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BRIEF REPORT

Relationship Problems Over the Early Years of Marriage:
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Although couples' management of differences and problems is widely assumed to be central to the course and outcome of their relationships, some theoretical perspectives hold that marital conflicts increase over the newlywed years, whereas others maintain that couples' problems remain stable. We tested these opposing views by examining changes in marital problems and marital satisfaction over the first 4 years of marriage in a sample of 169 newlywed couples. Although marital satisfaction declined on average, overall levels of marital problems remained stable. Analyses of 19 specific problems generally revealed considerable stability as well, although husbands and wives rated showing affection as increasingly problematic over time. These findings challenge longstanding assumptions regarding the role of accumulating conflict in marital functioning over time and suggest that specific and overall problems in marriage largely remain stable over the newlywed years. Implications for theory and clinical practice are discussed.

Keywords: longitudinal, marital conflict, marital satisfaction, newlywed couples

Theoretical understandings of marital functioning have long emphasized relationship problems and conflict over these problems. Kurt Lewin (1948) argued that conflicts between partners are inevitable, arising from competing needs in a variety of domains (e.g., sex, home life, outside activities). Whereas resolving conflicts through mutual adaptation was deemed essential to marital success, "If . . . no balance can be found which will give sufficient satisfaction to both partners, it will be difficult to keep the marriage intact" (Lewin, 1948, pp. 92–93). In the decades since, the idea that successful couples must negotiate their problems has remained central to our understanding of marital functioning (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 1999).

Despite the centrality of conflict in models of marital development, our understanding of how couples' problems change

remains incomplete. Instead, longitudinal studies of marriage have tended to focus on changes in couples' marital satisfaction, with a robust body of work showing that newlyweds' marital satisfaction declines on average over the newlywed years and documenting the individual, relational, and external factors that predict these declines (e.g., Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). These findings have led to the assumption that conflict and distress gradually emerge and increase over time (e.g., Huston et al., 2001), but leave unanswered exactly how couples' problems change. For example, the number of problem areas that couples contend with over time might grow, such that couples are dealing with more problems. Alternatively, the severity of couples' problems might increase, such that couples face more difficult problems overall, or they might experience a worsening of their single most significant problem. Each of these possibilities would have different implications for our basic understanding of the changes that occur during the newlywed years, but they remain unexplored.

Examining these types of changes is important because alternative perspectives call into question the idea that marital problems do change. Notably, the enduring dynamics model of marital distress argues that "Certain interpersonal patterns are established during courtship and are maintained throughout the course of marriage . . . problems arise initially in courtship and continue into marriage" (Huston et al., 2001, p. 239). Similarly, Wile (1988) posits "The process of selecting a partner for a long-term relationship should involve the realization that you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of unresolvable problems" (p. 263). Together, these perspectives raise the com-

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peting hypothesis that marital problems remain stable over time.

The current study tested these opposing views. Specifically, we examined changes in newlywed spouses' ratings of marital problems over the first four years of marriage at a global level, including changes in the number of problem areas, the total problem severity, and their maximum problem severity. Doing so has allowed us to determine whether marital problems change in the manner assumed by leading theories or whether they remain stable. We also compared these changes with changes in marital satisfaction to determine the relative degree of change in conflict versus satisfaction over the early years of marriage on average (i.e., whether problems and satisfaction change at similar rates or whether problems change more or less than satisfaction).

We also examined how specific marital problems change. Analysis of individual problem areas (e.g., in-laws, sex, children) provides a richer understanding of the specific changes that occur to inform theory and clinical practice, and allows for the possibility that different problem areas show unique patterns of change. Storaasli and Markman (1990) examined couples' reports of 10 different problem areas as they transitioned from engagement (premarriage) to the first year of marriage (early marriage) to after the birth of each couple's first child (early parenthood). Among the 40 couples who provided data at all three stages, approximately half of the problems remained stable over time, religion and jealousy improved, and sex and communication worsened. For this study, we built on these findings using a more expansive problem measure and a larger sample to examine how specific aspects of couples' relationships change.

