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Contributions of Social Learning Theory to the Promotion of Healthy Relationships: Asset or Liability?

Although social learning theory provides the conceptual basis for behavioral interventions designed to treat and prevent relationship distress, the results of large, recently published experiments cast doubt on the long-term viability of this approach. For example, couple therapies can produce lasting improvements in relationships, yet these improvements do not appear to be mediated by changes in communication in the manner suggested by social learning theory. Preventive interventions that teach couples communication skills produce inconsistent effects on communication and unexpectedly small effects on relationship outcomes. Because social learning theory may not provide the strongest foundation for relationship-sustaining interventions, new approaches are needed, especially those that articulate how diverse contexts and life circumstances constrain couples' opportunities for closeness and stability.

Recent experimental tests of two leading interventions for couples provide us with an unprecedented opportunity to take stock of key

theoretical premises of this field. Both lines of work—one designed to treat relationship problems after they emerge and one intended to prevent relationship problems before they develop—assign central significance to the interpersonal processes that are believed to govern partners' evaluative judgments about their relationships. These new, and unusually large, randomized controlled trials raise pointed questions about whether modification of interpersonal processes is a robust or reliable means for improving the quality and longevity of committed partnerships. We take this opportunity to review the results of these new studies and to revisit the theoretical basis of these interventions, with an eye toward asking new questions about how relationships develop and about how those developmental pathways can be modified.

The first line of research, which involves a tertiary or therapeutic intervention for couples who are already experiencing problems in their marriage, is called integrative behavioral couple therapy, or IBCT (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). IBCT grew out of Neil Jacobson and Andrew Christensen's frustration with the effectiveness of traditional behavioral couple therapy (TBCT). This shift from TBCT to IBCT was especially notable because Neil Jacobson was one of the first developers and proponents of TBCT (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979), yet he felt strongly that it had failed and that a new approach was needed (Jacobson, 1996).

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The second line of intervention research involves efforts to prevent relationship discord. The most widely studied of these interventions is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, usually referred to by its acronym: PREP. PREP was developed by Howard Markman around the same time that behavioral couple therapy was being formalized, on the basis of the view that the same theoretical principles that underlie couple therapy could be applied to forestall distress and dissolution from arising in the first place (e.g., Markman, 1979; Markman & Floyd, 1980). Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg (1994) translated this early research into what became PREP, a program that continues to be widely adopted and tested.

The durability of behavioral interventions for couples from the 1970s to the present day attests to the pioneering insights of scholars who sought to study and modify couple communication. At the same time, rigorous research on these interventions sheds new light on the scope their effectiveness, which, in turn, raises questions about additional factors that might be harnessed in the service of promoting fulfilling and enduring relationships. In the remainder of this article, we briefly review these two lines of research, highlight benefits and limitations of the theoretical perspective that guided them, and then outline potentially fruitful new directions for the next generation of relationship-focused interventions.

INTEGRATIVE BEHAVIORAL COUPLE THERAPY

Behavioral marital therapy grew out of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which maintains that people train each other through basic operant learning principles. Thus, social learning theory posits that people modify each other's behavior specifically through the rewards and punishments that follow those behaviors (Bandura, 1969). Applied to couples, this model implies that relationship partners routinely and mutually reward and punish each other's behaviors and, more crucially, that dysfunction develops when maladaptive behaviors are inadvertently rewarded and adaptive behaviors are punished. Behavioral couple therapy was designed to alter the dysfunctional learning that had taken place between partners and to implement a new set of rewards to enhance more functional behaviors (e.g., Jacobson &

Margolin, 1979; Stuart, 1969; Weiss, Hops, & Patterson, 1973).

Controlled outcome research demonstrated that traditional behavioral couple therapy did serve to improve partners' reports of relationship satisfaction. Indeed, a meta-analysis of TBCT outcome studies found that it was more effective than no-treatment control groups ($d = 0.59$; Shadish & Baldwin, 2005). However, when the criterion shifted to whether treated couples had improved to the point that they were no longer different from couples who are not seeking treatment, fewer than half of couples treated with behavioral couple therapy met this criterion (Jacobson et al., 1984), and only about 70% of the couples who met the criterion maintained it for 2 years (Jacobson, Schmaling, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1987). Of those couples who were classified as satisfied with their relationship at the end of treatment, 15% dissolved their relationship within 2 years (Christensen, Atkins, Yi, George, & Baucom, 2006), and 30% dissolved their relationship within 5 years (Christensen, Atkins, Baucom, & Yi, 2010). Finally, comparisons of behavioral marital therapy to insight-oriented marital therapy yielded similar results initially and 6 months following treatment (Snyder & Wills, 1989), but after 4 years the couples being treated with insight-oriented marital therapy had a 3% divorce rate, compared with a 38% divorce rate for couples treated with behavioral couple therapy (Snyder, Wills, & Grady-Fletcher, 1991).¹

