

WHY MARRIAGES CHANGE OVER TIME

Benjamin R. Karney

If finding an intimate connection is, as it has been described, a fundamental human goal (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), then most adults pursue that goal within the institution of marriage. In survey after survey, the vast majority of people express a desire to get married at some point in their lives (Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004; Trail & Karney, 2012). Indeed, about 90% of people in the United States do get married, a figure that has remained constant for decades (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001).

On their wedding day, as they make a public, legal, and often religious commitment to a lifelong relationship, newlyweds uniformly hope that their intimate bond will persist and flourish. But the odds are against them. Marriages often change, sometimes drastically, with about half of all first marriages ending in divorce or permanent separation (Cherlin, 2010). The poignancy of marriage is that the vast majority of those who dissolve their marriages will marry again (Sweeney, 2010), approaching their new relationships with all of the hope and optimism they brought to their prior one. Yet these remarriages are at even greater risk of dissolving (Bumpass & Raley, 2007).

How does this happen? How do marital relationships change so often and so severely, especially given spouses' fervent desire to preserve their initial happiness and given the social consensus that this is a change to be avoided at all costs?

The goal of this chapter is to review research addressing these questions. To this end, the chapter

is organized into three parts. In the first section, I discuss the nature of change in marriage, examining what it is that actually changes and reviewing research describing how different elements of marriage change over time. In the second section, I address why change in marriage comes about and, in particular, why spouses' evaluations of their marriages can decline despite their strong desire to maintain their initial feelings about their relationships. In the final section, I suggest specific directions for future research that moves work on these questions forward. Throughout this chapter, I emphasize research published over the past 15 years, although influential older studies and theoretical articles are addressed where appropriate.

DESCRIBING HOW MARRIAGES CHANGE OVER TIME

When a marriage changes over time, what is actually changing? Careful consideration of this question offers three answers. First, spouses may experience a change in their marital status, that is, the marital relationship may dissolve through divorce or permanent separation. Second, spouses may experience a change in the way they evaluate the marriage. These evaluations have been discussed using a wide range of terms such as *marital adjustment*, *marital quality*, and *marital happiness*. In this chapter, I use the term *marital satisfaction*, defined as spouses' global judgment of the extent to which they find their marital

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relationships fulfilling (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). Third, independent of the way spouses evaluate their relationships, their day-to-day experiences within the relationship may change over time. The way couples communicate, the amount of time spouses spend together, and what spouses do when they are together are all likely to change over the course of the marriage, and these changes may or may not correspond with changes in marital satisfaction or changes in marital status. In the rest of this section, I review research describing how each of these aspects of marriage is known to change over time.

Changes in Marital Status

The decision to marry represents a major life transition, altering the legal and social status of both partners. The decision to end a marriage, therefore, represents a dramatic and costly shift in partners' motivations, moving from the desire to pursue and maintain the relationship to the desire to escape it. In most domains of life, such reversals of intention are rare (e.g., avowed Republicans seldom become Democrats). Yet, in the domain of marriage, these reversals are the norm. Across multiple studies of the most recent data available, the lifetime risk that a first-married couple in the United States will voluntarily end their marriage hovers at around 45% (e.g., Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). That figure typically addresses legal divorces only. If one factors in permanent separations that never progress to legal divorce, then the total risk that a first marriage will dissolve is a little more than 50%. As noted earlier, the risk for remarriages is even higher (Bumpass & Raley, 2007). It is also worth noting that the United States has the highest divorce rate of any Western nation (Amato & James, 2010).

Those figures reflect widespread reversals in spouses' intentions toward their marriage, but the risk for experiencing these reversals is not distributed equally across the population. On the contrary, rates of marital dissolution in the United States are substantially higher among the poor and non-White than among more affluent Whites, and the gap has been widening for the past several decades. For example, among women with college degrees, rates of marital dissolution in the United States have

declined since their peak in 1980, but they have remained stable for women with less than a college degree, and they have increased steadily for women without a high school diploma (Martin, 2006). With respect to race and ethnicity, the chance of a Black woman's first marriage ending in divorce is currently estimated at 70%, compared with 47% for a White woman (Raley & Bumpass, 2003), a gap that is also increasing and is only partially explained by education and income differences between Blacks and Whites (Sweeney & Phillips, 2004). Rates of marital dissolution for Hispanics generally depend on their country of birth. Hispanics who have immigrated to the United States experience lower divorce rates than Whites, but those born in the United States have higher divorce rates than Whites, and third- and higher generation Hispanics have divorce rates that approach the rates for Blacks (Bean, Berg, & Hook, 1996).