Method

Participants

Participants were 169 couples drawn from a larger study of newlywed marriage that began in 2001 in a Northern Florida community surrounding a major state university.¹ Couples were recruited by (a) placing advertisements in community newspapers and bridal shops, offering payment to couples willing to participate in a study of newlyweds, and by (b) sending invitations to eligible couples who had completed marriage license applications in counties near study locations. Couples responding to either solicitation were screened for eligibility in a telephone interview. Inclusion required that this was the first marriage for each partner, the couple had been married less than 6 months, each partner was at least 18 years of age, each partner spoke English and had completed at least 10 years of education (to ensure comprehension of the questionnaires), couples did not have children, and wives were not older than 35. Eligible couples, after providing oral consent, were scheduled for an initial laboratory session.

Husbands averaged 25.6 ($SD = 4.1$) years of age and 16.3 ($SD = 2.4$) years of education; 59% were employed full time, 34% were full-time students, and 94% were White. Wives averaged 23.4 years of age ($SD = 3.6$) and 16.2 ($SD = 2.0$) years of education; 45% were employed full time, 45% were full-time students, and 86% were White. Consistent with the fact that many participants were students, average combined couple income was less than \$15,000 per year at baseline. Fifty-one couples (30%) became parents over the course of the study.

Procedure

Couples meeting eligibility requirements were scheduled to attend a 3-hr laboratory session within the first 6 months of marriage. Before the session, couples were mailed questionnaire packets (including the marital satisfaction and problems measures) to complete at home and bring to their appointments, along with a letter instructing couples to complete all questionnaires independently of one another. Upon arriving to the session, spouses completed a written consent form approved by the local human subjects review board, participated in a variety of tasks beyond the scope of the present study, and were paid \$70.

At approximately 6-month intervals subsequent to the initial assessment, couples were recontacted by telephone and again mailed marital satisfaction and marital problems questionnaires, along with postage-paid return envelopes and a letter of instruction reminding partners to complete forms independently. This procedure was used at all follow-up procedures except at Time 5, which resembled Time 1 in that couples completed questionnaires at home and brought them to the laboratory where they engaged in a variety of tasks beyond the scope of this study. After completing each phase, each couple was mailed a \$40–\$50 check for participating.

Measures

Marital problems. Spouses' marital problems were assessed eight times over the 4 years of the study, once every 6 months, using a modified version of the Marital Problems Inventory (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). This measure lists 19 potential problem areas in a marriage (e.g., in-laws, sex, showing affection) and, for each problem, asks participants to "indicate how much it is a source of difficulty or disagreement for you and your spouse" on a scale from 1 (*not a problem*) to 11 (*major problem*). In addition to the specific problem ratings, we used this measure to calculate three different dimensions of relationship problems at each time point: (a) problem count, the total number of problem areas that the spouse rated as being a 2 or higher (possible range = 0 to 19); (b) problem severity, the sum of each spouse's severity ratings of each problem area (possible range = 19 to 209); and (c) maximum problem, the most severe problem rating at that time point (possible range = 1 to 11). The three problem indices were highly correlated (mean cross-sectional correlation = .65 across all phases of the study for husbands and wives).

Marital satisfaction. We assessed marital satisfaction using three measures to ensure that any results were not idiosyncratic to a particular instrument. Each was used eight times over the 4 years of the study, once every 6 months. Two of the measures assessed global evaluations of the relationship exclusively (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). The first was the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983), a six-item scale asking spouses to report the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with general statements about their marriage (e.g., "We have a good marriage"). Five items asked spouses to respond according to a 7-point scale, whereas one

¹ Data from this study have been described in several other published reports (e.g., McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008; Meltzer, Novak, McNulty, Butler, & Karney, 2013), but this is the first to examine trajectories of global and specific relationship problems and how these trajectories compare to trajectories of relationship satisfaction.

item asked spouses to respond according to a 10-point scale, yielding scores from 6 to 45. Higher scores reflected greater satisfaction. The second global measure of satisfaction was a version of the Semantic Differential (SMD; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957), which asked spouses to rate their perceptions of their relationships on 7-point scales between 15 pairs of opposing adjectives (e.g., *bad-good*, *dissatisfied-satisfied*). The SMD yields scores from 15 to 105 such that higher scores reflect greater satisfaction. For both measures, coefficient alpha was $> .90$ for husbands and wives across all phases of the study. The two global measures were highly correlated (mean cross-sectional correlation = $.88$ across all phases of the study for husbands and wives).

