as a consequence, promising hypotheses involving physiological data (e.g., that arousal before and during marital interaction would foreshadow marital deterioration; Levenson & Gottman, 1985) have not been supported upon further analysis (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). In any case, the integration of overt behavioral data and accompanying physiology as antecedents of change in physical and marital well-being remains an important task for the future.

Patterns

In contrast to the microanalytic studies of sequential patterns in behavior that typified the 1980s, the 1990s witnessed a movement away from these patterns and toward higher order features of interaction. Foremost among these is the demand/withdraw pattern, whereby one spouse, typically the wife, criticizes and nags the partner for change, while the partner, typically the husband, avoids the discussion and disengages from confrontation. According to this view, increased demands lead to increased avoidance, which in turn leads to increased demands for engagement, with the end result being a decline in marital satisfac-

tion (e.g., Christensen, 1987; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Many important aspects of this model have been supported, using observational data (e.g., Klinetob & Smith, 1996), longitudinal designs (e.g., Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995), and cross-cultural samples (e.g., Bodenmann, Kaiser, Hahlweg, & Fehm-Wolfsdorf, 1998). At present, it appears that demand/withdrawal tendencies are at least partially responsive to conflict structure (i.e., who wants to change; see Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993) and that the usual gender differences may be reversed in couples characterized by violence (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993). A similar shift toward macroanalytic approaches is evident in Gottman's (1993b) typology, which identifies, using interaction data, three groups of couples who were in stable marriages over a 4-year period (e.g., validators, avoiders) and two groups of unstable couples (i.e., hostile and hostile-detached). Although reports using sequential analysis have appeared in recent years, these tend to focus on descriptive studies of populations that have not been examined extensively using behavioral data (e.g., couples with a depressed wife, Nelson & Beach, 1990; couples with a violent spouse, Burman, Margolin, & John, 1993).

This new focus, which might be characterized as yielding relatively encompassing behavioral patterns derived at least partially from clinical or quasi-clinical observation (i.e., a top-down approach), would seem to be a natural progression from the bottom-up approach to behavioral data that predominated in the past. As this line of work continues, it will be important to establish a reasonably exhaustive set of key macrolevel patterns, to demonstrate that these patterns have predictive validity beyond the specific codes that comprise them, to establish that sampling methods do not misrepresent systematically couples having a particular pattern (e.g., disengaged patterns), and to clarify the extent to which these patterns change over key periods in the life of a marriage.

Social Support

Research on interpersonal processes in marriage focuses heavily on conflict and problem solving. Nonetheless, there is some ambiguity in the association between problem-solving behavior and marital outcomes (as noted above), data suggest that the longitudinal association between negative behavior and marital outcomes is moderated by spouses' expressions of affection (Huston & Cho-

rost, 1994), the actual frequency of overt conflict in a typical marriage is proving to be surprisingly low (McGonagle, Kessler, & Schilling, 1992), and there is growing recognition that the continued increase in dual-career couples places a premium on the manner in which spouses help each other handle problems that arise largely outside the marriage. Although support processes in marriage have long been a topic of interest (e.g., Barker & Lemle, 1984; Coyne & DeLongis, 1986), for the reasons noted here the topic is now being addressed with increased vigor (e.g., Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Bodenmann, 1997; Coyne & Smith, 1994; Katz, Beach, Smith, & Myers, 1997). Support processes have been reliably linked in these studies with marital functioning and with important health outcomes in families (Collins, Dunkel-Schetter, Lobel, & Scrimshaw 1993).

An important feature in recent studies of marital support is the use of methods that permit more detailed investigation of potentially supportive transactions. Observational methods for assessing the provision and receipt of supportive behaviors have been developed (e.g., Cutrona, 1996). The resulting behaviors have been linked to marital quality and changes in marital quality, even after controlling for behaviors observed in standard problem-solving discussions (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; also see Carels & Baucom, 1999; Saitzyk, Floyd, & Kroll, 1997). Daily diary methods have also proven to be powerful in clarifying the operation of support in marriage; for example, in a study of couples in which one spouse was preparing to take the bar exam, Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler (1998) showed that the examinees' distress did not rise as the exam drew near to the extent that the partner provided increasing levels of support. This emerging line of work stands in sharp contrast to studies of conflict in marriage, and it promises to enrich our understanding of both conflict (e.g., it may be less consequential in marriages characterized by higher levels of support) and the determinants of marital quality. It is also likely to influence the large literature on the effects of marital interaction on child adjustment, which has focused almost exclusively on the effects of conflict on child well-being (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1994; Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994; Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, Vincent, & Mahoney, 1996). These effects might be weaker in families where compassionate, supportive behavior is displayed routinely by the parents and stronger in those families where it is not