IBCT was developed to determine whether the efficacy of traditional behavioral couple therapy could be improved. After declaring that the traditional model of behavioral couples therapy was ineffective to a degree that he felt he could no longer endorse it, Neil Jacobson teamed with Andrew Christensen to develop IBCT (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; see also Jacobson, 1996), essentially combining standard elements of the traditional behavioral approach with interventions that helped couples

¹Unlike the behavioral model, the insight-oriented approach "emphasized the interpretation of underlying intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics contributing to overt dynamics. . . . [Therapists adopting this model use] probes, clarification, and interpretation in uncovering and explicating those unconscious feelings, beliefs, and expectations contributing to the current observable marital difficulties" (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 139).

see that it might be beneficial to tolerate and even accept aspects of the partner and the relationship that were disappointing. Jacobson and Christensen subsequently conducted the largest and most rigorous study of marital therapy to date, comparing IBCT to traditional behavioral couple therapy with experienced and carefully monitored psychotherapists in Los Angeles and Seattle. They randomly assigned couples to the two types of therapy and followed them for 5 years after treatment. In the end, the percentage of couples who recovered or who reported substantial gains in relationship satisfaction was similar for both groups, as was the percentage who deteriorated and divorced (Christensen et al., 2010). Although the similarity of the findings between IBCT and traditional behavioral couple therapy came as a surprise, in that the newer acceptance-based approach did not produce incremental benefits, the combined results of the IBCT and TBCT interventions go far in documenting that couple therapy, when conducted competently (Christensen et al., 2004), yields clinically significant long-term benefits for about half of couples who present for treatment—even in samples of couples who present with severe relationship difficulties (see also Lebow, Chambers, Christensen, & Johnson, 2012).

THE PREVENTION AND RELATIONSHIP ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

In PREP, couples are taught skills in communication, conflict management, and problem solving, in addition to learning how they might protect and nurture their intimate bond, with particular emphasis on friendship, commitment, and shared activities. PREP is designed to prevent relationship discord from developing by intervening with couples before severe problems become evident. PREP is typically considered a primary intervention, as it has been used widely with unselected couples who are engaged to be married, yet it has also been tested as a secondary intervention, in that it has been adapted for couples believed to be at increased risk of developing relationship problems. Quite apart from any practical benefits, development of PREP has been seminal in encouraging others to be quite detailed in documenting the specific exercises and procedures that comprise their preventive interventions, a development that

has in turn has enabled numerous studies of its efficacy (see Halford, 2011).

The initial results of outcome studies on PREP were promising, with indications that the program had lasting effects on improving marital satisfaction and decreasing rates of dissolution (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993; see also Bradbury & Fincham, 1990b). However, in this early study, many of the couples randomly assigned to the treatment group declined treatment and were then included in the control group. As such, the couples who made up the treatment group were highly motivated compared to the control group, thus rendering the study a quasi experiment. Following this study, there were other studies that did not randomly assign couples to treatment and control groups (i.e., they too were quasi-experimental), with similarly promising results (e.g., Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998; Stanley et al., 2001). However, in studies in which couples were randomly assigned to treatment and no-treatment control conditions, the efficacy of PREP in preventing discord and divorce became less apparent. Of the nine experimental PREP outcome studies of which we are aware, the effects on discord and dissolution were positive in two studies (Kaiser, Hahlweg, Fehm-Wolfsdorf, & Groth, 1998; Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2010), null or mixed in five studies (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, Loew, & Markman, 2012; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001; Laurenceau, Stanley, Olmos-Gallo, Baucom, & Markman, 2004; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, & Peterson, 2013; Trillingsgaard, Baucom, Heyman, & Elklit, 2012), and negative in two studies (Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013; van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap, & van der Staak, 1996). In light of the discrepancy between the quasi-experimental and experimental results, we suggest that the studies using truly experimental designs be given more weight. In doing so, on the basis of data now available, it is difficult to reach a conclusion that PREP is demonstrably efficacious.