The third measure of marital satisfaction examined spouses' satisfaction with specific aspects of their relationship (as opposed to their global sentiments). This measure listed 11 different domains of relationships (e.g., the way we communicate with each other, the extent to which we share interests) and asked participants to rate each item on a scale from 1 (*extremely unsatisfied*) to 7 (*extremely satisfied*). We created an overall composite measure of total domain-specific satisfaction by summing spouses' ratings of each item to form an index that could range from 11 to 77. This measure was highly correlated with the two global satisfaction measures (mean cross-sectional correlation = $.77$ across all phases of the study for husbands and wives).

Results

Trajectories of Marital Problems and Marital Satisfaction

We first examined how marital problems and marital satisfaction changed over time using growth-curve analytic techniques and the HLM 7.0 computer program (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2010). Husbands' and wives' data were estimated simultaneously within the same equations (Atkins, 2005). Time was estimated as number of months since the first assessment and was uncentered so that the intercept terms (B_{f00} and B_{m00}) could be interpreted as the value at the initial assessment. We used the following equations.

Level 1:

$$Y_{it}(\text{outcome}) = (\text{female})_{it}[\pi_{f0i} + \pi_{f1i}(\text{time})_{it}] + (\text{male})_{it}[\pi_{m0i} + \pi_{m1i}(\text{time})_{it}] + e_{itj}$$

Level 2:

$$\begin{aligned}\pi_{f0i}(\text{wife intercept}) &= \beta_{f00} + \mu_{f0i} \\ \pi_{f1i}(\text{wife slope}) &= \beta_{f10} + \mu_{f1i} \\ \pi_{m0i}(\text{husband intercept}) &= \beta_{m00} + \mu_{m0i} \\ \pi_{m1i}(\text{husband slope}) &= \beta_{m10} + \mu_{m1i}\end{aligned}$$

These equations include separate intercepts and linear slopes for men and women, and sex-specific variance components at Level 2. We initially included quadratic time effects for men and women as well, but these were not significant for any of the variables of interest, so we removed them from the final models.

We ran six separate models, one for each outcome of interest. As shown in Table 1, marital problems remained stable over time on each dimension: total problem count, total problem severity,

Table 1
Summary of Multilevel Models of Husbands' and Wives' Marital Problems and Marital Satisfaction

Variable	Intercept		Linear Slope	
	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	t ratio	Effect size <i>r</i>
Husbands				
Problem count	11.13 (0.36)	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.09	0.01
Problem severity	51.28 (1.83)	0.41 (0.29)	1.40	0.11
Max problem	6.45 (0.18)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.08	0.01
QMI	41.39 (0.38)	-0.43 (0.08)	-5.50***	0.39
SMD	94.05 (0.84)	-0.75 (0.16)	-4.75***	0.34
Domain satisfaction	64.58 (0.65)	-0.54 (0.12)	-4.64***	0.34
Wives				
Problem count	10.25 (0.35)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.41	0.03
Problem severity	48.20 (1.64)	0.20 (0.28)	0.71	0.05
Max problem	6.53 (0.18)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.15	0.01
QMI	41.87 (0.36)	-0.36 (0.08)	-4.73***	0.34
SMD	96.10 (0.82)	-0.66 (0.17)	-4.00***	0.29
Domain satisfaction	65.25 (0.68)	-0.57 (0.12)	-4.81***	0.35

Note. All intercepts were significant $p < .001$ because the lowest possible score was > 0 , so the t statistics for these estimates are not reported. Effect size $r = \sqrt{(t^2 / (t^2 + df))}$.

*** $p < .001$. $N = 169$ couples. $df = 168$ for husbands and wives.

and max problem severity (linear slopes all $p > .10$). There was, however, a significant, moderate decline, on average, for husbands and wives in global satisfaction using the QMI and the SMD and in domain-specific satisfaction ($p < .001$).

Comparing Problem and Satisfaction Trajectories

We then tested whether the observed changes in marital satisfaction and problems were significantly different. To conduct comparisons between measures that were scaled differently, we first created a standard metric to ensure that any differences in fixed effects were not simply differences in scale (Plewis, 2005). To do so, we standardized the first time point of each of the above measures, within sex, and then applied each variable's respective initial normalization factor to each of the other time points (again within sex). Doing so made the intercepts equivalent, with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1, eliminating any possible differences between them, but allowed for comparisons of the slopes, which were our primary interest.