(Fincham, 1998). As the work on support continues to develop, it will be important to recognize that interpersonal processes within a marriage might be affected by the nature of support obtained by spouses outside the marriage (Bryant & Conger, 1999). In an observational study of wives talking with their confidants, for example, Julien, Markman, Leveille, Chartrand, & Begin, (1994) demonstrated that wives reported relatively more emotional distress and more perceived distance from their husband following the discussion to the extent the confidant made more comments that interfered with or undermined the wife's marriage.

Violence

The final aspect of interpersonal process in marriage that we consider is physical violence (also see Johnson & Ferraro, this volume). Important strides in estimating the prevalence of marital violence made in the 1980s (e.g., Straus & Gelles, 1986) have resulted in a large amount of research on marital and family violence in the 1990s (cf. Berardo, 1980). Although direct observation of actual physical aggression in marriage typically is not possible (cf. Capaldi & Crosby, 1997), a series of observational studies has been conducted on the interactional styles in violent and nonviolent marriages. Even when compared with distressed couples who are not violent, for example, the interactions of distressed violent couples are marked by higher levels of negative reciprocation, anger, and contempt (e.g., Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, & Rushe, 1993; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998). These findings help to clarify how disagreements can escalate in violent marriages, and they also confirm that behavioral differences between distressed and nondistressed couples can exist in the absence of physical aggression. Other noteworthy advances in this area include enhanced measurement of aggression (e.g., Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), analysis of the contributing role of alcohol use to violent marital incidents (e.g., Quigley & Leonard, 1999), and recognition that some form of physical aggression is present at high levels in newlywed marriage (e.g., 57% in O'Leary et al., 1989). Growing interest in domestic violence among European researchers has the potential to help identify cross-cultural commonalities as well as unique cultural factors that influence the manifestation of aggression in marriage (see Klein, 1998). Likewise, investigations of ethnic differences in level of physical aggression within the United States

suggest that such differences are attributable to differences in family income (Cazenave & Strauss, 1990). Nonetheless, other factors, such as level of acculturation, must play a role in any comprehensive explanation (Sorenson & Telles, 1991). Finally, the link between physical aggression and diminished marital quality typically is assumed rather than demonstrated, and the low rate with which aggression is reported as a problem in couples seeking therapy, even when present, indicates that some couples may tolerate aggression in their relationship (cf. Ehrensaft & Vivian, 1996). This raises questions about whether and how aggression comes to erode marriages (e.g., Leonard & Roberts, 1998; Rogge & Bradbury, 1999) and the factors controlling desistance in aggression (Jacobson, Gottman, Cortner, Berns, & Shortt, 1996; Quigley & Leonard, 1996). In short, although important questions remain, research conducted in the 1990s demonstrates plainly that marriage cannot be studied or treated effectively without giving due consideration to the possibility that spouses are or have been physically aggressive.

MARITAL PROCESSES IN CONTEXT

Although there is widespread endorsement of the view that “the stuff and substance of an interpersonal relationship is the behavioral interaction between the partners” (Berscheid, 1995, p. 531), many scholars adhere to the position that the meaning and implications of behavioral interaction cannot be fully understood without considering the broader context in which those interactions occur. The ways in which couples manage conflict may be important for the long-term quality of their relationship, for example, but is a certain pattern of negative behavior more consequential for blue-collar versus white-collar workers? Does our understanding of social support in relation to marital satisfaction change when we consider how much stress couples experience? Does one’s family background influence the meaning of different kinds of interpersonal behaviors in marriage? Is marital instability less prevalent in settings where there are few versus many available mates? Answering questions such as these can sharpen our understanding of marital satisfaction, and indeed questions of this sort received considerable attention in the 1990s.