The early and quasi-experimental results from PREP and other relationship education programs (for a meta-analytic review, see Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008) led many to believe that these programs should be made widely available to couples. As a result, policy makers and politicians began

discussing the idea of applying marriage and relationship education programs more widely, with a special emphasis on low-income couples and families. This momentum culminated in legislation that designated \$100 million of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF; i.e., federal welfare) funding be allocated annually to promote an appreciation of marriage or to teach relationship skills (Deficit Reduction Act of 2005). This policy of redirecting a portion of the TANF budget to marriage and relationship education programs remains in place, although the funding has been reduced to about \$80 million (for critical discussions of the federal effort to promote values and skills conducive to marriage, see Avishai, Heath, & Randles, 2012; Heath, 2012). A small portion of these redirected funds was spent evaluating the efficacy of these programs, yielding three main studies.

The first study—Building Strong Families, or BSF—randomly assigned 5,102 unmarried couples who were expecting or had just had a baby to either the intervention or a control group. The interventions varied across eight sites, but many were modeled specifically on social-learning conceptions of relationship functioning. Across all locations, there were no 36-month effects of the interventions on relationship quality, partner support, communication skills, infidelity, likelihood of still being together, likelihood of being married, and a host of other variables. When looking at the data by distinct locations, six sites had null effects; one site had one small positive outcome for family stability (but no positive outcome for relationship status or quality); and another site had negative effects for relationship status, father involvement, and family stability. Therefore, it appears that these programs had no net beneficial effect on unmarried couples and possibly some negative effects (Wood, Moore, Clarkwest, & Killewald, 2014).

The second study—Supporting Healthy Marriages, or SHM—was similar to the first but involved married rather than unmarried couples. SHM was conducted at eight locations around the country and involved 5,395 couples who were randomized either to an active intervention or to a no-treatment control condition. Whereas BSF consisted primarily of unmarried parents expecting their first child, SHM consisted primarily of married couples (81%); the average length of marriage was 6 years. The 30-month data from this study showed that there were no group difference in terms of who was still

married; small positive effects indicating that couples who received the intervention were happier; no effects on domestic violence; and essentially no effects on parenting or child well-being (Lundquist et al., 2014).

In a third study—the Community Healthy Marriage Initiative evaluation, or CHMI—187,844 couples went through relationship education programs sponsored by the federal government but administered broadly through community agencies and churches. These interventions were examined to measure the likelihood of being married and the impact on relationship quality on a citywide scale. In this study, there were no effects for the likelihood of still being in the relationship or being married, whether examining the effects overall or in each of three cities, nor were there overall effects on marital quality. Thus, the community-administered programs appear to lack efficacy (Bir et al., 2012).

In conclusion, it seems that whether tested in carefully controlled outcome trials or in large demonstration projects, preventive interventions derived from social learning theory are underperforming relative to expectations and lacking clear evidence of efficacy. Although some leading scholars remain optimistic in the face of these data (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2013), we argue (as the first author has done elsewhere; see Johnson, 2012, 2013) that the null and noisy findings of these studies should signal an end to the diversion of funds from TANF that poor families might use to pay for basic necessities like food, clothes, rent, health insurance, and child care (see Velasquez-Manoff, 2014). It is tempting to argue that the basic premises of social learning theory and skills-based interventions remain viable for the prevention of relationship distress in low-income populations, in that this approach has underperformed to date because of compromised implementation of interventions, because other federal programs yield equally disappointing results, or because scaling up this type of intervention presents a steep learning curve for federal agencies. However, several aspects of these studies leave us far less confident in the viability of communication-based interventions for promoting the quality and durability of relationships: the degree of statistical power was unusually high in these studies; null results were surprisingly consistent across the three major federal studies, despite marked differences among the studies; findings

replicated at diverse sites around the United States; the passive no-treatment control groups in BSF and SHM provided a low threshold for demonstrating statistical significance; and the newest studies align well with the modest and decaying effects detected in meta-analytic studies of these interventions with middle-class couples (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2008; see also Bradbury & Lavner, 2012). Of course, the results of these studies do not change our view that basic and applied research on marriage and other committed partnerships merit intensive investment and analysis; indeed, the disappointing results of skills-based interventions suggests that the need for renewed investment and new models to guide the next generation of interventions may be more acute than ever. Beyond their policy and budgetary implications, these recent studies highlight the importance of reevaluating and building upon social learning theory so that the next generation of research might yield stronger results.