In sum, although couples experience the transition from commitment to dissolution in all segments of the population, some segments are at far greater risk of experiencing this transition than others. Unfortunately, very little is known about how this transition plays out in the groups in which it occurs most frequently. Whereas demographic and sociological research has documented the widening socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities in marital status, almost no psychological research has been done on these transitions in diverse or disadvantaged populations (Fein & Ooms, 2006; Johnson, 2012). Instead, research on how and why marriages change is based almost exclusively on samples composed primarily of White, middle-class, college-educated couples, that is, the segment of the population at lowest risk (Karney & Bradbury, 2005). Of necessity, that is the research that informs most of what follows in this chapter, but the ability of this research to explain marital dissolution in other segments of the population remains an open question.

Changes in Marital Satisfaction

The decision to begin or end a marriage is more or less categorical. A couple is either married or not; the marriage either dissolves or remains intact. In contrast, change in how spouses evaluate their

relationships has been described as continuous (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Karney, Bradbury, & Johnson, 1999). Each day of their marriage, spouses have occasion to reflect on how their relationship is going; across days, their evaluations can remain stable, they can become consistently more positive or negative to varying degrees, or they can fluctuate.

What is the normative course of marital satisfaction over time? The fact that so many initially happy marriages end in divorce suggests that many couples experience a process of gradual disaffection. Indeed, influential theories of marriage have long assumed that marital satisfaction on average declines gradually and steadily as the result of accumulated experiences with conflict, disagreement, and irritation between spouses. Social exchange models, for example, propose that "relationships grow, develop, deteriorate, and dissolve as a consequence of an unfolding social-exchange process, which may be conceived as a bartering of rewards and costs both between the partners and between members of the partnership and others" (Huston & Burgess, 1979, p. 4). Behavioral theories of marriage similarly emphasize incremental declines, suggesting that "unresolved negative feelings start to build up, fueling destructive patterns of marital interaction and eventually eroding and attacking the positive aspects of the relationship" (Markman, 1991, p. 422).

Yet evidence for this characterization of marital satisfaction over time was not always easy to find. The first attempts to describe the normative course of marital satisfaction did not even observe a steady decline over time. On the contrary, early research suggested that marital satisfaction declines only in the early years of marriage (after the end of the honeymoon period), remains generally stable during the child-rearing years, and then returns to nearly newlywed levels in the later years, presumably when children have left home and spouses have an empty nest in which to enjoy each other again (Rollins & Cannon, 1974; Rollins & Feldman, 1970). This was a narrative with considerable resonance among members of the public, and it is still frequently repeated as fact (Miller, 2000).

However, there are several good reasons to question whether it is true. First, the primary evidence

for a U-shaped course for marital satisfaction came from cross-sectional surveys of marital satisfaction across spouses of widely varying marital duration. As marital researchers have been noting for decades (e.g., Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975), couples with the longest marital duration in such samples include only the most successful marriages, the less successful ones having long since exited the population of married couples through divorce. Thus, the longest lasting couples in a cross-sectional sample may report higher marital satisfaction only because they represent a different population, not because marital satisfaction increases in the later years of marriage.

Second, when longitudinal studies have followed couples over time to evaluate how their marital satisfaction actually changes, no evidence for a U-shaped curve has emerged. Instead, the consistent message from longitudinal research on marriage is that, on average, marital satisfaction declines monotonically over time, just as social exchange and behavioral theories of marriage predict. Drawing on 40 years of marital satisfaction data from a sample of Harvard graduates and their wives, Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) showed that, although spouses believed that their satisfaction had followed a U-shaped curve, it had actually declined linearly over time. Since then, numerous other longitudinal studies have documented the same pattern: Marital satisfaction starts high among newlyweds and then declines over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Kurdek, 1999; Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005). Perhaps the most thorough demonstration examined change in marital satisfaction over 17 years in a diverse sample of more than 1,500 couples participating in the Marital Instability Over the Life Course study (VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Across the entire sample, marital satisfaction declined monotonically on average. Moreover, when the authors divided their sample into seven cohorts (i.e., examining the youngest marriages separately from the oldest marriages), average reports of marital satisfaction declined monotonically within each of them.