Directly comparing the fixed effects (regression coefficients) across dependent variables required a three-level multivariate, multilevel model (Hox, 2002) in which values were nested within variable (Level 1), nested within time (Level 2), and nested within couple (Level 3). We conducted these analyses using SPSS mixed and compared two variables in each model (e.g., SMD and problem count). Results, shown in Table 2, confirmed that the patterns observed were significantly different. The slopes of the global satisfaction measures (QMI and SMD) and the domain-specific satisfaction measure differed from the slopes of the problem measures (total problem count, total problem severity, and maximum problem; all $p < .01$). The slope of the global satisfaction measures did not differ significantly from the slope of the domain-specific satisfaction measure ($p > .10$). Results did not differ between husbands and wives.

Table 2

Summary of Three-Level Multilevel Models Comparing the Linear Slopes of Different Relationship Perceptions ($N = 169$ Couples)

Comparison	Perception \times Time				Perception \times Time \times Gender			
	Estimate (SE)	t ratio	df	Effect size	Estimate (SE)	t ratio	df	Effect size
QMI–Problem count	0.08 (0.02)	4.11***	3203	0.07	–0.02 (0.03)	–0.75	3140	0.01
QMI–Problem severity	0.09 (0.02)	4.97***	3244	0.09	–0.03 (0.03)	–0.98	3180	0.02
QMI–Max problem	0.08 (0.02)	4.44***	3061	0.08	–0.02 (0.03)	–0.86	3007	0.02
QMI–Domain satisfaction	0.02 (0.02)	1.21	3960	0.02	–0.01 (0.02)	–0.49	3921	0.01
SMD–Problem count	0.05 (0.02)	2.91**	3189	0.05	–0.01 (0.03)	–0.45	3128	0.01
SMD–Problem severity	0.07 (0.02)	3.81***	3236	0.07	–0.02 (0.03)	–0.66	3175	0.01
SMD–Max problem	0.06 (0.02)	3.24**	3040	0.06	–0.01 (0.03)	–0.52	2987	0.01
SMD–Domain satisfaction	0.00 (0.02)	–0.02	3985	0.00	0.00 (0.02)	–0.18	3946	0.00
Domain–Problem count	0.05 (0.02)	3.16**	3806	0.05	–0.01 (0.02)	–0.30	3747	0.00
Domain–Problem severity	0.07 (0.02)	4.18***	3862	0.07	–0.01 (0.02)	–0.54	3805	0.01
Domain–Max problem	0.06 (0.02)	3.54***	3640	0.06	–0.01 (0.02)	–0.38	3583	0.01

Note. The linear slopes for each measure were calculated using adjusted scores that were scaled based on the standardized mean at the first time point. The first column (Comparison) lists the two variables being compared. The second column (Perception \times Time) tests whether these variables differed in their slope over time. The third column (Perception \times Time \times Gender) tests whether the difference in slope between variables also differed by gender. Husbands were the comparison group (coded as 0). Effect size $r = \sqrt{(t^2/[t^2 + df])}$.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Severity of Specific Marital Problems Over Time

Last, we examined how specific relationship problems changed over time using the growth-curve analytic techniques described above. Husbands' and wives' data were again estimated simultaneously within the same equations, with time estimated as number of months since the first assessment and uncentered. For husbands, 15 of the 19 problems remained stable over time (see Table 3). Religion was rated as a less severe problem over time, whereas showing affection, sex, and solving problems were rated as more severe (all $p < .05$). For wives, 16 of the 19 problems remained

stable (see Table 4). Jealousy was rated as a less severe problem over time, and children and showing affection were rated as more severe problems (all $p < .05$).

Discussion

Conflict resolution and problem solving have long been seen as central to marital functioning, but competing perspectives make different predictions about the longitudinal course of couples' marital problems. Using data from 169 newlywed couples assessed eight times over the first 4 years of marriage,

Table 3

Summary of Multilevel Models Estimating Husbands' Specific Marital Problems Over Time