BEHAVIOR CHANGE AND TREATMENT OUTCOMES

As noted, IBCT appears to be efficacious in the treatment of marital distress, but no more so than other well-tested treatments (e.g., TBCT), whereas PREP and similar programs appear to be lacking efficacy in the prevention of marital distress. However, these results in and of themselves reveal little about how social learning theory might be modified in its application to the etiology, prevention, and treatment of relationship distress and dissolution. To address this question, we review two studies that examined whether IBCT and PREP led to changes in interpersonal behavior in the intended direction and whether those changes had an impact on longitudinal marital satisfaction.

Observed Communication and IBCT Efficacy

As part of the large outcome study comparing IBCT and TBCT, Baucom, Sevier, Eldridge, Doss, and Christensen (2011) videotaped distressed couples engaging in two 10-minute discussions about a problem in their relationship. Each spouse picked a topic for one discussion, and the order was counterbalanced. This was done before, immediately after, and 2 years after treatment. Relationship satisfaction was assessed at those same time points as

well as at 5 years following treatment. Both treatments led to reductions in observed negativity and withdrawal from post-treatment to the 2-year follow-up; however, gains in observed positivity and problem solving were not sustained. Greater relationship satisfaction at post-treatment predicted positive changes in interpersonal communication from post-therapy to the 2-year follow-up for wives and husbands, and changes in wives' positivity from pre-treatment to post-treatment were associated with 5-year rates of relationship dissolution ($d=0.46$) in the expected direction. However, the contributions of treatment-induced behavior change to relationship outcomes appeared to be complicated; for example, decreases in positivity appeared to have *beneficial* effects for couples, though these effects were eliminated when observed withdrawal was controlled. In addition, the associations of treatment effects and communication variables were stronger in moderately distressed couples than in severely distressed couples (Baucom, Atkins, Simpson, & Christensen, 2009). So, changing interpersonal behaviors is at least one of the mechanisms through which tertiary treatments of relationship discord improve relationships, yet the effects are not as simple or as clear as social learning theory would predict.

Observed Communication and PREP Efficacy

If tertiary interventions for relationships alter relationship outcomes, in part, by changing dysfunctional interpersonal behaviors, it is plausible to reason that relationship education classes striving to teach adaptive interpersonal skills to couples should prevent marital distress and dissolution. As we have described already, a diverse set of studies calls into doubt the efficacy of interventions designed to alter couple communication, particularly interventions intended to contain the potentially damaging effects of conflict. To gain insight into the effect of preventative interventions on interpersonal behavior, we review a study we conducted with our colleagues Ronald Rogge, Rebecca Cobb, and Erika Lawrence (Rogge et al., 2013). Whereas PREP aimed to provide couples with skills that would reduce the effects of mismanaged conflict on relationship satisfaction, emerging findings on prosocial processes in couple relationships—most notably positive social support, acceptance, and empathy (e.g.,

Cutrona, 1996; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998)—led us to speculate that modification of these “joining” capacities might be at least as effective in preventing distress and dissolution. We viewed this approach as remaining entirely within the conceptual sphere of social learning theory while still shifting greater emphasis to the processes and skills that join and connect partners. Accordingly, we developed a preventive intervention focusing on positive and supportive forms of communication that was structurally identical to PREP (e.g., with didactic group sessions and individual coaching of couples)—called CARE (Rogge, Cobb, Johnson, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2002; see also Rogge et al., 2006)—and subsequently designed a randomized, controlled study that tested CARE against PREP.

Couples assigned to receive PREP and CARE were compared to active and inactive control groups. With the active control group, which we called the relationship awareness (RA) group, our intention was to encourage the couples to think about and discuss their relationship without teaching them any of the skills that are part of PREP or CARE. Instead, RA couples were informed about the importance of thinking about and discussing their relationship as a routine form of relationship maintenance. Following a lecture on relationship awareness couples watched a widely available commercial film, *Two for the Road* (Donen, 1967), which depicts a couple talking about their marriage. Couples were then coached privately through a 50- to 60-minute semistructured discussion in which the film was a vehicle for reflecting on their own relationship. Before departing, couples were given vouchers for four more movies along with a homework assignment to watch one movie per week for 4 weeks, from a list of relationship-oriented films, and to discuss the film and their relationship using a list of open-ended questions. The inactive control group, in contrast, consisted of couples who were either randomized to this group or who were assigned to PREP, CARE, or RA but declined to participate in any relationship classes, typically owing to scheduling and logistical difficulties. (Thus, some self-selection into this group limits conclusions that can be drawn from it.) We then assessed couples at several points over the following 3 years.