In addition to its obvious scientific merit, there are important applied benefits to be gained from addressing the ways in which contextual factors—

those that are unique to particular couples as well as those that are common to many couples—contribute to interpersonal processes and moderate links between those processes and marital outcomes. Here it must be recognized that causes of marital dysfunction and the solutions pursued in the hopes of alleviating it can diverge considerably and that the causes of the problem can be linked to viable solutions for a problem in tenuous ways (see Christensen, 1998). To reason by analogy, variability in skin cancer across individuals is presumably due to environmental factors to which people are exposed or to environment by organism (e.g., pigmentation) interactions, but they can be counteracted by individual-level interventions (e.g., applying sunscreen, wearing a hat). Thus, effective solutions that alleviate marital dysfunction may overlap only partially with the actual causes of marital dysfunction.

Research on contextual or ecological factors in relationship functioning has expanded dramatically in recent years, suggesting that a more balanced view of interpersonal and environmental causes—and solutions—will emerge in the decade ahead. Marriages exist in highly complex, multifaceted environments, of course, and a full understanding of how these environments interact and impinge upon marriage is just beginning to develop. In the sections below, we highlight a few key environments and contexts, and we outline associated research as a way of illustrating recent progress. Where possible, we draw attention to studies that link contextual variables with specific interpersonal processes rather than more global indicators of marital functioning. We focus first on three *microcontexts*, which we define as settings and circumstances that are likely to be salient to couples and that will have relatively direct links to interpersonal functioning in marriage, and then we move on to consider some *macrocontexts*, or broader social conditions and institutions likely to be less salient to couples and perhaps more indirect or subtle in their effects.

Microcontexts

Children. Children figure prominently in how marriage is experienced for many couples. Research suggests that children have the paradoxical effect of increasing the stability of marriage, at least when children are relatively young, while decreasing its quality (e.g., Belsky, 1990; Waite & Lillard, 1991). Researchers for some time have turned to examine how couples negotiate the tran-

sition to parenthood and the ensuing years as a means of understanding the putative effects of children on marital satisfaction, and numerous studies on this topic were published in the 1990s (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Johnson & Huston, 1998; Levy-Shiff, Goldshmidt, & Har-Even, 1991). Perhaps the most important advance in this literature has been the recognition of enormous variability across couples in how they change from, typically, the last trimester of pregnancy through several months or a few years postpartum. Belsky and Rovine (1990) called attention to this point, noted that many couples do not change much on important variables over the transition to parenthood, and demonstrated how differing pathways through this transition could be predicted from demographic and personality data and, in some instances, from indices of infant temperament. A subsequent study of marital change patterns from the time firstborn sons were 10 to 60 months old indicated that spouses' personality traits covaried with marital functioning at any one point in time, whereas marital dynamics—particularly uncooperative coparenting behavior observed in the home—predicted deterioration in marital functioning over the study period (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998). Using a continuous rather than categorical measure of marital change through 2 years postpartum, with multiwave trajectories derived for observational and self-report data, Cox, Paley, Burchinal, and Payne (1999) showed that declines in marital quality and increases in negative interaction were predicted by symptoms of depression, child gender, and whether the pregnancy was planned.

This is an exciting line of research because it is beginning to specify the individual, child, and marital characteristics that render a family vulnerable to a difficult transition to parenthood. Identification of marital trajectories over this important transition is likely to lead to additional questions about how the transition to parenthood and parenting are embedded in a more encompassing developmental view of marriage and marital quality. How does marital satisfaction figure in to couples' decisions to have a child? Do children born at different times in marriage have different effects on marital satisfaction? How do marital processes predict later parenting (cf. Katz & Gottman, 1993)? How do parenting stress and satisfaction with parenting relate to marital satisfaction (cf. Kurdek, 1996; Rogers & White, 1998)? As questions such as these are addressed, there will be a greater understanding of how the transition to par-

enthood figures in the more general developmental course of marriage, and a stronger basis for intervention with at-risk couples will be established (cf. Cowan & Cowan, 1995).