In all of these studies, change in marital satisfaction was examined as a function of time and marital duration. The idea that satisfaction might increase in the later years of marriage, however, is linked

specifically to a particular life event—the departure of children from the home. Yet longitudinal research that has directly examined changes in satisfaction across the transition to an empty nest has been hard put to find a normative increase in marital satisfaction. One recent study that did report such an increase examined a sample of 123 women participating in the Mills College Longitudinal Study (Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008). Among the women in this study who were married or in marriage-like relationships, average marital satisfaction increased over time, especially for women who transitioned to an empty nest. These results stand in striking contrast to the results of research on larger and more diverse samples of couples, and they may speak to the unique experiences of this relatively affluent and well-educated sample. Cross-cultural research has failed to find any evidence for late increases in marital satisfaction among more diverse populations of couples (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009).

Thus, as far as broad generalizations go, the statement “marital satisfaction declines monotonically on average” is about as reliable and well supported as one can find in this literature. Nevertheless, recent studies have revealed overlooked but important nuances even within this reliable conclusion. Marital satisfaction may decline reliably on average, but across studies the variability around the mean trajectory is always substantial. A recent series of longitudinal analyses from multiple independent scholars has begun to examine this variability directly, using cluster analyses (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998) and group-based mixed modeling (Nagin, 1999) to determine whether the shape of spouses’ marital satisfaction trajectories varies continuously across members of a sample or whether distinct groups of marital satisfaction trajectories can be identified. The results are consistent across several studies that have used a range of samples, assessment instruments, and measurement intervals, and they suggest two important modifications to the generalization that marital satisfaction starts high and then declines over time (Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010; Kamp Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). First, although newlyweds may indeed be as satisfied with their marriages as they will ever be, not all newlyweds are

equally satisfied. Even in the early years of marriage, studies have revealed meaningful variability in initial satisfaction, and these are almost certainly underestimates of the true variability in the population that includes those who do not volunteer to participate in marital research. Second, even though average marital satisfaction declined significantly in each of these studies, this pattern characterizes only a minority of couples. For example, Anderson et al. (2010) used the group-based approach to reanalyze the same longitudinal data that VanLaningham et al. (2001) had used to demonstrate average declines in marital satisfaction. The newer study, focusing on the variability around the mean trajectory, found that, for nearly two thirds of the respondents, marital satisfaction actually remained high and stable across time; the mean declines were driven entirely by the one third of the sample for whom which satisfaction began low and then declined. Lavner and Bradbury (2010) found a similar pattern in a sample of first-married newlyweds assessed multiple times across the first 4 years of their marriages: 81% of husbands and 82% of wives experienced no or minimal declines in their marital satisfaction over time, but the fewer than 20% of couples that did decline contributed to an average trajectory that was significantly negative. In all of these studies, membership in a trajectory group was strongly associated with initial levels of marital satisfaction, such that the spouses most likely to maintain their satisfaction were those with the highest initial satisfaction, whereas spouses who experienced the greatest declines were those who reported the lowest initial satisfaction. In other words, just as no family actually has the average of 2.5 children, few couples actually experience the average trajectory of initially high satisfaction followed by gradual declines over time. On the contrary, in couples who remain married, marital satisfaction declines modestly when it declines at all, and differences between couples are far larger and more reliable than differences within couples over time.

Both kinds of differences significantly predict which marriages will end in divorce and which will remain intact. That is, divorce rates vary across the trajectory groups, such that couples in the low and declining group are at highest risk for divorce, and

couples in the high and stable group are at the lowest risk, although their risk is still above zero (Lavner & Bradbury, 2012). However, it is not simply the fact that some couples are less happy than others that predicts which ones will divorce. When between-couple differences in marital satisfaction are controlled, rates of change in marital satisfaction continue to predict divorce, such that the couples experiencing the steepest declines are at greatest risk (Huston et al., 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1997).