Across the 3-year follow-up interval, there were no differences in relationship satisfaction trajectories among any of the groups. However, 24% of couples in the inactive control group dissolved their relationships, compared to 11% in each of the other three groups (PREP, CARE, RA). Our brief one-session relationship awareness intervention thus yielded effects comparable to PREP and CARE on relationship satisfaction and dissolution. Even more surprising was our finding that the two skills-based interventions appeared to have unintended and adverse consequences on their intended change targets. The PREP intervention emphasized communication skills and problem-solving skills, yet this resulted in women reporting *more* hostile conflict over time than women in the CARE or RA groups. Although our self-report data do not allow us to determine whether women actually experienced more hostile conflict or whether they were merely more prone to labeling interactions as conflictual when they did arise, this result is nevertheless directly opposite of our prediction, as these are the type of skills that PREP emphasized more than CARE. Similarly, women in the CARE group reported *less* emotional support over time than did the PREP and RA groups, which was also the opposite of our expectations, because the CARE training emphasized being supportive.

In the end, a simple intervention designed to increase relationship awareness yielded effects on satisfaction and dissolution equal to those produced by PREP and CARE, with fewer adverse effects than a skills-based marriage and relationship education class. Not only was there no clear effect of skills-based interventions on the skills they were intended to improve, skills-based interventions may have unintended consequences on the exact behavioral mechanisms they are designed to target. We do not yet fully understand why the brief relationship awareness intervention proved so potent, nor is it clear whether the unintended effects on reported behavioral outcomes reflect actual behavioral changes or simply heightened awareness to specific types of exchanges within the relationship. As in so many domains in our field, further research is necessary, although in this instance we believe it may prove advantageous to adopt a critical perspective on skills-based interventions as new studies are proposed.

SUMMARY OF BEHAVIOR CHANGE AND TREATMENT OUTCOMES

Changes in communication appear to be part of the process of recovering from relationship distress, at least when that distress is moderate in magnitude (Baucom et al., 2011). However, accumulating evidence challenges the assumptions that changes in communication are easy to come by, necessary, or even effective when attempting to improve intimate relationships. In thinking about the implications of these data, we believe the time is right for our field to take stock of social learning theory as a model for how marriages and other committed partnerships change. By examining which elements in the model are useful and worth keeping, we can speculate about new ways it may be applied to interventions. A dispassionate consideration of the benefits and shortcoming of the model may help us make greater strides in research on and treatments of relationship discord, in general, and with at-risk couples in particular.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE APPLICATION OF SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY TO RELATIONSHIP INTERVENTIONS

Social learning theory rests on the premise that when positive or adaptive interpersonal behaviors are reinforced and when negative or dysfunctional behaviors are ignored or punished, relationship quality improves; conversely, relationship quality deteriorates when negative or dysfunctional interpersonal behaviors are reinforced and positive or adaptive behaviors are ignored or punished (Stuart, 1969; Weiss et al., 1973). This idea became the foundation for primary (e.g., Markman, 1979; Markman & Floyd, 1980) and tertiary (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Stuart, 1969) behavioral interventions for relationship distress. In the years since, social learning theory and the behavioral interventions based on this theory have become mainstream. For example, a writer for the *New York Times* wrote about how her reporting on animal trainers taught her to stop reinforcing her husband's dysfunctional behaviors (Sutherland, 2006). Indeed, many couples who come to therapy present their problems in interpersonal terms. The logic and simplicity of social learning theory are appealing. After all, the exchange of behaviors is our primary means of connecting to others (Kelley et al., 1983), and thus it is part of

every credible treatment of relationship dysfunction even if it is not the primary focus (Johnson, 2012). Moreover, specific dyadic behaviors have been implicated in relationship development (although here, too, there are important qualifications and complexities; e.g., Johnson et al., 2005; Lavner & Bradbury, 2012; for a review, see Bradbury & Karney, 2013). Thus, the impact of social learning theory on the science of predicting, preventing, and treating marital dysfunction cannot be overstated.

LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

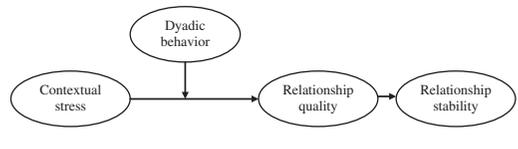
Social learning theory has all the features of a strong theory: It offers a plausible causal mechanism presumed to drive judgments of relationship satisfaction and stability, it outlines observable and potentially modifiable processes, it is parsimonious, and it is testable. Much of the appeal of the theory is due to its nearly singular focus on the dyadic exchange of behavior, itself a rich domain of psychological and interpersonal phenomena. Although these factors explain much of the theory's endurance and popularity, this strong emphasis on dyadic exchanges of behavior may overlook other consequential predictors of relationship quality. The influences of contextual and intrapersonal variables, for example, are not well addressed by social learning theory. For many practitioners as well as researchers, the focus on interaction without an examination of other factors is akin to treating symptoms instead of treating an underlying infection. Or, as Richard Heyman (2001) cogently observed, "a conceptualization of 'the husband is unhappy because he doesn't communicate well' is about as useful a conceptualization as 'the patient died because his heart stopped beating'" (p. 6). The exclusion of potentially influential factors from social learning theory leads to another limitation, which is that the theory has difficulty accounting for diverse patterns of relationship development. Couples who demonstrate spontaneous improvement and couples who cycle rapidly through negative and positive phases are not easily explained by the basic premise of social learning theory, and indeed change patterns such as these raise critical questions about their underlying causes. Thus, the field seems to be confronting a conundrum: Although there is no denying the importance of exchanges of behavior as critically important to intimate

relationships, demonstrating this plausible assumption to be true has proved remarkably difficult. We believe that recent findings suggest that there may be value in exploring how social learning theory fits into a more dynamic conceptualization of relationship change, and particularly a conceptualization that appreciates within- and between-couple variability in relationship development.

TOWARD COMPREHENSIVE MODELS OF RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

As enthusiasm for social learning theory as a grand theory of relationship development was beginning to wane, more comprehensive models were introduced. We have each introduced more comprehensive models that incorporate elements of social learning theory as well as other theories, including Hill's (1949) model of how families deal with stress, and Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) social exchange theory. In the simplest and more recent model, the first author proposed a renewed focus on social learning as moderator of the effect of contextual stress on marital quality (see Figure 1). Johnson (2012) presented this model to emphasize the contextual stress experienced by couples who were the target of the aforementioned large-scale federal initiatives. This model emphasizes contextual stress—that is, chronic conditions and acute stressors arising outside the relationship, including job stress, economic uncertainty, health concerns, inadequate living circumstances, and discrimination (see Karney & Bradbury, 2005)—and the ways in which such stress can have a direct impact on relationship quality and in turn on relationship dissolution. The emphasis on contextual stress as a predictor of changes in relationship quality made by Johnson was intended to counter the view among many policy makers and noted scholars who have argued that the arrows in Johnson's model should be reversed. That is, we are drawing attention here to the idea that various challenges and demands can make it difficult to sustain a lasting partnership, whereas others have instead promoted marriage as a means of increasing economic well-being, and reducing stress, for adults and any children they may be raising (e.g., Rubio, 2014). Both perspectives may well hold validity, although we would argue that advocating for people to enter into marriage—without appreciating the tremendous

FIGURE 1. MODEL FOR STUDYING THE INFLUENCE OF STRESS AND BEHAVIOR ON RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AMONG POOR COUPLES AND COUPLES OF COLOR.



Source. Johnson (2012, p. 302).

external challenges that many couples subsequently face in maintaining their family—may leave many couples vulnerable to distress and dissolution. The model proposed by Johnson (2012) challenges this notion and is consistent with research that affirms the bidirectionality of the association between stress and relationship quality while emphasizing the point that the stronger direction appears to be from stress to relationship quality (Neff & Karney, 2004, 2007; Trail, Goff, Bradbury, & Karney, 2012; Trail & Karney, 2012). The strength of contextual stress as a predictor of changes in relationship quality also suggests that there are ways in which this association can be modified.

In the face of stressful circumstances, couples can work to be supportive of each other in ways that can ameliorate the effects of stress or even strengthen the relationship. This is not a new idea. In fact, Helen Jennings (1950) wrote about how reducing the impact of a stressor can lead to greater attraction to another person. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) also wrote about the ways in which couples can enhance or diminish the stressors experienced by each member of the couple. More recent studies show that the effects of stress can bring some couples closer together while alienating other couples (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; for reviews, see Randall & Bodenmann, 2009; Story & Bradbury, 2004).

