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Part IX

RELATIONAL QUALITIES

CHAPTER 31

Relationship Satisfaction

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Romantic relationships such as marriage have the potential to provide lifelong companionship, romance, support, sexual fulfillment, and commitment needs. Yet a high proportion of couples experience an erosion of these positive qualities over time and, for some, relationship satisfaction erodes to the point where the relationship is terminated. Relationship satisfaction is widely viewed as the final common pathway that leads to relationship breakdown (Jacobson, 1985). When intimate relationships like marriage go wrong, the costs can be high; marital distress, separation, and divorce are associated with just about any physical or mental health problem one cares to name (see Beach & Whisman, 2012; Fincham & Beach, 2010; Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014). Not surprisingly, relationship satisfaction is the gold standard for evaluating interventions designed to alleviate relationship distress.

Emergence of Interest in Relationship Satisfaction

Changing economic and social conditions at the beginning of the 20th century called public attention to relationship problems in families and ushered in a period of emerging science. The desire to understand and remediate family problems led to direct study of family relationships using empirically based procedures. The two earliest studies in this domain were on sexual behavior (predating Kinsey by a decade) and both examined its role in relationship satisfaction or success (Davis, 1929; Hamilton, 1948).

The central status accorded relationship satisfaction in marital research became even more salient in two later projects that are often credited with establishing marital research as an area of empirical inquiry. Terman and colleagues' (1938) book, *Psychological Factors in Marital Happiness*, described a questionnaire study of 1,133 couples designed to identify the determinants of marital satisfaction. Burgess and Cottrell (1939) similarly reported a questionnaire study of 526 couples in *Predicting Success or Failure in Marriage*. Both books are classic texts and report studies that became the prototypes for later research in their attempt to identify correlates of marital satisfaction.

The legacy of Burgess and Cottrell (1939) has been profound as they developed an index of marital adjustment which was conceptualized as “patterns of behavior ... [that are] mutually satisfying.” (p. 47). However, Burgess and Cottrell selected items for their

index based on the item's correlation with a single item rating of marital happiness. They then "validated" their measure by showing that the summed score of the items in the index predicted marital happiness. This approach set an important precedent for the development of subsequent measures that dominated marital research, namely, the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT, Locke & Wallace, 1959) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Spanier, 1976). Given this origin it is no surprise that the relationship literature is replete with numerous terms (e.g., adjustment, success, happiness, companionship) that are used synonymously with satisfaction to reflect the quality of a relationship.

In short, satisfaction has been the dominant construct studied in the literature on relationships such as marriage. Not surprisingly, it has gained the attention of researchers from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, family studies, and communication. Initially researchers, mostly sociologists, paid greatest attention to identifying demographic correlates of marital satisfaction (the sociological tradition), a focus forgone in the late 1960s and 1970s when observation of couple behavior assumed center stage (the behavioral tradition). Beginning in the 1980s recognition of the limits of a purely behavioral account of marriage gave rise to study of variables such as cognition and affect that might mediate the relation between behavior and marital satisfaction (the mediational tradition). For a more complete historical account, see Bradbury, Fincham and Beach (2000) and Ogolsky, Lloyd and Cate (2013).

Overview of Satisfaction in Close Relationships

Before providing a brief synopsis of major findings regarding relationship satisfaction, we briefly highlight salient features of scholarship on this topic.

The Nature of Relationship Satisfaction Research

A first important feature of writings on relationship satisfaction is that they focus almost exclusively on Western – and more particularly, North American – relationships. Moreover, with a few exceptions (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Hendrick, Dick, & Hendrick, 1998) most of the assessment devices used to study relationship satisfaction have focused on one particular relationship; marriage. This is both a strength and weakness. It is a strength in that there is a widespread agreement, although not consensus, in North American society that marriage is primarily for the benefit of the spouses rather than the extended family, society, the ancestors, deity or deities, and so on. Widespread agreement on the hedonic purpose of marriage has the potential to simplify the task of researchers engaged in assessing and understanding relationship satisfaction and thereby promote advances in understanding. On the other hand, there is the strong temptation to insert into our measures of satisfaction items that may not be applicable in other cultures. For example, an assessment of marital satisfaction that asks who the respondent would marry if she had her life to live over again (as in one of the most widely used measures of marital quality, the Marital Adjustment Test [MAT]; Locke & Wallace, 1959), is clearly not applicable in cultures in which arranged marriages are

accepted practice. Likewise, questions assessing disagreements may be poor indicators of marital satisfaction in cultures in which disagreement with a spouse is discouraged.

Second, the literature on relationship satisfaction is characterized by a lack of adequate theory (for exceptions, see Clark and Shaver & Mikulincer chapters, this volume). Long ago Glenn (1990) pointed out that most research on marital satisfaction is justified on practical grounds “with elements of theory being brought in on an incidental, ad hoc basis” (p. 818). This circumstance did not change much until recently and had had unfortunate consequences. For example, Spanier (1976) eliminated items from his influential measure (the DAS) when they were positively skewed thereby assuming that items reflective of marital quality approximate a normal distribution. As Norton (1983) pointed out, however, such items may be less critical indicators or even irrelevant to marital quality if marital quality inherently involves skewed data because spouses tend to report “happy” marriages. Moreover, if the outcome predicted by marital quality is itself skewed (e.g., aggression), then a skewed predictor may be best (Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994). Conceptual confusion has resulted in a large number of terms, such as adjustment, success, happiness, companionship, or some synonym reflective of the quality of the relationship being used interchangeably to refer to satisfaction.

Third, relationship satisfaction is almost exclusively assessed using self-report. However, self-reported satisfaction gives us little information on the processes involved in “the final common pathway” that results in relationship breakdown. Ironically, even behaviorally oriented psychologists who rejected the utility of self-report when they began to study marriage systematically in the 1970s used self-reported satisfaction as a criterion variable in their studies. Indeed, a primary goal was to account for variability in reports of marital satisfaction. This feature of the literature is important when considering the two dominant approaches that have been used to study marital satisfaction. One approach has been to view marital quality as a characteristic of the relationship between spouses instead of, or in addition to, the spouses’ feelings about the marriage. This approach has tended to favor use of such terms as adjustment (see Whisman & Li, 2015). However, it is questionable whether spouses are the best, or even good, reporters of relationship properties. Self-report seems better suited to the second major approach to marital quality which focuses on how married persons feel about their marriage. This approach has tended to use such terms as marital satisfaction and marital happiness.