Spouses' backgrounds and characteristics. Evidence that marital processes are associated with marital satisfaction and change in marital satisfaction leads naturally to questions about antecedents of those processes. Numerous studies on this topic appeared in the past decade, and they were complemented by a continuing interest in the intergenerational consequences of marital and family functioning for offspring as they themselves move into long-term committed relationships. Research on intergenerational transmission effects reported in the 1980s (e.g., McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988) are now being examined with increased precision, both with regard to those aspects of the family of origin that appear to be consequential and to the subsequent effects that they produce in families of procreation (e.g., Webster, Orbuch, & House, 1995). There is now evidence, for example, that parental divorce is associated with poorer communication observed among their offspring around the time of marriage (Sanders et al., 1999) and that the association between parental divorce and offspring divorce is mediated by problematic behaviors, such as hostility and jealousy, reported by the younger generation (Amato, 1996). Marital satisfaction in the parents' marriage may prove to be more important than their divorce in these associations (Booth & Edwards, 1989). Along similar lines, Marks, Wieck, Checkly, and Kumar (1996) have shown that marital processes moderate the effects of a history of affective disorder on relapse following the birth of a child; Gotlib, Lewinsohn, and Seeley (1998) have shown that individuals with a history of depression during adolescence are more likely to marry earlier and to experience higher rates of marital dissatisfaction than are individuals with other diagnoses or no diagnosis. Data of this kind demonstrate that a history of psychopathology is proving to be an important antecedent of marital functioning and, together with concurrent symptomatology, cannot be overlooked in models of marital functioning (cf. Beach, in press).

Perhaps the most dramatic upsurge in research on spousal characteristics and relationship functioning occurred in the literature on attachment, which aims to address questions about how the experience of relationships early in life are manifest in individuals' working models of relation-

ships and subsequent interpersonal functioning in adulthood (Bowlby, 1969; see Simpson & Rholes, 1998). Although data on early parent-child functioning are typically not examined directly in this literature, self-reports of attachment style in adulthood or retrospective interview-based assessments of attachment to parents have been used to show that marital quality is greater to the extent that an individual, and that individual's partner, report secure versus avoidant or anxious ambivalent attachment styles (e.g., Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Longitudinal links between attachment styles and subsequent relationship quality are beginning to be established (e.g., Klohnen & Bera, 1998), and the specific interpersonal behaviors that mediate this association—particularly behaviors reflecting the regulation of emotion—are being pursued. Kobak and Hazan (1991), for example, showed that wives displayed more rejection during a problem-solving discussion to the extent that they described themselves as less reliant on their husband and that they described their husband as less psychologically available to them (also see Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999). Although the richness of theorizing about the role of attachment in adult relationships can sometimes exceed the data used to test key hypotheses and although there is greater interest in attachment among dating partners than spouses, data in this area have improved rapidly in a short period of time. They provide strong, conceptually guided evidence for how an overarching framework can integrate individual-level variables and interpersonal processes to clarify determinants of marital satisfaction.

Life stressors and transitions. The social learning approach, which has been influential in the study of marriage, focuses heavily on the interior of marital relationships as the generative mechanism in marital functioning, leaving relatively little room for the ecological niches in which marriages are situated or for the intersection between interior processes and external factors that impinge upon them. This is reflected, for example, in the assertion that “distress, in this model, is assumed to be a function of couples’ interaction patterns. Inevitably, couples have wants and needs that conflict. Distress results from couples’ aversive and ineffectual responses to conflict” (Koerner & Jacobson, 1994, p. 208). This focus can be understood in part from the clinical orientation of this model, as there is a clear need to emphasize potentially changeable determinants of marital quality. None-

theless, building on a series of studies that link marital environments, stressors, and transitions to marital outcomes, a large body of research now indicates that the social learning perspective may be viewed more appropriately as one component, albeit a key component, in a more inclusive model of marital functioning.

