

• AUTHORS' REPLY

## Purging Concepts From the Study of Marriage and Marital Therapy

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In the Temple of Science are many mansions, and various indeed are they that dwell therein. (Einstein, 1934, p. 1)

The need for concepts to understand marriage and marital therapy is emphasized by the relative paucity of theory in the marital literature. The title of Coyne's article (this issue) therefore struck us as timely and promising. As indicated in our article, we believe that the cognitive domain may indeed yield useful concepts for understanding marriage and marital therapy. Coyne disagrees strongly with this viewpoint; he attacks the purported hegemony of cognition ("cognition über alles") and offers a "solution" (in this case a pure marital therapy cleansed of degenerate cognitive elements). Unfortunately, his response speaks only minimally and often indirectly to the arguments we offer in our original article. This is perhaps a necessary consequence of caricaturing our position in order to emphasize how it differs from his own.<sup>1</sup> Although there clearly are differences between our positions, these are not always the ones expressed by Coyne. Moreover, Coyne's attempt to draw an overly sharp contrast between "interactional" and "cog-

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nitive" perspectives detracts from many important observations in his article with which we agree. We will attempt to build on the commonalities we see in our positions, but we will also try to highlight the essential differences.

### **DEPRESSION AND MARRIAGE: THE GLASS IS HALF FULL/EMPTY**

We agree with Coyne that scholars in the marital area have much to learn from the study of depression. Depression is a complex phenomenon. Like marital discord, it appears to be multifaceted both in its manifestations and its etiological and maintaining factors. Although marital cognition research began by extending ideas from the learned helplessness theory of depression, explicit examination of cognitive research on depression by marital cognition investigators is now rare despite increased interest in the treatment of co-occurring depression and marital discord. Coyne provides a welcome reminder that analysis of the depression literature provides potentially useful information to marital researchers.

#### **Hopefulness Versus Helplessness**

Unlike Coyne, we view cognitive research on depression as cause for optimism rather than pessimism regarding an understanding of cognition in marriage. The literature on depression clearly reveals limitations in the scope of cognitive variables studies (largely cognitive contents), the manner in which they are studied (largely self-reports obtained via questionnaire), untested assumptions made about them (they represent naturally occurring cognitions, they influence behavior), and so on. In short, it provides a map of fertile and barren research lands and, by omission, points to uncharted territory for future research. Although not motivated by the status of cognitive research on depression, it is precisely the kinds of problems found in the depression literature that leads us to reappraise the study of cognition in marriage and marital therapy. To cite but one example: Our concern about extant assessments of cognition (echoed in Coyne's article, cf. "Assessing Cognition: Weak Methods") led us to rethink not only issues of measurement but the manner in which we conceptualize cognition and study it in marriage. Ironically, many of Coyne's concerns support the reappraisal of cognition offered in our article.

In any event, it is important to note that the problems Coyne outlines regarding depression research are not inexorable in the marital domain. To think otherwise suggests that psychologists are incapable of benefiting from past research, a position likely to be strongly rejected by most researchers. More important, research on cognition in marriage is in its infancy and will

reach maturity in a historical context different from much of the depression research to which Coyne refers. Coyne cannot deny the important effects of that context without destroying the foundation on which his interactional perspective of depression (and now marriage) rests.

### **The Zero Sum Game**

Coyne's emphasis on the interactions experienced by depressed persons, especially in intimate relationships, is also valuable (see Coyne, Burchill, & Stiles, in press). Indeed, we expected that Coyne might view our work on marriage as a welcome antidote to the experimental research on depression (e.g., performance on anagram tasks, use of bogus feedback in the laboratory) that he so vehemently rejects, especially in view of our continued attempts to limit the claims we make for the role of cognition in understanding marriage and marital therapy. For example, in our article we argued that although cognitive interventions may sometimes be central to helping couples enhance their marital satisfaction, "the conditions under which cognitive interventions alone can play this role are likely to be quite limited" (Fincham, Bradbury, & Beach, this issue). The thrust of our proposals regarding cognition in marital therapy had to do with ways of enhancing existing therapies and is clearly incompatible with the "cognition über alles" stance attributed to us.