Fourth, it is not clear what most instruments of relationship satisfaction actually measure. Most frequently, measures comprise a polyglot of items, and responses to them are not conceptually equivalent. For example, on the MAT items include ratings of disagreement on eight issues (most, but not all, of which are scored from 0 to 5), and questions such as, “Do you ever wish you had not married?” (scored as 0, 1, 8, or 10 depending on responses). The inclusion of behavioral and subjective categories and the number and weighting of items used to assess each category varies across measures of marital satisfaction, making it unclear what these tools actually measure. The summation of various dimensions of marriage in omnibus measures of marital satisfaction (e.g., interaction, happiness) also precludes meaningful study of the interplay between such dimensions (e.g., interaction may influence satisfaction and vice versa).

Typically, an overall score is computed by summing over the items, but it is not clear how such a score should be interpreted. Although this problem was identified in the marital literature over 50 years ago (see Nye & MacDougall, 1959), it remains an issue. Dahlstrom (1969) described three levels at which responses to self-report inventories can be interpreted: they can be seen (a) as veridical descriptions of behavior (e.g., responses regarding frequency of disagreement reflect the actual rate of disagreement between spouses), (b) as potential reflections of attitudes (e.g., frequently reported disagreement may reflect high rates of disagreement but may also reflect the view that the partner is unreasonable, that the spouse feels undervalued, or some other attitude), and (c) as behavioral signs the meaning of which can only be determined by actuarial data (e.g., rated disagreement may reflect time spent together, respondents' self-esteem, frequency of intercourse, or a host of other variables). Few measures of relationship quality address the level at which responses are to be interpreted.

A fifth feature of relationship satisfaction research follows naturally from the last, namely, that our knowledge of the determinants and correlates of relationship satisfaction includes (an unknown number of) spurious findings. This is because of overlapping item content in measures of satisfaction and measures of constructs examined in relation to it. The often-documented association between self-reported communication (e.g., Marital Communication Inventory; "Do the two of you argue a lot over money?" "Do you and your and your spouse engage in outside activities together?") and marital satisfaction (DAS; "Indicate the extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner on: handling family finances," "Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?") is a particularly egregious example of this problem. The resulting tautological association hinders theory construction and affects the credibility of research findings. Funk and Rogge (2007) offered evidence to support the cross-contamination of communication and relationship quality measures, identifying 13 items from the MAT and DAS that correlated more strongly with the communication factor (extracted from a principle components analysis of 176 satisfaction and communication items in a sample of 5,315 respondents) than they did with the satisfaction factor. The problem of overlapping item content is vexing as the exclusion of items common to both measures does not provide a satisfactory solution because they usually reflect overlap in the definition of the constructs (see Fincham and Bradbury, 1987).

Major Findings

Using quantitative measures of relationship satisfaction as criteria for group membership, a variety of studies have attempted to pinpoint what differentiates happy and unhappy relationships. However, the discovery of these correlates has been accompanied by "little or no explanation of why the correlations exist" (Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974, p. 4), and by the 1960s, there was considerable dissatisfaction with the research, particularly its reliance on self-report. In 1961, Raush et al. began to examine the overt behaviors of couples engaged in improvised marital conflicts in the laboratory.

Next, we briefly summarize what has been learned about behavioral, cognitive, and emotive correlates of relationship satisfaction, recognizing that the distinctions among these three constructs are in many ways artificial.

BEHAVIOR

Attempts to identify the behavioral correlates of relationship satisfaction have taken two major forms. Using spouses as observers of their partners' behaviors, researchers have attempted to examine behaviors that covary with daily reports of marital satisfaction. A second strategy entailed laboratory observation of couples who reported high and low marital satisfaction.

The first point to note is that agreement between spouses in reports of daily marital behaviors is low (average 46%; Christensen & Nies, 1980) and is not improved by training spouses as observers. Such findings raise questions about the epistemological status of spouse reports of partner behavior, suggesting that they may reflect more about the reporter's perceptions than the observed spouse's behavior. With this caveat in mind, it has been found that reported spouse behaviors covary only slightly with daily reports of satisfaction (the two variables share about 25% of their variance), the covariation remains slight even when lists of behaviors are customized for each couple, behaviors classed as affective are more highly related to satisfaction than other classes of behavior (e.g., instrumental), events experienced as displeasing (e.g., "spouse interrupted me") are more highly related to satisfaction ratings than events that are "pleasing," and the association between daily behaviors and satisfaction is higher in dissatisfied than satisfied spouses (see Weiss & Heyman, 1997, for a review).

Although questionable as veridical reports of partner behavior, some of the results obtained for spouse reports of behavior are remarkably consistent with the findings that emerge from observed couple interactions. For example, negative behaviors appear to distinguish more consistently satisfied from dissatisfied couples. Because several comprehensive reviews exist, we provide only a brief overview of findings (for reviews, see Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Kelly, Fincham, & Beach, 2003; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Compared with satisfied couples, distressed couples show a range of dysfunctional communicative behaviors, including higher levels of specific negative behaviors such as criticisms and complaining, hostility, defensiveness, and disengagement, such as not responding or tracking the partner. Distressed couples also fail to listen actively to each other when interacting. We also know that these negative interactional behaviors are more likely to occur in some settings than others. Diary studies show that stressful marital interactions occur more frequently in couples' homes on days of high general life stress and at times and places associated with multiple competing demands and that topics of disagreements often coincide with the activities partners are engaged in at the time.

Research has shown also that the giving and receipt of support behaviors are related to satisfaction and to important health outcomes (see Sullivan & Davila, 2010). For example, wives' supportive behaviors predicted decreased satisfaction 24 months later

independently of either partners' conflict behaviors and supportive behaviors moderated the association between conflict behavior and later marital deterioration with compromised conflict skills leading to greater risk of lower satisfaction in the context of poor support communication (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; see also Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000).

With regard to sequences of behavior, the "signature" of dissatisfied couples is the existence of reciprocated negative behavior that tends to escalate in intensity. In fact, one of the greatest challenges for couples locked into negative exchanges is to find an adaptive way of exiting from such cycles (Gottman, 1998). This is usually attempted through responses designed to repair the interaction (e.g., metacommunication, "You're not listening to me") that are typically delivered with negative affect (e.g., irritation, sadness). Distressed couples tend to respond to the negative affect, thereby continuing the cycle. This makes their interactions more structured and predictable. In contrast, satisfied couples appear to be more responsive to the repair attempt and are thereby able to exit from negative exchanges early on. For example, a spouse may respond to "Please, you're not letting me finish" with "Sorry . . . please finish what you were saying." Their interaction therefore appears more random and less predictable.