At the risk of oversimplifying a large and complex literature, research on marital environments tends to address either discrete, often traumatic events; economic and work-related stressors; or the total set of stressors and events to which couples might be exposed. In the interest of space, we will focus on the first two lines of research here; examples of the third line of research can be found in Tesser and Beach (1998) and Whiffen and Gotlib (1989). The traumatic events that have been studied in relation to marital functioning are numerous and range, for example, from a hurricane (Moore & Moore, 1996), World War II (Pavalko & Elder, 1990), child illness or death (e.g., Hoekstra-Weebers, Jaspers, Kamps, & Klip, 1998), and testicular cancer (Gritz, Wellisch, Siau, & Wang, 1990). Many of these studies document not only the diverse ways that couples adapt to these extreme difficulties, but also the remarkable resilience that they display when doing so. For example, Gritz and colleagues, in their study of testicular cancer and marriage, commented on how this illness strengthens marital ties for many couples, Schwab (1998) dispelled the myth that the death of a child necessarily increases risk of divorce, and Ward and Spitze (1998) commented on how couples taking care of growing children and aging parents are able to sustain a strong marriage (perhaps due to selection effects; see Loomis & Booth, 1995). These studies are important because they often identify specific marital processes that are affected by or that buffer the effects of traumatic events (e.g., Quittner et al., 1998; Umberson, 1995) and because they help to bring balance to a portrayal of marriage that often is characterized by fragility and impermanence.

Economic and work-related stressors comprise the largest body of research on environmental influences on marriage. Adding to a long line of self-report studies outlining links between job characteristics and marital quality (e.g., Hughes, Galinsky, & Morris, 1992), several of these studies use observational or diary methods to specify the interactional processes that are affected by financial and work stress (see Menaghan, 1991). Repetti (1989), for example, used a diary procedure with air traffic controllers and their wives to

show that wives' social support can increase husbands' social withdrawal and decrease anger in the home following workdays marked by high levels of air traffic volume and poor visibility. Using observational methods, Krokoff, Gottman, and Roy (1988) demonstrated that displays of negative affect, but not reciprocation of negative affect, were linked to occupational status in a sample of white- and blue-collar workers. And in perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of economic stress and marital functioning to date, Conger, Rueter, and Elder (1999), found support for a model whereby economic pressure in a sample of predominantly rural families at Time 1 predicted individual distress and observed marital conflict at Time 2, which in turn predicted marital distress at Time 3; the effect of economic pressure on emotional distress was greater in marriages poor in observed social support.

In short, recent research on life events and transitions enriches our understanding of the association between interpersonal processes in marriage and marital functioning. Several researchers testify to the remarkable resilience of couples and families under stress, and the ways in which marital processes moderate the influence of the environment on spouses' evaluations of marriage are becoming apparent. There is now a growing need to map out the life events that are and are not influential for different couples and for different stages of marriage, to clarify how individuals and marriages may inadvertently generate stressful events, and to examine how spouses take life events into account when making evaluations of their relationship (see Tesser & Beach, 1998). Also warranted are experimental studies designed to strengthen relationships by effecting change either in the events that couples confront (e.g., job loss; see Howe, Caplan, Foster, Lockshin, & McGrath, 1995) or in their responses to these specific events.

Macrocontexts

The final set of contextual factors we consider involves the broader social conditions and institutions that can affect individual mates and their marriages. In addition to the contextual factors already noted—children, spouses' backgrounds and characteristics, life stressors and transitions—it is necessary to recognize that there are more encompassing, relatively slow-changing factors that can influence, to varying degrees, entire cohorts of couples. Although links between these macrocon-

textual factors and specific marital processes are not typically addressed, in part because survey methods are often used to examine them, recent work indicates that marital functioning can covary with aspects of these broader contexts.

The following studies help to illustrate the type of findings obtained recently using this level of analysis. South and Crowder (1999), for example, showed that higher levels of neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage are associated with higher rates of premarital childbearing and earlier timing of first marriage. Other studies have shown that mate availability, perceptions of mate availability, and local employment rates can have far-reaching effects on the development and course of marriage, most notably in African American communities (see Massey & Sibuya, 1995; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Recognizing that many spouses consider extramarital relationships before divorce, South and Lloyd (1995) combined data from the National Survey of Families and Households and census data to demonstrate that risk for marital dissolution is greater in those regions characterized by high geographic mobility, high levels of unmarried women in the labor force, and high numbers of potential mates. And, finally, there is not only continued interest in the links between various aspects of religiosity and marital functioning (e.g., Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995; Call & Heaton, 1997), but also in studying how couples' involvement in religious institutions and practices are related to specific dyadic aspects of marriage. Mahoney and colleagues (1999), for example, presented data showing that various aspects of marital functioning, including marital satisfaction, conflict frequency, and use of verbal aggression, are predicted by joint religious activities (e.g., praying together) and by perceptions of the sacred qualities of one's marriage, even after controlling for individual religiousness and religious homogeneity.