All of these results await further replication. Because longitudinal research on marriage has focused on relatively affluent, primarily White couples, generalizations to more diverse or more vulnerable populations should be made with caution. Nevertheless, given the high rates at which marriages dissolve, the observation of relative stability in most couples' satisfaction raises provocative questions about the relation between change in marital satisfaction and the decision to divorce. Specifically, is the decision to divorce sensitive to the relatively modest, gradual changes that have been observed in longitudinal research? An affirmative answer would support the incremental models of change that are prevalent in the existing marital literature. Or does divorce follow from a drastic reevaluation of the relationship that may follow years of relative stability? An affirmative answer here would support a model of catastrophic change in marital satisfaction, when it occurs. At present, the evidence to compare these contrasting views does not exist because longitudinal research on marriage, relying on assessments separated by intervals of months to years, has not yet been sensitive enough to measure how spouses' evaluations of their marriage may be changing immediately before the decision to divorce.

Changes in Marital Experiences

Even if most spouses' global evaluations of their marriage remain relatively stable, their experiences within the marriage can and do change over time. Newlywed couples mature, they graduate and take up careers, they bear and raise children, and all of these developmental milestones alter the daily experience of the relationship for both partners. Because there are so many facets of that daily experience—from the way spouses divide household chores, to

their communication, to their sex life—attempts to plot the normative course of marital experiences have reached no consensus on what the most relevant domains of those experiences should be. Instead, this research has tended to focus at a very broad level on normative changes in positive, relationship-promoting experiences (e.g., successful communication, sex, shared activities) or negative, relationship-weakening experiences (e.g., conflict, physical aggression).

As diverse as it is, evaluating this literature is worthwhile for the insight it may offer into the way that global evaluations of marriage change over time. If spouses' global evaluations are the product of their accumulated experiences in the marriage, as many theories of change in marital satisfaction suggest (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Markman, 1991), the fact that global marital satisfaction declines over time on average should correspond with a decline in positive experiences and an increase in negative experiences within the relationship. Some evidence from longitudinal research on marriage has been consistent with this view, but the results have varied widely depending on the type of measures used. Moreover, this variability suggests that the relation between specific marital experiences and global evaluations of the marriage may be more complex than has generally been acknowledged.

With respect to changes in positive experiences within marriage, research using self-report measures has painted a consistent picture of gradual declines in positivity over time. For example, when Huston et al. (2001) asked newlywed spouses to report on the frequency of their expressions of affection and feelings of love for each other across the first 2 years of their marriage, reports of these positive behaviors declined significantly and did so whether or not couples were satisfied and whether or not they went on to divorce. The frequency of sexual intimacy also declines over time, especially in the early years of marriage (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995). Some of these declines may be the result of the transition to parenthood, an event that is likely to occur early in marriage and one that is reliably associated with decreases in couples' shared leisure time (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008) and increases in wives'

household responsibilities (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). With more time taken up by the demands of parenting, less time for sex and other forms of affectionate exchange is almost inevitable.

Yet this cannot be the whole explanation for declines in positivity, for two reasons. First, these declines are observed at all stages of the life course. Although they seem to be more pronounced in the early years of marriage, analyses of survey data collected over 8 years from a national sample of more than 1,000 individuals found that reports of positive experiences within the marriage decline at all stages of marriage (Umberson et al., 2005). Second, and more difficult to explain, these declines have not been found in research that has observed what couples are actually doing. Lindahl, Clements, and Markman (1998), in a 9-year study of 36 couples, conducted annual assessments of couples' problem-solving interactions. In contrast to the changes observed in comparable studies using self-reports, observed positivity within these interactions increased significantly over time. This was a small convenience sample, but the results raise the possibility that the declines in positive behavior reported in other longitudinal studies reflect differences in perception and interpretation rather than differences in experience over time. Aron and Aron (1996) acknowledged this possibility when they highlighted the importance of novelty in intimate relationships. Over time, these scholars argued, the human brain acclimates to repeated stimuli. The scent of fresh bread is salient on entering a bakery, but minutes later one can no longer detect it. Similarly, the same behaviors that register as positive and affectionate early in marriage (e.g., checking in to say hello during the day, preparing each other's favorite meals) may over time develop into routines that are no longer processed as affection. Support for this alternative view would suggest that changes in global evaluations of a marriage could result not only from changes in the quality of spouses' experiences within the marriage but also from changes in the way spouses process those experiences, regardless of how the experiences are changing.