A second interaction pattern commonly observed in dissatisfied couples is that one spouse pressures the other with demands, complaints, and criticisms, and the partner withdraws with defensiveness and passive inaction. This interaction pattern is commonly referred to as the demand-withdrawal pattern or as pursuit and distance (Wile, 2013). Although initially linked to gender (female demand and male withdrawal), it was later shown that the demand-withdrawal pattern varies as a function of which partner's problem issue is discussed. When discussing the husband's issue, there were no systematic differences in the roles taken by each spouse. However, when discussing the wife's issue, women were much more likely to be demanding and men more likely to be withdrawing than the reverse (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). Similarly, Klinetob and Smith (1996) found that demand-withdrawal patterns switch polarity when the topics chosen for discussion clearly focus on an issue of change for each partner. These results provide good evidence that although men and women tend to play different roles in typical dysfunctional communications, these roles are sensitive to context and are particularly sensitive to whose issue is discussed (see Eldridge & Baucom, 2012). Regardless of issue discussed, higher levels of emotional arousal are associated with use of the demand-withdrawal pattern (Baucom, et al., 2011) and such arousal is related to both own and partner behaviors (Baucom, et al., 2015).

Finally, conflict interaction patterns seem to be relatively stable over time and to predict changes in marital satisfaction and marital stability (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For example, observed negative behaviors (e.g., anger, criticism and negative affect reciprocity) among newlyweds predicted marital satisfaction and stability 6 years later (Gottman et al. 1998) and, among couples married an average of 5 years, up to 14 years later. Similarly, self-reported destructive behaviors in the first year of marriage predicted higher divorce rates over 16 years of marriage (Birditt, Brown, Orbach, & McIlvane, 2010). However, research on social support suggests it is important to consider such

relations in a broader context (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). In a similar vein, in the context of high levels of affectional expression between spouses, the inverse correlation between negative spouse behavior and marital satisfaction becomes significantly weaker (Huston & Chorost, 1994). Affectional expression is also important for understanding the association between the demand-withdrawal pattern and satisfaction; the demand-withdrawal pattern was unrelated to marital satisfaction in the context of high affectional expression but the two variables were inversely related in the context of average or low affectional expression (Caughlin & Huston, 2002).

COGNITION

The role of cognitive variables in understanding relationship satisfaction has received considerable attention (see Fincham, 2001; Murray & Holmes, 2011; Sinnott, 2014). Most research on cognition has studied the content of cognitions. For example, unrealistic relationship beliefs (e.g., disagreement is destructive, partners cannot change, sexual perfectionism) are related to dissatisfaction, observed couple behavior, and couples therapy outcome.

Some studies, however, have examined functional unrealistic beliefs. For example, Murray and colleagues (Murray, Griffiths & Holmes, 1996), showed happy couples viewed their partners in a more positive light than their partners viewed themselves, and individuals were happier in their relationships when they idealized their partner and their partners idealized them. In a similar vein, Murray and her colleagues (2002) found that egocentrically assuming similarities between partner and self that do not exist is characteristic of being in a satisfying relationship. This work showing that cognitive distortions are important in satisfied relationships is consistent with earlier work that shows happy spouses make egocentric attributions for negative relationships events (e.g., arguments) but partner-centric attributions for positive relationships events (Fincham & Bradbury, 1989). In short, positive illusions about a partner and relationship events are related positively to relationship satisfaction (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2011).

More work has been conducted on attributions in close relationships than on any other cognitive variable. Evidence for an association between attribution and relationship satisfaction is overwhelming, making it possibly the most robust, replicable phenomenon in the study of close relationships (Fincham, 2001). Specifically, certain attributions for relationship events (e.g., spouse arrives home late from work) can promote relationship satisfaction (e.g., she [he] was delayed by traffic,” an attribution that locates cause outside of partner, is impermanent, does not influence other areas of the relationship, and absolves partner of blame) or dissatisfaction (e.g., she [he] is selfish and cares more about work than about me,” which locates an unchanging cause – selfishness – with implications for many areas of the relationship and in the partner and makes the partner blameworthy). Alternative explanations for this attribution – satisfaction association that have been ruled out include anger and depression, general negative affectivity, measurement error, overlap between the assessment of attributions and satisfaction, and relationship violence (see Fincham, 2001).

The importance of attributions for relationship satisfaction is emphasized by longitudinal data showing that attributions may influence marital satisfaction. In each study, only the variance that attributions do not share with satisfaction is used to predict changes in satisfaction making it difficult to account for findings by arguing that attributions are a proxy index of relationship satisfaction. Four longitudinal studies show that attributions predict later satisfaction, a temporal relationship that is independent of partner depression. A fifth study spanning an 18-month period suggests that the association is mediated by the impact of attributions on efficacy expectations, which, in turn, influenced satisfaction (Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000). Finally, Karney and Bradbury (2000) found that intraindividual changes in attribution and in marital satisfaction covaried. Moreover, controlling for within-subject covariation, initial attributions had greater effects on the trajectory of marital satisfaction than Time 1 satisfaction had on the trajectory of attributions. Specifically, more conflict-promoting attributions at Time 1 were associated with steeper declines in satisfaction and with satisfaction that covaried less with subsequent changes in attributions. It appears that the relation between attributions and later satisfaction occurs via the impact of attributions on intervening behavior (Durtschi, Fincham, Cui, Lorenz, & Conger, 2011).

Relationship satisfaction is also related to a number of other cognitive variables. These include *working models of attachment*, with greater satisfaction being related to secure attachment (e.g., Towler & Stuhlmacher, 2013) through empathy and forgiveness (Chung, 2014), and perception of the *partner and ideal standards discrepancies*, with smaller discrepancies being related to greater satisfaction (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001). In fact, those who believe that their partner mirror their ideals do not show declines in marital satisfaction in the early years of marriage (Murray et al., 2011). *Further, social comparison processes* affect relationship satisfaction as well, with greater downward comparison (and hence greater perceived superiority) being associated with greater satisfaction (Buunk & Ybema, 2003). *Memory is another cognitive factor* in that more satisfied partners believe their relationships have improved over the past by negatively biasing recall of the past (Karney & Coombs, 2000). *Implicit attitudes* towards the partner predict later relationship satisfaction and relationship termination (Fincham & Rogge, 2010; McNulty, Olson, Meltzer & Shaffer, 2013). Finally, *self-evaluation maintenance processes* influence satisfaction by changing the nature of couple communication, producing positive and negative emotional reactions to interactions involving the partner and moderating responses to differences in decision-making power in marital relationships (O'Mahen, Beach, & Tesser, 2000).