The resilience of a couple in the face of a stressor experienced by one member of the couple has been examined in relation to the support that one member of the couple is able to offer to the other member who is experiencing the distress. This is often referred to as social support. There is a rich empirical literature on the role of social support within the intimate relationships (e.g., Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010; for a review, see Sullivan & Davila, 2010; see also Bodenmann, 2005). Much

of this empirical literature has rightfully been framed in the context of the social learning model because the ability of spouses to assist each other in the face of a contextual stress can be easily understood in terms of rewards and costs. The more a partner can alleviate stress, the more satisfied both partners will be with their relationship.

However, we argue that an overemphasis on the social learning model may have led to a de-emphasis on relationship constructs beyond the interpersonal interactions within the couple, and that the disappointing results of recent large-scale federal studies make this oversight especially salient. Indeed, Johnson's model (in Figure 1) is narrowly focused and purposefully unidirectional. A more comprehensive model—and one from which Johnson borrowed—was the Vulnerability-Adaptation-Stress Model of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In this model, interpersonal behaviors, which are the focus of social learning theory, are influenced by enduring vulnerabilities (absent from Johnson's model) and by stressful events. In turn, the interaction of the couple, which Karney and Bradbury label adaptive processes, can cycle back to feed into stressful events (a so-called stress-generation model; see Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997). This model views the adaptive processes, which we might think of as the heart of social learning theory, as the link to—and from—marital quality. Comprehensive models like this (see also Huston, 2000; Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988) represent a major revision of the social learning model and a road map for future research.

The expansion of models and interventions that were initially based on social learning theory mirrors similar changes in other domains of psychology. For example, in clinical psychology, pure behavioral interventions that do not incorporate other components, such as cognition or acceptance, are now relatively rare. In the interdisciplinary science of relationships, there has been a great deal of work on the cognitive components of relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990a, 1992; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). However, there has been relatively little research done that links the processes outlined in social learning theory with the contextual factors (e.g., on economic pressure, see Williamson

et al., 2012; on social networks, see Jackson, Kennedy, Bradbury, & Karney, 2014) and personal vulnerability factors (e.g., childhood maltreatment; DiLillo et al., 2009) that may also influence relationship development and discord. Although there are examples of such work (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2004; Osterhout, Frame, & Johnson, 2011), they remain the exceptions.

In short, we argue that by not exploring these links to a greater extent and instead holding tight to social learning theory, we have missed opportunities to inform models of etiology and treatment. Therefore, we recommend a renewed focus on linking context to the basic processes described by social learning theory. More broadly, we can understand context as those forces arising outside the immediate domain of couples' relationships that necessitate some sort of response by one or both members of the couple. More narrowly we might look to poverty and financial instability, job stress, neighborhood safety, discrimination, demands from friends and family, and inadequate health care as factors particularly likely to disrupt the equilibrium that couples are striving to achieve. Most of what we currently know about the promotion of healthy relationships come from well-educated, middle-class White couples, yet as we begin to locate our studies in more diverse communities, we will gain a greater and more precise appreciation for how to define and assess the full range of contextual influences.

Focus on Interpersonal Behaviors Strongly Associated With Dysfunction

When considering the dyadic behaviors that predict relationship distress, some behaviors are obviously destructive. For example, the empirical literature is unequivocal that aggression in relationships predicts relationship dissolution (e.g., Rogge & Bradbury, 1999) and a host of other outcomes (e.g., Langer, Lawrence, & Barry, 2008; O'Leary, Slep, & O'Leary, 2007). Although interpersonal aggression is clearly a potent interpersonal variable, the influence of social learning theory has led to researchers searching for ways in which more subtle or complicated interpersonal behaviors predict relationship outcomes. This pursuit has led to findings that have not always replicated or have been deemed to be statistical artifacts (for a discussion of these findings, see Johnson, 2002), but even in cases where there are intuitive

findings regarding behavioral patterns (e.g., the demand–withdrawal pattern; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995), there are questions about the replicability of gender effects (Caughlin, 2002). Yet the complex nature of some of these results, such as the finding that greater deterioration in relationship quality is preceded only by the combination of deficits in both communication skills and dyadic affect (e.g., Johnson et al., 2005), suggests that it may be more fruitful to focus on dyadic behavior that is strongly associated with relationship outcomes (e.g., aggression) than examining the intricacies of smaller behavioral effects. The money and effort spent to instill communication skills, which have relatively small predictive effects (Johnson, 2012), might be better spent preventing aggression (Del Vecchio & O’Leary, 2004; O’Leary & Slep, 2012) or funding research that moves us beyond the constraints of social learning theory.