Although agreeing with Coyne that cognition is not everything in marriage or in depression, we must disagree with a central but faulty premise in his argument. Specifically, a major premise of Coyne's position is that the study of cognition necessarily means that people's contexts and interactions are either ignored or reduced to cognitive processes. Stated differently, he would have us believe that "interactional" and "cognitive" perspectives are incompatible and therefore constitute a zero sum game. But, to complete the destruction of a cliché begun by Coyne, if we wish to study what makes babies clean, must we deny the role of water in order to understand the role of soap?

As Coyne notes, interpersonal and contextual variables can influence the development and course of depression and marital treatments for co-occurring marital discord and depression have been proposed (cf. Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990). Moreover, effective marital therapy can alleviate depression that occurs in the context of marital discord (O'Leary & Beach, 1990). Does it follow that individual and cognitive perspectives therefore have no place in our understanding and treatment of depression? There seems to be no logical requirement to reject the importance of cognitive variables in depression simply because the marital context has proved

important. To do so also flies in the face of evidence that cognitive variables can play a role in maintaining a depressive episode (e.g., Dent & Teasdale, 1988), that aspects of Beck's original speculation about the etiology of depression appear to have been correct (e.g., Hammen, Elliot, Gitlin, & Jamison, 1989; Robins & Block, 1988), that cognitive therapy is a potent intervention for depression (Dobson, 1989), and so on.

In our judgment, both interactional and cognitive perspectives (and many others) potentially have much to offer to an understanding of phenomena as complex as depression and marital discord. The depression literature provides an excellent example of multiple perspectives providing complementary contributions at both scientific and clinical levels of understanding. Rather than constituting a zero sum game, differing perspectives yield a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts (cf. Safran, 1990).

### **A Difference That Makes a Difference**

Not only do we agree with Coyne that interaction is important in marriage, we also agree that observational research on marriage has much to offer. However, there is a major difference between the depression and marital literatures that makes many of Coyne's observations incongruous. Simply stated, the emergence of research on covert factors (thoughts and feelings) in marriage followed a tradition of observational or behavioral research. That is, the limitations of a purely behavioral account of marriage led to research on intrapersonal variables such as cognition. This new genre of research does not reject its predecessor; on the contrary, it explicitly attempts to build on advances made in observational research. It is therefore no accident that major contributors to cognitive perspectives on marriage (e.g., Baucom, Jacobson, Revenstorf, Weiss) are well known for their contributions to marital observation research (for a more complete historical account, see Fincham & Bradbury, 1990).

Our own work exemplifies the above viewpoint and we have offered a *contextual* model of marriage in which *interaction* plays a central role. By including the very intrapersonal constructs that Coyne rejects (e.g., cognition) we have attempted to provide new insights on several bodies of marital research, identified numerous avenues for future inquiry, and outlined how the contextual model can be used to achieve a greater integration of marital research and marital therapy (see Bradbury & Fincham, in press; Fincham & Bradbury, in press). It is our view that this new genre of marital research is precisely the kind of development that helps generate the theory needed to sustain costly observational research. Although we applaud Coyne's concern about models of adaptation that ignore interpersonal factors, his

admonitions to those in the marital field appear to be misplaced or, at best, redundant.

The difference between Coyne's view and our view can be summarized by different perspectives on cognition in the depression literature. Coyne chooses to focus on the glass being half empty, but we choose to see it as half full; Coyne is pessimistic about filling the glass, but we are optimistic; Coyne sees water (interactional perspectives) as incompatible with other liquids (cognitive perspectives) and can only tolerate a glass filled with a "pure" drink, but we see compatibility and complementarity and allow for mixed drinks.