EMOTION

A variety of indices of emotion have been examined in marital research. An index of emotion which has long been utilized is nonverbal behavior. Although such assessment of affect is clearly simplistic, several fascinating findings support the centrality of affect in couple satisfaction. For example, affect codes are more powerful than verbal codes in discriminating satisfied from dissatisfied couples, with groups being distinguished by their use of neutral and negative, rather than positive, affect. Interestingly, although dissatisfied spouses are able to alter verbal behavior if instructed to pretend to be happily

married, they are unable to change their nonverbal behavior (Vincent, Friedman, Nugent, & Messerly, 1979).

Other indices of emotion investigated include verbal report, “online” affect ratings, and physiological measures such as heart rate. As might be expected, satisfied partners score higher on self-report indices of emotion, suggesting that positive affect is an important component of marital satisfaction (although this finding is not surprising given that affect-related items appear in relationship satisfaction assessments). To investigate affective experience during interactions, partners have been asked to make continuous ratings of affect as they review a videotape of their interaction. Typically these consist of a rating dial with a semicircular arc, which is manipulated to represent how they felt (ranging from very negative to very positive). As might be expected, satisfied spouses experience problem-solving interactions with their partner as more positive than distressed couples.

Gottman and colleagues also took online measurements of autonomic nervous system activity during the course of low- and high-conflict discussions. It was found that physiological interrelatedness (or “physiological linkage”) between partners occurred at the times when negative affect was reported as occurring and being reciprocated, was higher in the high-conflict task compared with the low-conflict task, and was inversely related to marital satisfaction (see Gottman & Notarius, 2000). In contrast, Thomsen and Gilbert (1998) find greater synchrony or correspondence in physiological systems among satisfied than dissatisfied couples. Such discrepancies show that it can be difficult to obtain reliable physiological data during spontaneous social interaction and that, perhaps as a consequence, promising hypotheses involving physiological data (e.g., that arousal before and during marital interaction predicts later marital satisfaction) have not been supported on further analysis (Gottman & Levenson, 1992).

Despite its presumed importance in relationships, the role of emotion regulation has received very little research attention. However, Bloch, Haase and Levenson (2014) showed that wives’ down regulation of negative emotional experience and emotional behavior was related concurrently to greater marital satisfaction in both husbands and wives and to positive changes in wives’ marital satisfaction 13 years later. No effects were found for physiological measures of emotion regulation or for husbands’ emotion regulation.

Notwithstanding these observations, there is strong evidence that emotion is an essential component of any complete understanding of relationship satisfaction and is integral to the experience of marital dissatisfaction. However, its exact role *visa-vis* change in satisfaction remains unclear because some studies show, for example, that negative affect is detrimental for marriage, and others show that negative affect promotes marital satisfaction or is unrelated to change in satisfaction (for discussions, see Fincham & Beach, 1999; Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Lack of replication across laboratories and even within laboratories is a problem, and it is unlikely that the role of affect in eroding or supporting relationship satisfaction will become clear without clarification of the

conceptual underpinnings of affect-related constructs and refinement of the methods used to observe emotion and to document their impact on relationships over time.

CODA

The challenge for understanding relationship satisfaction given its overlap with other relevant constructs, at both conceptual and measurement levels, has already been noted. Similarly, sentiment override also poses a challenge to the validity of research findings on relationship satisfaction. Weiss (1980) coined the term sentiment override to describe the hypothesis that spouses respond noncontingently to partner behavior or questions about the marriage. In other words, partners simply respond to each other or research questions in terms of their dominant feeling or sentiment about the relationship, and this is reflected “in as many tests as one chooses to administer” (Weiss & Heyman, 1990, p. 92). Belief in this position is so strong that attempts to explain variance in relationship satisfaction using self-reports have been characterized as “invalid from a scientific standpoint” (Gottman, 1990, p. 79).

A fundamental task for the field is to show that any construct studied is not simply a proxy for relationship satisfaction. It is therefore useful to require that constructs studied do more than capture variance in commonly used measures of relationship satisfaction. A test of “surplus conceptual value” can be provided by controlling statistically the relationship satisfaction of both partners whenever two relationship variables are investigated lest any association between them simply reflect their status as proxies of relationship satisfaction.

Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Relationship Satisfaction

What we know about relationship satisfaction is necessarily a function of how we have studied the phenomenon. In this section we briefly describe two major approaches to conceptualizing relationship satisfaction before outlining recent developments that are changing the way in which relationship quality is operationalized.

Two Approaches

Two major approaches are evident in conceptualizing the numerous terms used to refer to what we earlier identified as the final common pathway to relationship breakdown. Terminological heterogeneity combined with disciplinary diversity means that relevant material is “scattered across a variety of disparate sources,” which makes it extremely difficult “to access the picture of marriage painted by scientific research” (Fincham, 1998, p. 543). The two approaches focus on the relationship and on intrapersonal processes, respectively. Reflecting the legacy of Burgess and Cottrell (1939), the interpersonal or relationship approach typically looks at patterns of interaction such as communication, companionship, and conflict, and tends to favor use of terms such as adjustment. In contrast, the intrapersonal approach focuses on individual judgments, namely subjective evaluation of the relationship. This approach tends to use such terms as satisfaction and happiness.

Prima facie, each approach seems valuable. However, reliance on self-report in each approach obscures their differences. Although, some properties of the relationship can be obtained only from partners (e.g., frequency of intercourse), others may be beyond the awareness of all but the most psychologically sophisticated (e.g., the pattern of interaction during conflict). As a result, the epistemological status of such reports has changed so that they are now viewed not as objective reports of behavior (as originally thought) but as subjective perceptions. Self-report seems better suited to the second major approach to marital quality, which focuses on how spouses evaluate their marriage.

In light of the above, it comes as no surprise that standard measures of relationship satisfaction intercorrelate highly (e.g., Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994; Funk & Rogge, 2007) supporting the conclusion that “different operations designed to measure marital satisfaction converge and form one dimension” (Gottman, 1979, p. 5).