Problem variable	Intercept	Linear slope		
	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	t ratio	Effect size r
1. Children	2.17 (0.13)	0.01 (0.02)	0.32	0.02
2. Religion	2.15 (0.15)	–0.05 (0.02)	–2.16*	0.16
3. In-laws, parents, relatives	3.45 (0.20)	–0.04 (0.03)	–1.26	0.10
4. Recreation and leisure time	3.46 (0.15)	0.02 (0.03)	0.80	0.06
5. Communication	3.33 (0.17)	0.04 (0.03)	1.38	0.11
6. Household management	3.41 (0.17)	0.02 (0.03)	0.59	0.05
7. Showing affection	2.49 (0.13)	0.09 (0.03)	3.20**	0.24
8. Making decisions	2.82 (0.14)	0.02 (0.03)	0.74	0.06
9. Friends	2.37 (0.13)	0.00 (0.02)	0.07	0.01
10. Unrealistic expectations	2.67 (0.15)	0.04 (0.03)	1.32	0.10
11. Money management	3.64 (0.17)	0.01 (0.03)	0.42	0.03
12. Sex	3.44 (0.18)	0.11 (0.03)	3.17**	0.24
13. Jealousy	2.29 (0.15)	–0.05 (0.03)	–1.74 ⁺	0.13
14. Solving problems	2.13 (0.11)	0.05 (0.02)	2.16*	0.16
15. Trust	1.91 (0.12)	0.01 (0.02)	0.65	0.05
16. Independence	2.42 (0.14)	0.02 (0.02)	0.69	0.05
17. Drugs and alcohol	1.51 (0.09)	0.01 (0.02)	0.28	0.02
18. Career decisions	2.64 (0.13)	0.01 (0.03)	0.20	0.02
19. Amount of time spent together	3.09 (0.15)	0.04 (0.03)	1.37	0.11

Note. $N = 169$. $df = 168$. All intercepts were significant $p < .001$ because the lowest possible score was > 0 , so the t -statistics for these estimates are not reported. One unit of time is equal to 6 months. Effect size $r = \sqrt{(t^2/[t^2 + df])}$.

⁺ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4
Summary of Multilevel Models Estimating Wives' Specific Marital Problems Over Time

Problem variable	Intercept	Linear slope		Effect size r
	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	t ratio	
1. Children	1.79 (0.10)	0.08 (0.02)	3.30**	0.25
2. Religion	2.09 (0.14)	-0.02 (0.02)	-1.14	0.09
3. In-laws, parents, relatives	3.34 (0.19)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.16	0.01
4. Recreation and leisure time	2.82 (0.14)	0.03 (0.03)	1.10	0.08
5. Communication	3.03 (0.15)	0.05 (0.03)	1.75 ⁺	0.13
6. Household management	3.67 (0.17)	0.00 (0.03)	0.09	0.01
7. Showing affection	2.28 (0.14)	0.06 (0.02)	2.57*	0.19
8. Making decisions	2.64 (0.13)	0.03 (0.03)	1.11	0.09
9. Friends	2.16 (0.12)	-0.03 (0.02)	-1.44	0.11
10. Unrealistic expectations	2.39 (0.14)	0.03 (0.03)	0.99	0.08
11. Money management	3.83 (0.17)	-0.04 (0.03)	-1.42	0.11
12. Sex	3.48 (0.19)	0.05 (0.03)	1.69 ⁺	0.13
13. Jealousy	1.99 (0.13)	-0.08 (0.02)	-3.62***	0.27
14. Solving problems	2.10 (0.12)	0.02 (0.02)	0.76	0.06
15. Trust	1.68 (0.12)	0.01 (0.02)	0.36	0.03
16. Independence	2.02 (0.14)	-0.04 (0.02)	-1.47	0.11
17. Drugs and alcohol	1.60 (0.12)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.72	0.06
18. Career decisions	2.36 (0.13)	0.02 (0.03)	0.67	0.05
19. Amount of time spent together	2.91 (0.14)	0.04 (0.03)	1.30	0.10

Note. $N = 169$, $df = 168$. All intercepts were significant at $p < .001$ because the lowest possible score was > 0 , so the t statistics for these estimates are not reported. One unit of time is equal to 6 months. Effect size $r = \sqrt{(r^2/[r^2 + df])}$.

⁺ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

we showed that marital problems remained stable on average, even as marital satisfaction underwent significant declines. This pattern of results was true regardless of how marital problems were operationalized, including partners' reports of their total number of problems, total severity of problems, and most severe problem. This stability did not appear to be due to the level of specificity of the assessment (i.e., global vs. specific), as ratings of specific problem areas (e.g., trust, recreation) also tended to be stable. Moreover, partners' ratings of how satisfied they were with specific aspects of their relationship showed similar changes to global satisfaction and differed significantly from change in marital problems.