Research on longitudinal changes in negative marital experiences has revealed similar complexity. Both self-report (Huston et al., 2001; Umberson

et al., 2005) and observational research (Lindahl et al., 1998) have indicated that negativity and negative experiences either remain stable or increase over time for most married couples. The convergence of the two types of data suggests that these trends are not solely the result of changes in spouses' sensitivity to negative behaviors; spouses do seem more likely to engage in interactions that even outside observers recognize as more negative. This could be the result of greater investment in the marriage over time: As constraints to leaving the marriage increase with shared offspring and shared property, the opportunities for conflict increase, even as the motivation to avoid conflict decreases (Frye, McNulty, & Karney, 2008).

However, with respect to change over time, all negativity is not created equal. Although rates of daily upsets and negative exchanges seem to remain stable or increase, several longitudinal studies have indicated that rates of intimate partner violence decline. Across longitudinal studies of self-reported marital violence, this has been a remarkably consistent finding, emerging across intervals ranging from as short as 3 or 4 years (Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Lorber & O'Leary, 2011) to as long as 10 years (Fritz & O'Leary, 2004). Across these studies, the declines cannot be attributed to more violent couples leaving the sample: The analyses have clearly shown that couples who engage in physical violence initially engage in less violence as their marriages endure. The Fritz and O'Leary (2004) study further indicated that this trend is unique to physical aggression. When they examined psychological aggression, a construct that overlaps greatly with the sorts of negative exchanges observed by Lindahl et al. (1998) and reported by spouses in Umberson et al. (2005), they found no average changes over time.

Viewed together, these findings suggest a potentially important distinction between the dramatic negative behaviors represented by physical aggression and the more mundane conflicts and irritations of married life. If the more dramatic events had a greater impact on spouses' global marital satisfaction, average declines in the frequency of marital violence should be associated with average increases in marital satisfaction. That is not the case: Even as

marital violence declines, so too does marital satisfaction on average. The implication is that spouses respond more strongly or attend more closely to their mundane conflicts, which are the experiences that characterize their daily experience of the relationship.

One caveat worth highlighting is that longitudinal research on change in marital experiences, similar to most longitudinal research on global marital satisfaction, has focused almost exclusively on describing average trends and accounting for variability in change as a continuous variable. Whereas some research has probed variability around the mean trajectory of marital satisfaction, no research has done so for trajectories of specific experiences. Thus, it remains unclear whether the trends reported so far describe the way most spouses actually experience their marriage or whether the mean trends are driven by a few spouses in each sample who change drastically.

The overall picture of marriage that emerges from this brief review is that different facets of marriage change over time at different rates and in different directions and that changes in different facets of marriage do not always hold together in intuitive ways. The occasional lack of correspondence between changes in marital experiences and changes in spouses' global evaluations of the marriage points toward some flexibility in the way that spouses decide whether their marriages are satisfying. In the next section, I present a model that describes how spouses assemble their marital experiences into a coherent evaluation of their marriage, and I then use the model to explain how spouses' evaluations of their marriage may change or remain stable over time.