At an empirical level the two approaches appear indistinguishable. It appears that conceptual confusion regarding relationship quality may be based on the assumption that constructs related at the empirical level are equivalent at the conceptual level. This can lead to a problem that is demonstrated by considering the example of height and weight. Those two dimensions correlate to about the same degree as many measures of relationship quality, yet much is gained by keeping height and weight separate. Imagine designing a door frame having only a composite measure of the bigness of users and not their height! Keeping empirical and conceptual levels of analyses separate is likely to facilitate theoretical development and the construction of more easily interpreted measures of relationship quality.

In view of the conceptual problems encountered in using omnibus measures, some scholars have argued that relationship quality be restricted to subjective, global evaluation of the relationship (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Norton, 1983; Schumm, Nichols, Schectman, & Grinsby, 1983). The strength of this approach is its conceptual simplicity, as it avoids the problem of interpretation and allows for unambiguous specification of the construct’s nomological network. Because it has a clear-cut interpretation, the approach allows the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of relationship quality to be examined in a straightforward manner.

One criticism of this approach is the view that unidimensional, global scales “often do not provide much information beyond the fact that a couple is distressed” (Fowers, 1990, p. 370). However, the same is true of the most widely used scales of relationship satisfaction, the MAT and DAS. It therefore appears that any attempt to advance understanding of relationship satisfaction will have to offer a significant advantage over the MAT and DAS to overcome the familiarity bias that has developed concerning these two measures. The conceptual clarity and ease of measuring subjective, global evaluation of the relationship does so, suggesting that it replace the MAT and DAS in marital research. As this standard is adopted, it will be important to reexamine accepted correlates of marital satisfaction to show that they do not represent spurious findings.

Operationalizing Relationship Satisfaction and Modern Test Theory

With a notable exception (Funk & Rogge, 2007), scales of relationship quality have problematic levels of noise in measurement, reducing their power to reveal meaningful results and thereby hindering theory development. This is because they have been developed using classical test theory and therefore fail to take advantage of recent developments in psychometrics.

Although 50 years of converging data offer strong evidence that measures like the DAS and MAT measure relationship quality, very little attention has been given to determining how precisely or accurately they assess that construct. This would be equivalent to doing 540 years of research studying fever medications using the same one or two brands of thermometers without knowing whether they were accurate to ± 0.1 degrees or ± 10 degrees. As long as the thermometers were indeed measuring temperature, researchers should still get converging results. However, if researchers were using thermometers that were accurate to only ± 10 degrees, it would take considerably larger sample sizes to discover reliable patterns of change over time and such extreme noise in measurement would likely obscure significant and meaningful results in smaller samples. An important casualty of such circumstances is likely to be theory development. In many ways, couples researchers find themselves in precisely this position, and although research using scales like the MAT and DAS has undoubtedly been fruitful, if those scales were to have low levels of precision (high measurement noise), then the countless significant results that excessive noise was likely to have masked would outweigh the information gained by using those measures. To address this issue, Item Response Theory (IRT) analyses are now being used in the development of relationship satisfaction measures.

IRT used with large samples provides insight into how an item will perform across a range of situations and specifies how much information it provides to discriminate among individuals. This also means that a score for a measure developed using IRT should have an identical meaning across samples. IRT also assumes that the utility of individual items varies by levels of the construct being assessed (θ). Put simply, some items might be highly effective at assessing low levels (e.g., -2 SD to -1 SD below the population mean) of a construct like relationship satisfaction. Conversely, other items might offer little information for people in that range but could offer large amounts of information for assessing higher levels (e.g., $+1$ SD to $+2$ SD) of that same construct. Although the possibility of such differences has long been recognized, classical test theory techniques like factor loadings, item-to-total correlations, squared multiple correlations, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients are simply unable to reveal such differences or to quantify them as clearly as IRT. Finally, IRT can synthesize the results into information profiles for each item (called item information curves, or IICs) that reveal how much information an item provides for assessing the construct of interest at various levels of that construct.

Funk and Rogge (2007) used IRT analyses on a pool of 140 items culled from existing measures to identify the set of 32, 16, and 4 items offering the greatest information (lowest noise) for assessing relationship quality, the couple Satisfaction Index (CSI). In

doing so they showed that the 32-item DAS offered little more information than the 6-item QMI, and the 15-item MAT offered no more information than a 4-item version of the DAS. Thus, the IRT analyses suggested that the two most widely used and cited measures of relationship quality, the MAT and DAS, had markedly high levels of measurement noise. Funk and Rogge (2007) were able to demonstrate that the increased information offered by the CSI scales translated into increased precision (decreased noise) and markedly higher levels of power for detecting group differences than the MAT and DAS. The reduced measurement error associated with the CSI provides greater power to detect theoretically meaningful results, particularly in small samples.

The above findings directly challenge the assertion that for measures of relationship quality the “psychometric foundation is reasonably solid and need not be redone” (Gottman & Levenson, 1984, p. 71). Rather measurement error has been a serious problem lurking underneath the seemingly robust and convergent findings of studies using the DAS and MAT. This lack of precision provides another reason that helps account for the relative lack of theoretical development in research on marital quality.

Finally, the psychometric analyses generating the CSI scales also shed light on the theoretical underpinnings of the construct of relationship quality. Funk and Rogge (2007) identified a more homogeneous set of items for the CSI scales. Specifically, items identified as most informative by the IRT analyses also happened to be items prototypical of the global evaluative dimension (e.g., the top four items included “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship,” “I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner,” “How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?” and “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?”). This finding suggests that responses to relationship satisfaction items align most directly with the more focused theoretical definition of this construct discussed earlier.

Moving forward: A Two-Dimensional approach

The attempt to conceptualize relationship satisfaction as a global evaluation of the relationship has focused on a bipolar conceptualization with dissatisfaction reflecting an evaluation of the relationship in which negative features are salient and positive features are relatively absent, and satisfaction reflecting an evaluation in which positive features are salient and negative features are relatively absent.