Before turning to the implications of these results, it is important to note that, first, the sample as a whole was disproportionately Caucasian, middle-class, and likely low in risk for distress. Accordingly, problems might change more over time in higher-risk samples, though we note that this stability was found in the context of a sample whose satisfaction declined on average. Second, this study focused on changes in satisfaction and problems during the first 4 years of marriage. Although this is a time of significant transition, generalizations about how marriages change over longer periods should be made cautiously. Third, as with all research using this type of methodology, these are average trends in problems. The pattern of change for any specific couple may differ from this mean effect. Indeed, recent studies using group-based mixed modeling techniques to examine couples' satisfaction have revealed significant variability in patterns of change over time (e.g., Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010). Future work should expand on the analyses reported here to examine variability in trajectories of relationship problems, and the factors that predict this variability. Fourth, conflict was operationalized as partners'

reports about how much each problem was a "source of difficulty and disagreement for you and your spouse." This measure was ideal for understanding spouses' perceptions of their relationships, but it is possible that other ratings of conflict (e.g., frequency of arguing, how the conflict was handled) could reveal different patterns and should be examined further. Finally, although we used an expansive list of problems, they were based on a standard list that was identical across participants. A different methodology that allowed participants to generate their own most significant problems (e.g., Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) could yield different results if there were topic areas that this measure did not capture.

Notwithstanding these limitations, these findings have important implications for theoretical understandings of couple dynamics over the early years of marriage. Consistent with enduring dynamics models of marital functioning (e.g., Huston et al., 2001), the findings reported here indicate that, along multiple dimensions, marital problems are generally stable over the early years of marriage. Thus, relationship problems should not be thought of as a degenerative process that worsens over time, but instead might be better conceptualized as a chronic condition that remains steady. These findings support clinical observations that choosing a long-term partner involves "choosing a particular set of unresolvable problems" (Wile, 1988, p. 263) and build on work indicating that the roots of marital distress are present early in couples' relationship trajectories and remain stable (e.g., Birditt, Hope, Brown, & Orbuch, 2012; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010; Mattson, Frame, & Johnson, 2011). They also suggest that the key shift underlying declining satisfaction is not an increase in relationship problems, but a growing intolerance for problems that have existed from the

beginning (Karney, McNulty, & Frye, 2001). Further research is needed to test this idea.

Although problems generally did not change over time, analysis of specific problems highlighted a limited set of domains that did change. For husbands, these centered around intimacy (sex and showing affection) and solving problems; for wives, the domains of children and showing affection worsened over time. This pattern of results suggests that the first few years of marriage may be challenging not because longstanding issues become worse, but because the positive aspects of the relationship (sex, showing affection) are diminishing and/or external stressors (children) change relationship dynamics. We note also that husbands and wives showed improvements in certain domains on average as well. Notably, wives reported a significant decrease in jealousy, suggesting an increase in felt security in the relationship even as the degree of intimacy declined. Overall, these results are generally consistent with those observed by Storaasli and Markman (1990), increasing confidence in the robustness of these effects. Future research should extend these findings to examine how specific problems predict future difficulties (i.e., lower levels of satisfaction, relationship dissolution), and whether the patterns observed here differ for individuals who remain married and those who divorce.

These results also have implications for prevention and intervention. These findings that problems generally remain stable can be incorporated into psychoeducation about the longitudinal course of relationship development during premarital counseling. Doing so may help counter couples' general tendency to be overly optimistic about how the newlywed years will unfold (e.g., Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2013) and instead foster more open conversations about current difficulties. Very brief interventions that (a) encourage relationship awareness and discussion (Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013) or (b) help couples reappraise conflicts in their marriage (Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013) can then prove sufficient to counter these difficulties and promote positive outcomes over time, or couples may benefit from more intensive, structured, preventive programs that help them learn how to communicate about their problems more effectively and increase positive interactions (e.g., Halford, 2011; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010). For couples who are already distressed and seeking therapy, practitioners should focus on helping couples understand what their key problems are, process the deeper issues underlying these problems, and learn how to navigate these problems through more effective communication and greater acceptance and tolerance (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). Thus, by highlighting stability in couples' relationship problems, these findings support current models of intervention that emphasize helping couples understand and better manage their difficulties rather than problem solving per se, given that the actual content of couples' problems is likely to be longstanding and resistant to change.

In sum, most marital problems remain stable, on average, over the newlywed years. These findings challenge longstanding assumptions regarding the role of increased conflict in marital functioning over time and call for further study of the marital processes underlying changes in satisfaction.

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