### **COGNITION AND BEHAVIOR: THE PROVERBIAL ELEPHANT**

If, as Coyne asserts, our analysis simply generates confusion, it behooves us to consider seriously his proposed alternative. Unfortunately, positive statements about what should be done in marital research and therapy are limited to the closing paragraphs of the article. Specifically, Coyne recommends the use of daily diaries, yet the entries to such diaries necessarily reflect the person's cognitive construction of their transactions with the environment. Similarly, he recommends the need to "get couples to engage each other in more positive and satisfying ways" (Coyne, this issue). Much of the clinical literature on cognition in marital therapy is designed precisely to facilitate this goal and emerged because of the need for more powerful interventions to ensure its attainment. Our discussion also considers how cognitive interventions might facilitate subgoals of therapy such as structuring appropriate therapeutic tasks, compliance with such tasks, and having clients derive and maintain the benefits of such tasks, all of which Coyne cites as "alternatives" to a cognitive perspective.

Failing to find a positive alternative that appeared to differ from our own perspective, we turned to a different source (Coyne, 1988) to determine what Coyne envisages as a more fruitful marital therapy. What we found was quite surprising: "The fundamental strategy is to connote positively the spouse's efforts" (p. 106; read "influence cognitive representations of spouse behavior"); "When the therapist provides a positive reframing for a spouse behavior and encourages a relinquishing of any excessive responsibility for how the depressed partner feels, the spouse is more likely to adopt more human interpretations of his or her partner's behavior and reduce demands for immediate change" (p. 107; note that changing a spouse's attributions of responsibility leads directly to changes in his or her behavior, a clear instantiation of the cognition-behavior relationship that Coyne totally rejects!); "Just as important . . . are steps to dissuade depressed persons from

taking responsibility for solving problems that are intractable" (p. 101; again, responsibility attributions assume significance). In view of such observations, we fail to see how attention to "attributions and schema will add little" (Coyne, this issue) to marital therapy. Indeed, without such cognitive variables, it is impossible to conceive of the reframes that play such an extensive role in Coyne's (1988) view of therapy.

Although we disagree with the role Coyne (1988) accords cognition in marital therapy, we do not for a single moment believe that marital therapy does or should consist solely of attention to cognitive variables. Rather, we believe that cognitive variables offer another level of analysis, one that may be impossible to avoid, as we look for potential points of therapeutic intervention. In fact, there are circumstances (e.g., marital violence) in which attention to cognition only (or primarily) would be ethically untenable. These observations in no way deny the potentially important role of cognition in marital discord.

Again, we believe that our differences with Coyne can be captured in terms of a well-known image. Like the proverbial blind people exploring the elephant, we have happened on related parts of the elephant's anatomy. We are both excited by our respective discoveries and wish to emphasize them. Although Coyne seems unwilling to value or even acknowledge the anatomy discovered by others, we welcome such discoveries in the belief that they enrich, rather than detract from, our own.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the question we must ask ourselves is precisely the question Coyne asks: Will attention to attributions or other cognitive variables in marriage help guide intervention and clinical decision making so that we can better serve the couples who seek our help? Unlike Coyne, however, we need to ask this as an open-ended question for which an answer is sought rather than as a rhetorical question. A systematic body of research on cognition in marriage and marital therapy is now well underway and it is no longer a matter, as Coyne questions, of whether marital research should include the study of spouses' cognition. The issue is how this can be done most fruitfully to provide as complete an answer as possible to the question posed. Toward this end, the program we outline draws on disparate sources to advance basic research on marital cognition, explicate intervention techniques already in use, refine the timing and application of cognitive interventions, and perhaps even to generate new techniques that will be useful in their own right. Many of our observations may turn out to be incorrect in the light of empirical evaluation, but even if correct, they will still provide an incomplete picture

of marriage and marital therapy. It is important therefore that there are indeed many mansions in the "Temple of Science."

### NOTE

1. Indeed, we are puzzled by, and cannot identify with, many positions ascribed to us. For example, our article was motivated in part by the relative lack of integration among theory, research, and practice, and this lacuna is discussed explicitly in the article (cf. Fincham et al. "assume that cognitive theory, research and practice are more closely linked than they are, and this leads to considerable confusion"; Coyne, this issue). Other examples are discussed throughout our reply.

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