Although their potential effects on marriage may not be as immediately apparent as some interpersonal processes (e.g., overt conflict or physical aggression), a host of environmental and contextual variables may well influence whether and how couples form their relationship, the obstacles they may confront along the way, and the resources they can use to maintain their relationship. For example, the impact of racism and acculturation processes on marital satisfaction would seem to be especially important to understand. How people understand these factors and the degree to which they engage the relevant institutions may

be at least as important as mere exposure to them (e.g., perceptions of mate availability versus actual mate availability; spiritual activity versus religious identity) and that as a result, there are likely to be important differences in how different individuals and couples respond to otherwise identical milieu or the related experiences they have had. Although there appears to be a more accepting attitude of divorce now compared with 20 years ago, for example, such an acceptance might be greater among individuals whose parents divorced (see Amato, 1996). In any event, this line of work underscores the value of studying the external circumstances to which marriages are exposed, and it highlights the possibility that these circumstances can be modified to enhance marital functioning.

CONCEPTUALIZING AND MEASURING MARITAL SATISFACTION

Up to this point, we have provided little direct analysis of the concept that is the central focus of this article, marital satisfaction itself. Nevertheless, there have been important developments in the conceptualization and measurement of marital satisfaction in recent years, and we review the highlights of these developments (also see Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Kluwer, 2000; Sternberg & Hojjat, 1997).

As a result of analyses in the 1980s by Fincham and Bradbury (1987b), Huston, McHale, and Crouter (1986), Norton (1983), and others, there is now widespread recognition that standard measures of marital satisfaction—such as Locke and Wallace's (1959) Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) and Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)—consist of different types of items, including evaluative judgments about marital quality, as well as reports of specific behaviors and general interaction patterns. As a result, the use of these scales can inflate associations between marital quality and self-report measures of interpersonal processes in marriage. This development had clear benefits for the interpretation of extant findings and for the execution of much subsequent research, but it has had at least two unfortunate side effects. First, some researchers are now more inclined to develop and employ non-standard global measures of marital satisfaction, which limits the degree to which otherwise similar studies can be integrated. We recommend against the further development and proliferation of non-standard measures of marital satisfaction and, in

the absence of data to the contrary, we encourage researchers to administer global measures that are used routinely in the field (e.g., the Quality Marriage Index, Norton, 1983). Second, the notion that measures such as the MAT and DAS are not appropriate for some applications has been over-extended to the point where they are believed to be inappropriate for all applications. Most notably, in longitudinal analyses of the association between a behavioral variable and later marital satisfaction, where earlier levels of marital satisfaction are controlled statistically, it would appear that the problem does not emerge. This is because of the statistical controlling of the variability due to the behavioral items in the satisfaction measure. In any case, the original arguments about the overlapping item content between the MAT or DAS and other measures were made with reference to cross-sectional data, and there is some evidence that measures such as the MAT and DAS perform similarly to global measures of satisfaction in longitudinal designs (Karney & Bradbury, 1997).

Four other important developments in the conceptualization and measurement of satisfaction are on the horizon. First, there is growing appreciation for the view that a satisfying marriage is not merely a relationship characterized by the absence of dissatisfaction, as is implied by the routine use of the term *nondistressed* to describe couples who are maritally satisfied. Factors that lead to marital distress may not be the simple inverse of the factors that lead to a satisfying relationship. Recent discussion of the defining features of a healthy marriage (Halford, Kelly, & Markman, 1997), continuing interest in the attributes of long-term satisfying relationships (e.g., Kaslow & Robison, 1996), and a growing emphasis on social support and other positive behaviors in marriage (e.g., Cutrona, 1996), all point to a developing conception of marriage and marital quality in which the unique dimensions of dissatisfying and satisfying relationships are recognized.