This view has been challenged, however, on the basis that constraining the assessment of relationship quality to a single dimension could be obscuring important phenomena and oversimplifying theories (see Fincham & Rogge, 2010). This challenge is consistent with robust findings in the affect literature, exemplified by scales like the PANAS (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988), suggesting that the experience of positive and negative affect are substantively distinct yet related phenomena, best assessed separately. Accordingly, two 3-item scales were developed to assess each dimension, the Positive and Negative Quality in Marriage (PN-QIM) scale. To enhance the distinction between the two dimensions, the beginning of each item asked respondents to consider only the dimension

they were evaluating (e.g., “Considering only the positive qualities of your spouse, and ignoring the negative ones, evaluate how positive these qualities are”).

Using this scale, Fincham and Linfield (1997) showed that that the PN-QIM positive and negative dimensions both demonstrated significant unique explanatory variance in self-reported positive and negative relationship behaviors and attributions even after controlling for a unidimensional measure of relationship satisfaction (the MAT), for the other PN- QIM scale, and general affect. More important, the “surplus conceptual value” test was met as these findings held even when MAT scores were statistically controlled. Finally, two groups of wives who were indistinguishable on MAT scores, those who were high in positivity and high in negativity (ambivalent wives) versus those who were low in positivity and low in negativity (indifferent wives), differed reliably in their behaviors and attributions (Fincham & Linfield, 1997). These results suggested that new and useful information was gained by disentangling the assessment of positive sentiment toward a relationship from negative sentiment toward that same relationship. Mattson, Paldino, and Johnson (2007) have also shown the utility of assessing positive and negative quality separately using the PN-QIM among engaged couples.

This two-dimensional approach also opens new avenues of inquiry in longitudinal research on relationships. For instance, it would be theoretically important if happily married spouses first increased negative evaluations only (became ambivalent) before then decreasing positive evaluations and becoming distressed, compared with a progression in which negative evaluations increased and positive evaluations decreased at the same time. Such progressions may, in turn, differ in important ways from one in which there is simply a decline in positive evaluations over time. Documenting the existence of different avenues of change in relationship quality, examining their determinants, and exploring their consequences suggests a program of research that may do much to advance our understanding of how relationships succeed and fail.

Rogge et al. (2013) extended this approach to examine linear change in relationship quality over 3 years using the MAT, PMQ, and NMQ in a sample of 174 couples who had received either no treatment (NoTx), the Preparation and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979), the Compassionate and Accepting Relationships Through Empathy program (CARE, Rogge, Cobb, Johnson, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2002), or an intervention designed to increase couples’ awareness of their own relationship behaviors without teaching them any specific skills (AWARENESS). When using the MAT, both husbands and wives in all four groups demonstrated drops in quality over the 3 years following the interventions, and couples in the treatment groups failed to demonstrate significant differences from couples in the NoTx group. When using the NMQ to model change in negative relationship qualities over time, the analyses also failed to identify any differences between the couples receiving treatment and those in the NoTx group. However, when using the PMQ scores to model linear change in positive relationship qualities over time, couples in the NoTx group demonstrated significantly sharper declines in positives than did couples in all three active treatment groups (PREP, CARE, and AWARENESS). The results suggest that positive relationship evaluations

can change over time independently of negative evaluations and that using only a global measure of quality like the MAT might have obscured meaningful treatment results.

Mattson, Rogge Johnson, Davidson, and Fincham, (2012), however, noted two limitations of the measurement approach used in the above research. First, a single descriptor was used for each dimension (e.g., “how positive”), leaving out other evaluative descriptors that may also compose these potentially multifaceted evaluations (e.g., “how exciting, interesting, etc.”). Second, the items used vary with respect to either the object being evaluated (i.e., partner or relationship), or which aspect of the object was evaluated (i.e., “qualities of” or “feelings toward” the relationship). Consequently, they reconfigured items from the semantic differential to assess relationship satisfaction across separate positive and negative dimensions thereby greatly broadening item content and its theoretical foundation.

Using seven items to measure each dimension, Mattson et al. (2012) found a 2-factor model for the Positive and Negative Semantic Differential (PN-SMD), that demonstrated convergent, criterion-related, and showed incremental validity over the 16-item Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) in predicting social support, sexual satisfaction, and hostile conflict. As expected, the new measure performed better than the one developed by Fincham and Linfield (1997). In addition, they showed that even though ambivalent (high P-SMD and high N-SMD) and indifferent participants (low P-SMD and low N-SMD) were indistinguishable based on their CSI scores, they were substantively different from one another (as well as from distressed and satisfied individuals) on specific relationship processes such as conflict. Interestingly, over 18 months the two groups showed different trajectories of change. Across two studies these researchers showed that the PN-SMD captures criterion-relevant information about ambivalence versus indifference toward the relationship, associations that are only detectable when using a 2-dimensional satisfaction measure.

Most recently, Rogge et al. (2016) developed the Positive Negative Relationship Quality scale (PN-RQ) an Item Response Theory-optimized measure of these two dimensions. From an initial pool of 20 positive (e.g., sturdy, enjoyable, good, friendly, hopeful, hot) and 20 negative (e.g., fragile, bad, lonely, static, discouraging, boring) adjectives reflecting the three dimensions of the Semantic Differential, (evaluation, potency, & activity), they identified the 8 (and within those 8, the 4) items most effective at assessing positive and negative relationship dimensions, respectively. The longer (8-item) versions of the subscales are suitable for use when higher levels of precision and power might be required (e.g., in studies with smaller sample sizes, or when used as one of the primary outcome variables) and the shorter (4-item) versions might be used when practical constraints limit the number of items that can be administered (e.g., daily diary studies, telephone surveys).

The PN-RQ was shown to offer unique insights in the temporal course of relationship satisfaction beyond those offered by current unidimensional measures of relationship quality. Specifically, it is possible to experience significant improvement or deterioration in the positive qualities of a relationship over 2 weeks while experiencing no

corresponding change on negative qualities (and vice versa). In addition, the PN-RQ scales outperformed the CSI-4 in their ability to detect differences between groups and showed meaningful differences between indifferent (low positive and negative qualities) and ambivalent (high positive and negative qualities) relationships that are obscured by unidimensional scales. Finally, the PN-RQ showed that the improvements seen on the unidimensional scales (i.e., MAT & CSI-4) following an intervention with couples were actually a result of a drop in negative relationship qualities rather than an increase in positive relationship qualities.