Linking Enduring Vulnerabilities With Interpersonal Behaviors

As we have described, there are more encompassing models of relationship functioning that incorporate other components of relationship development beyond social learning theory. The vulnerability–stress–adaptation model of marriage begins with the construct of enduring vulnerabilities (i.e., characteristics of individuals that are unlikely to change regardless of who their relationship partner is, including personality traits, race and sociodemographic status, experiences while growing up, propensities for psychological disorders; see Karney & Bradbury, 1995). We view the link between enduring vulnerabilities and couples’ patterns of dyadic and interactional exchanges as a natural step toward expanding social learning theory. Recent advances in genetics and epigenetics as well as endocrine functioning make this a particularly intriguing area of study. For example, research demonstrating that the 5-HTTLPR polymorphism in the serotonin-transporter gene moderates the association between emotional behavior and changes in marital satisfaction over time (Haase et al., 2013; Schoebi, Way, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012) is an excellent example of how this link may be explored. Other work investigating how levels of cortisol change as a function of marital conflict (e.g., Rodríguez & Margolin, 2013) provide another promising

link that expands social learning theory. However, there is much more to be done with regard to this link; for example, technological advances in the ability to collect and maintain oxytocin through saliva (Gyurak et al., 2013) and recent studies of the effects of oxytocin on emotional responses to couple conflict (Ditzen et al., 2013) suggest that there is promise in further research of the role of oxytocin in close relationships. By thinking of vulnerabilities in terms of biomarkers, we could move the field well beyond established vulnerabilities, perhaps enabling efficient identification of couples most likely to respond to intervention.

Linking Context and Interpersonal Interactions

The possibility that there is a link between contextual influences—including such factors as perceived discrimination, low wages and nonstandard work schedules, unsupportive or demanding social networks, and stressful neighborhoods—and communication processes holds particular promise in future efforts to promote healthy relationships, in that challenging contexts might give rise to the maladaptive interactions highlighted by social learning theory. To the extent that couple communication is resistant to change through skill-building interventions (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 2004), changes in context may be a viable alternative; such changes may exert a subtle but persistent effect on partners’ affective states and on the tone of their ensuing conversations. For example, fluctuations in daily levels of stress do appear to predict fluctuations in angry and avoidant behavior (for air-traffic controllers, see Repetti, 1989), racial discrimination covaries with verbal aggression (particularly when ethnic identity is low; see Trail et al., 2012), observed warmth between partners is negatively associated with the economic strain of their neighborhoods (as determined on the basis of census data; Cutrona et al., 2003), and observed levels of negativity and criticism are higher for those couples reporting more stressful events and living with more financial strain (even after controlling for relationship satisfaction; Williamson, Karney, & Bradbury, 2013). Although the impact of stressful life events does appear to distinguish couples who do and do not relapse in the 2 years following traditional behavioral couple therapy (whereas use of treatment-derived communication skills does not; see Jacobson et al.,

1987), additional experimental and longitudinal studies are needed to shed light on any causal connections between contextual influences and couple communication. Much remains unknown about how couples' complex and dynamic environments constrain and enable various sorts of dyadic exchanges, yet the surprising findings from recent federal initiatives and promising results from newer studies have convinced us that experiences in couples and families are shaped in profound ways by the contextual influences that surround them.

CONCLUSION

Although social learning theory has focused the attention of researchers and practitioners alike on a compelling set of plausible, proximal influences on relationship outcomes, growing evidence indicates that these influences are either relatively small or relatively difficult to harness through preventive or therapeutic interventions. Results of large federal initiatives in particular, to the extent they are based on principles of social learning theory, cast doubt on (a) whether skills-based interventions as they are currently understood can gain much leverage over dyadic processes and on (b) whether changes in these processes can prevent adverse relationship outcomes. Thus, on the one hand, the ongoing exchange of interpersonal behaviors remains a central and even defining feature of our intimate bonds that commands our theoretical attention, yet on the other hand, leading scholars have struggled to demonstrate how modification of these processes can be accomplished and whether any such modifications are of consequence in couples' lives. In the absence of robust evidence that skills-based interventions promote healthy relationships, we believe that a renewed focus on identifying generative elements in couples' interpersonal repertoires is overdue, particularly when conducted in tandem with a detailed analysis of the specific contexts that enable relationship-promoting exchanges to flourish.

NOTE

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