Second, prior efforts that conceptualize marital satisfaction as a global evaluation of the marriage have operationally defined this concept as a single dimension: Marital dissatisfaction reflects an evaluation of the marriage in which negative features are salient and positive features are relatively absent, and marital satisfaction reflects an evaluation in which positive features are salient and negative features are relatively absent. Fincham and colleagues have challenged this view, with the argument that positive and negative evaluations in marriage can be conceptualized and measured as

separate, although related, dimensions (Fincham, Beach, & Kemp-Fincham, 1997). Data obtained with a simple measure used to capture this two-dimensional conception of marital quality indicate that the dimensions have different correlates and account for unique variance in reported marital behaviors and attributions. Moreover, two groups of wives who were indistinguishable in their MAT scores—those who were high in positivity and high in negativity versus those who were low in positivity and low in negativity—differed reliably in their behavior and attribution scores (Fincham & Linfield, 1997). This line of work is noteworthy because it draws attention to the important but largely overlooked distinction between positive and negative dimensions of marriage made in prior research that incorporated reports of behavior in assessments of marital quality (cf. Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Johnson, White, Edwards, & Booth, 1986; Orden & Bradburn, 1968). Additionally, the measure derived from this view will enable more detailed descriptions of change in marital satisfaction and the factors that account for these changes.

A third important development in the conceptualization and measurement of marital satisfaction is the notion that satisfaction is appropriately conceptualized not simply as a judgment made by spouses at one point in time but as a trajectory that reflects fluctuations in marital evaluations over time. Such a trajectory is computed for individual spouses using multiple waves of data, and parameters of this trajectory—especially its slope, or rate of change over time—can be examined in relation to other variables of theoretical interest. According to this view, a marital satisfaction score assessed at one point in time cannot be fully understood without reference to earlier or later data points; a score of 95 on the MAT, for example, has a different meaning depending on whether the individual scored 110 or 80 six months before it was obtained. The advantages of this perspective are that it encourages multiwave longitudinal research on marriage (where two-wave longitudinal designs have predominated; see Karney & Bradbury, 1995), it allows researchers to have direct access to the variable reflecting longitudinal change in satisfaction (where two-wave longitudinal designs provide indirect access to this variable, typically by way of residualized change scores), and it encourages researchers to specify a model of marital change (where two-wave longitudinal designs assume a simple linear model). Use of a trajectory-based view of marital satisfaction is increasing (e.g., Cox et al., 1999; Karney

& Bradbury, 1997; Kurdek, 1991; Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett, 1995; Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, & Elder, 1997) and holds considerable promise for testing refined models of marital change.

A fourth important development has been the application of a social-cognitive perspective to the conceptualization of marital satisfaction. One example of this approach is the reconceptualization of marital satisfaction as an *attitude* toward the partner or relationship. Analyzing marital satisfaction with reference to the literature on attitudes highlights the idea that satisfaction can vary not only in degree but also in the strength of the association between the evaluation (i.e., self-reported satisfaction) and the object of the evaluation (i.e., the partner). This association, or level of *attitude accessibility*, may be assessed independent of the valence of the evaluation (Fazio, 1995) and thus may increase prediction of response to partner behavior (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 1999b). Such findings suggest that the correlation of marital satisfaction with marital behavior and interpretations of marital behavior may be different for those with highly accessible attitudes compared with those who have less accessible attitudes (Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips, & Osborne, 1995). They also imply that spouses whose marital satisfaction is highly accessible should report more stable satisfaction over time (they engage in top-down processing) relative to spouses whose satisfaction is less accessible (they engage in bottom-up processing); data collected over 18 months of marriage are also consistent with this implication (Fincham et al., 1997). In short, it may be necessary to revisit many of the correlates of marital satisfaction to determine whether they hold to a greater degree for persons with more accessible marital attitudes.