This viewpoint may seem to be a variation on the theme of unidimensional versus multidimensional approaches to relationships satisfaction. On the other hand, it appears to be something new in that it alone in the field retains the advantage of the theoretical clarity found in the unidimensional, global evaluation perspective outlined in the last section while also capturing the advantages of a multidimensional approach. In addition, it has the clear advantage of allowing us to make distinctions that are not afforded by unidimensional measures and thereby open new areas of inquiry. For example, it allows study not only of happy (high in positivity and low in negativity), and unhappy spouses (high in positivity and high in negativity) but also ambivalent spouses (high in positivity and in negativity) and indifferent spouses (high in positivity and in negativity), two groups that have not received attention in prior research.

Some Unresolved Issues

Snapshot or Movie?

An important development is the idea that relationship satisfaction is appropriately conceptualized not as a judgment made at a single time point but as a trajectory that reflects fluctuations in satisfaction over time. Such a trajectory can be computed for individual partners and parameters of the trajectory, especially its slope, or rate of change, can be examined in relation to other variables of interest. From this perspective, relationship satisfaction at one point in time cannot be fully understood without reference to earlier or later data points. So, for example, a score of 105 on the MAT has a different meaning depending on whether the person scored 115 or 85 five months earlier. This approach has the advantage of fostering multiwave longitudinal research on relationships and encourages researchers to specify a model of marital change. Use of this approach to conceptualize and understand relationship satisfaction is increasing and has the potential to provide a more refined picture of relationship satisfaction.

Will the Real Relationship Satisfaction Please Stand Up?

Confronted by various views of relationship satisfaction, it is tempting to want to identify the “real” relationship satisfaction. However, any attempt to identify the “real” meaning of relationship satisfaction is ultimately self-defeating. Instead, researchers are confronted by a situation analogous to that captured by the story of the blind men and the elephant. Each man describes what he can feel as an elephant and each is correct with the

totality of the descriptions providing a more complete picture than any single description or any subset of descriptions. Similarly, there are several options available for understanding relationship satisfaction, and each, when precisely specified, has merit. For example, the rich, multidimensional picture provided by the MSI is clearly more valuable to the couple counselor than knowing the summary score on a unidimensional measure comprising global evaluations of the relationship.

In essence, unresolved issues as to the nature of relationship satisfaction can be resolved not by pitting different perspectives on relationship satisfaction against each other but by careful specification of their referents and the purposes for which they may be most suited. For instance, if one's purpose is to simply distinguish satisfied couples from couples who might need marital counseling, standard measures of couple satisfaction (e.g., MAT, DAS) are perfectly appropriate, and their inclusion of a heterogeneous set of items might even give them an edge *for this purpose* over measures that consist solely of global evaluation of the relationship. In contrast, more homogenous measures are clearly advantageous in theoretically driven research on the correlates of relationship satisfaction.

Continuum or Category?

Over the past decade relationship researchers have begun to address a fundamental question regarding the nature of relationship satisfaction that can be asked of many psychological constructs. For example, when we speak of depression, we commonly distinguish between symptoms of depression and the syndrome of depression. A basic issue in this field is whether there are cutting points between qualitatively distinct categories that reflect "upset/distress or life dissatisfaction" and "disorder/psychopathology." In an analogous manner, family psychologists have begun to ask whether we can show that the "manifestations of marital disorder tend to cluster or aggregate in recognizable patterns in the same way that the symptoms of individual psychiatric disorders cluster in identifiable syndromes" (First et al., 2002, p. 163; see Koerner, this volume). Simply stated, does relationship satisfaction reflect an underlying continuum or are there discontinuities in satisfaction?

Why is it important to understand the underlying structure of relationship satisfaction? First, the underlying structure has implications for the plausibility of linear versus nonlinear models in the study of relationships. Nonlinear models often imply discontinuities and if a continuous dimension underlies scores of relationship satisfaction, it might be taken as a strike against such theories. Second, dichotomizing a variable that could legitimately be treated as a continuous variable has the same effect on power as discarding more than a third of one's sample (Cohen, 1983). If there is no evidence of distinct categories of relationship satisfaction, dichotomizing data, as is often done in marital research, is wasteful and has the potential to lead to type two errors. Third, if there is no point of discontinuity in relationship satisfaction, one may question the validity of the distinction between therapy participants who have "recovered" and those who have not "recovered" following couple therapy. Accordingly, there are both theoretical and practical reasons to address the latent structure of relationship satisfaction.

Why Might One Expect Relationship Satisfaction to Be Well Represented as a Single, Continuous Dimension?

Reports of marital dissatisfaction appear to be linked to a dimension of individual negative affectivity (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Likewise, the intraindividual changes produced by interaction patterns are well modeled as a linear effect over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). In addition, external life events influence level of satisfaction (Story & Bradbury, 2004), as do symptoms of personality disorder (e.g., Lavner, Lampkin, & Miller, 2015). Accordingly, to the extent that variations in environmental events, or personality disorder symptoms, or negative affectivity, reflect continua of severity, they might be expected to stretch out the range of marital satisfaction scores in a relatively continuous manner. As a result of these influences, one might expect a fine gradation of different levels of satisfaction with no point of discontinuity or categorical differences.

One might also expect marital satisfaction to reflect a dimensional structure based on the broader literature regarding positive and negative affective reactions to events. If change in individual relationship satisfaction is related to perceptions of movement toward or away from important relationship or individual goals (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 1999), relationship distress could be viewed as feedback that goals are being met by the relationship or, conversely, that the relationship is blocking important individual goals. Because rate of progress toward important relationship goals may be variable, and behavior in the service of goal attainment might be expected to require continuous adjustment, one might again expect a relatively continuous distribution of relationship satisfaction scores to result from such influences. Accordingly, there are a variety of empirical and theoretical considerations that would lead to the expectation that relationship satisfaction and distress should be well represented as a continuum only.

Why Might One Expect Relationship Satisfaction to Be Categorical Rather Than a Single Continuous Dimension?

There are also, however, good reasons to expect discontinuity in relationship satisfaction. It has, for example, been known for some time that happy couples tend to overestimate positive qualities and underestimate negative qualities of partners, whereas unhappy couples tend to do the opposite (e.g., Murray, 1999). Indeed, attributional models of marital discord suggest that there are interpretive differences between couples that result in deterioration in marital satisfaction over time (see Fincham, 2001).

Biases in perception or interpretation, whether viewed as motivated or as merely a by-product of cognitive architecture, suggest the strong possibility that relatively subtle differences in initial biases could feed back on themselves, becoming exaggerated over time to create increasing divergence between

happy and unhappy couples. In particular, one might anticipate that couples with negative biases could find themselves drawn inexorably into an increasingly negative view of the partner, whereas couples with more positive biases would find that they can readily explain away even those characteristics and behaviors that others might view as the “faults” of their partner (Murray, 1999). As a result, relatively minor initial differences in marital satisfaction could become exaggerated over time, leading to an increasingly bimodal distribution of outcomes over time.