Researchers in the social-cognitive tradition have also examined the way partners engage in effortful cognitive transformations to change potentially damaging responses to negative partner behavior into responses that are more benign (e.g., Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). Because these transformations are effortful, introducing a cognitive load can result in more negative reactions than would have otherwise occurred. As a result, this perspective suggests that certain stressful contexts may exert a negative effect on relationship satisfaction by interfering with effortful cognitive transformations and so disrupting patterns of pro-social interaction. In addition, social-cognitive models of assimilation and contrast effects lead to

the prediction that evaluation of the quality of family relationships should be affected adversely by a stressful life context, but only up to a point. After a certain point, an increase in stress should result in a contrast or sharp increase in reported satisfaction (e.g., Tesser & Beach, 1998). Accordingly, although not yet fully articulated for the family, this perspective has considerable promise for providing new insights regarding the correlates of satisfaction, reactions to partner behavior, and the impact of various life contexts on satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Scientific work published in the 1990s on marital satisfaction evokes both optimism and pessimism about what can be expected in the decade ahead. The optimism derives in part from the fact that this topic is addressed with surprising vigor by scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. More important, it derives from the progress that has been made in understanding (a) marital processes that covary with and may foreshadow changes in satisfaction, (b) the complex environments to which spouses and couples adapt, and (c) how best to conceptualize and assess the quality of marriage. A central goal of this article has been to illustrate and evaluate this progress, both in terms of the individual research themes we have highlighted and the broader notion that a complete portrayal of variability in marital quality requires analysis of interpersonal exchanges within marriage, the milieus in which marriages are embedded, and the interplay between these interior and exterior forces. Our analysis cannot be considered comprehensive, of course, because research on marital satisfaction extends well beyond what we have presented here. Research on satisfaction in relationships other than marriage (e.g., siblings, Brody, 1998; gay and lesbian couples, Kurdek, 1998; cohabiting couples, Stack & Eshleman, 1998), which is important by itself and as a complement to research on marriage, would extend the scope of this analysis even further.

Pessimism about future work in this area stems from our perception that progress in the field is characterized more by the adding of ideas within a given research area than by building upon, and where appropriate, discarding existing ideas. This is perhaps inevitable—the more we look, the more we see—yet the tendency to supplement rather than supplant or even integrate our hypotheses and ideas hinders cumulative growth in the field. We must be careful to not exaggerate this concern

and thereby overlook the numerous contributions that have been made, and we must be careful to mark progress by the degree of sophistication in the questions that are asked and not solely by the systematic accumulation of empirical findings. Nevertheless, the apparent increase in breadth without a corresponding increase in depth may be part of the price that is paid for conducting research on a complex topic where research designs usually preclude strong inferences of causation. The increased use of longitudinal designs advocated in earlier reviews (e.g., Berardo, 1990) is an important step in the right direction, but the inferential power in these studies tends to be lower than desired, particularly because attrition tends to be high and nonrandom, more than two waves of data are rarely collected or analyzed simultaneously, and data are often collected from only one spouse (see Glenn, 1990; Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

The research published in the 1990s and in prior decades contains a wealth of ideas and information about marital satisfaction. A first step toward generating better work on this topic in the next decade may be to delve deeply into the theories and findings in this work—in those areas close to our research interests as well as those on the periphery. Theoretical and methodological analysis of existing research is needed, and this can serve as a foundation for studies that clarify and complement what is already known about marital satisfaction. We believe that these studies will be of greatest consequence to the extent they meet the following three criteria. First, there is a continuing need for large, well-funded intensive longitudinal studies of couples, particularly those that sample marital functioning at several points in time. Basic research on how marriages develop and deteriorate is deficient in several key respects, and data are badly needed that will illuminate the factors that account for changes in satisfaction over key periods of marital development. Second, because most of the research that we can anticipate in the decade ahead will be nonexperimental in nature, studies that rule out plausible counterhypotheses will be particularly valuable. Most studies on marital quality tend to be confirmatory in their focus and emphasize convergent validity, but studies that provide discriminant information and compare competing models against each other (rather than solely against the null hypothesis) will yield the most progress. Finally, it will be important to conduct research that directly informs and guides specific preventive, clinical, and policy-

level interventions involving couples and families, not simply because of the inherent value in applied work and the experimental designs that are permissible there, but also because an applied orientation—an orientation toward solving specific problems pertinent to marriages and families—will greatly focus and sharpen our basic research efforts.

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