How Can the Continuum–Category Issue Be Addressed?

Taxometric procedures (Waller & Meehl, 1998) have been developed to address the question of whether psychological constructs are best characterized as being dimensional only, or whether there is evidence of a latent categorical structure superimposed on the dimension of interest. If there is evidence of a latent categorical structure, the members of the group of interest are identified as members of the “taxon” and others are identified as members of the “complement.” These procedures provide a set of tools to examine the underlying structure of relationship satisfaction.

Beach, Fincham, Amir, and Leonard (2005) used taxometric methods to analyze data from 447 couples in early marriage who had lived together for an average of 4.5 years. Using the MAT, there was discontinuity in marital satisfaction scores such that approximately 20% of the sample experience marriage in a way that is qualitatively and not merely quantitatively different than their peers. They also showed that taxon and complement members differed on a number of relationship variables and that taxon membership moderated the contribution of leisure activities and negative partner behavior to satisfaction scores. Not only were the two groups different on a range of marital variables, they also appeared to show a different pattern of connections among marital variables.

The distinction between dissatisfaction and discord: A decade report card

Findings over the past decade have replicated and extended these initial findings by Beach et al. (2005), and there have been several developments supporting wider application of the distinction between discordant and non-discordant couples. Whisman, Beach, and Snyder (2008) examined a nationally representative sample of 1020 couples who were assessed with the Marital Satisfaction Inventory – Revised (MSI-R; Snyder, 1997). Replicating Beach et al. (2005), they found a taxonic result, reporting a prevalence of the taxon of .32 across this representative sample of couples. In addition, they observed temporal stability in taxon membership across a 6-week test-retest sample of 105 community couples, and strong discriminative validity between community and therapy couples with much higher prevalence of taxon membership in three independent

samples of couples in treatment (i.e. .92, .94, and .86 for treatment samples of 50, 50, and 323, respectively) than for the normative sample (i.e., .32). In addition, composite therapist rating of relationship problems across multiple areas for couples in treatment ($n = 323$) were correlated significantly with taxon membership, which also predicted therapists' ratings of couple distress better than did partners' own self-reports.

Encouraged by these findings, these authors subsequently developed and made available efficient self-report and interview-based screening tools (Snyder, et al., 2009; Whisman et al., 2009) that were further disseminated in the context of WHO efforts to elaborate relational processes relevant to mental health (Foran et al., 2015). Recently, Whisman, Robustelli, Beach, Snyder and Harper, (2015) again replicated the finding of taxonic structure in a community sample of 502 couples who had been married at least 10 years and in which at least one spouse was 55 to 75 years old. These authors also found statistically significant differences between individuals in the taxon (discordant spouses) and the complement (nondiscordant spouses) in depressive symptoms, with discordant spouses reporting higher levels of depressive symptoms than nondiscordant spouses, further underscoring the clinical utility of distinguishing qualitatively distinct levels of marital dissatisfaction.

The replications across young, normative, and older samples of married couples, and the development of practical tools for the assessment of taxonic status suggest greater consideration of the qualitative shifts in marital satisfaction that may be superimposed upon, and sometimes overshadow, the more gradual quantitative shifts in marital satisfaction that accrue across time (Fincham, et al., 2007). Conversely, longitudinal studies using latent class growth curves suggest the presence of a subset of couples with greater initial relationship distress who are most at risk for negative relationship outcomes over time and most in need of early identification and services (e.g., Foran et al., 2013; Lavner, Bradbury, & Karney, 2012); These findings suggest that the emergence of increasingly distinct groups of discordant and non-discordant couples across time, as reflected in the greater percentage of couples in the taxon later in marriage, may result from initial differences that become magnified as marriages develop. This affords another promising direction for future research on the emergence of marital discord and potential individual difference predictors (e.g., Lavner, et al., 2015).

As the foregoing brief overview suggests, there is a need for both continued conceptual and empirical development with regard to the role of qualitative differences in level of relationship satisfaction. Research on the structure of relationship satisfaction suggests that it may be important to examine multiple dimensions within each group (taxon and complement) and characterize patterns of change and correlates of satisfaction separately for each. It may also be important to examine separately the association of insider and outsider reports of marital satisfaction and observed marital interaction. Accordingly, the next decade seems well positioned to yield a more complex characterization of the latent categorical structure of marital satisfaction and to better articulate its importance in prevention and remediation of marital discord.

To conclude, it is noteworthy that this attempt to study the underlying structure of relationship satisfaction differs dramatically from prior efforts that assumed an underlying continuum and have attempted to identify clusters of items that group together using such techniques as factor analysis. Early on, factor analytic approaches gave rise to the conclusion that “different operations designed to measure marital satisfaction converge and form one dimension” (Gottman, 1979, p. 5) a view point supported by subsequent work that shows standard measures of relationship satisfaction inter-correlate highly (e.g., Heyman et al., 1994). With taxometric research on relationship satisfaction having only just begun, the jury is still out on whether relationship satisfaction is taxonic. We hope that it will not be too long before similarly strong conclusions to those just cited can be drawn about its taxonic, nature (or lack thereof). If relationship satisfaction proves to be taxonic, it will open up a new era of research in which it will be necessary to document correlates and consequences of taxon membership, the developmental trajectory of taxon members, and so on.

Conclusion

Romantic relationships do not invariably provide the benefits spouses hope and long for, and in Western societies the hedonic impact of this reality has been given a privileged position. As a result, a long and productive history of research has emerged on relationship satisfaction and its correlates. Primary among the findings in this research is clear evidence that relationship satisfaction is linked to problems in individual mental and physical health. It is also clear that a number of features characterize distressed couples, and research has moved on to address the more difficult problem of identifying reliable antecedents of marital dissatisfaction. Recent research and theory emphasize the utility of examining relationships in context and of studying both positive and negative aspects of the relationship. When this is done, it becomes clear that positive and negative aspects of relationships are not merely different ends of a bipolar dimension. Rather, they have the potential to interact in important ways to enrich our understanding of couple functioning. Finally, researchers have begun to take on the fundamental question of whether couples can be “categorized” as distressed or nondistressed.

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