UNDERSTANDING HOW MARRIAGES CHANGE OVER TIME

Being married involves two individuals interacting with each other and with their environment. Being satisfied with a marriage, in contrast, is ultimately the result of a cognitive process that occurs within individuals. When judging whether their marriage is fulfilling or not, spouses must integrate an accumulation of specific experiences to arrive at a global conclusion about the relationship, which then

informs their decisions about whether to persist in the relationship and make efforts to maintain it or whether to leave. If newlyweds are, on average, as happy with their marriages as they are ever likely to be (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010), most newlyweds should be strongly invested in resisting change and should seek to maintain or enhance their initial satisfaction with the relationship. To the extent that perceiving decline in the marriage is emotionally painful (Karney & Frye, 2002), evaluating one's marriage should therefore invoke motivated reasoning, that is, a review of the facts biased toward a particular, desired conclusion (Kunda, 1990). Indeed, satisfied couples manifest all sorts of cognitive biases designed to preserve and strengthen their positive feelings about each other and their relationship (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Neff & Karney, 2003; Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003). Yet, despite these mechanisms and the powerful incentives for using them, spouses' evaluations of their marriage change anyway, with most couples who initially declare their intention to remain together ending up dissolving their relationship. The prevalence of this unwanted transformation highlights poorly understood limits to motivated reasoning within the context of intimate relationships. In this section, I review research relevant to understanding these limits and then develop a model of how marriages often change despite spouses' best efforts to keep them stable.

The Structure of Marital Satisfaction

Within a marriage, as within any long-term close relationship, each partner develops a wealth of information and opinions about the other. One might view one's partner as dependable, a lousy cook, a fan of mystery novels, and someone who regularly leaves the cap off the toothpaste. One might have separate evaluations of different aspects of one's relationship, such as being satisfied with the way one coparents, being thrilled with one's sex life, or being dissatisfied with the way one communicates and solves problems. The fact that spouses can easily provide global evaluations of their marriages when asked to do so suggests that all of this information is structured into a coherent representation of the partner and the relationship (Karney,

McNulty, & Bradbury, 2004). Research on person perception (e.g., Funder, 1999; Gilbert, 1998) and on the self-concept (e.g., McConnell, 2011) has examined the structure of these representations in detail, and the results of this work can also be fruitfully applied to understanding representations of marriage. In particular, this work offers two premises that any model of marital satisfaction must acknowledge.

First, beliefs about a marriage vary in their level of abstraction. Even within a set of beliefs and opinions that all reflect positive evaluations of a marriage, the belief that one's partner is skilled at chess is not the same as the belief that she or he is a suitable and rewarding spouse. Some beliefs about a marriage (such as one's spouse's skill at chess) are specific and concrete, describing a relatively narrow range of behaviors and experiences, whereas others (such as her or his suitability as a spouse) are global and abstract, subsuming within them a wide range of specific behaviors and experiences (Neff & Karney, 2002a, 2002b). Between these extremes, all of spouses' beliefs and opinions about their marriage can be arrayed along a continuum, ranging from the relatively specific to the relatively global, with the belief that the marriage is worth maintaining perhaps being the most global of all.

Second, beliefs about a marriage are organized hierarchically. Research on cognitive structures in other domains has suggested that cognitions not only vary in their level of abstraction but also function at more global levels to organize and give meaning to cognitions at lower, more specific levels (e.g., John, Hampson, & Goldberg, 1991). Models of cognition in close relationships have made the same

claim (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996; Neff & Karney, 2002a), as illustrated in Figure 20.1. As the figure shows, beliefs about a spouse at any particular level of abstraction integrate beliefs and knowledge at lower levels of abstraction. Thus, in this example, the belief that "my spouse is a great parent" subsumes the more specific beliefs "my spouse treats our children with love" and "my spouse devotes time to our children," each of which in turn integrates memories of specific experiences related to each statement. With respect to representations of an enduring marriage, the belief that "this marriage is worth sustaining" sits atop the hierarchy, integrating and giving meaning to all of the more specific beliefs and evaluations that lie beneath.

Although the structure described in Figure 20.1 is static, representations of an ongoing relationship are dynamic. Each new experience with a spouse presents new information to be integrated within the existing structure, a process that can be automatic (Smith, Ratliff, & Nosek, 2012). Thus, representations of a marriage evolve over time as they assimilate some experiences and accommodate others. One implication of the hierarchical structure of marital satisfaction is that changes at one level of abstraction need not necessarily require changes at higher levels of abstraction. For example, one might view one's spouse as a talented person on the basis of one's experience of her as a skilled chess player, a great dancer, and a highly paid executive. Even if one of these beliefs should change (e.g., one's spouse begins to lose at chess), it is still possible to maintain the general belief that she is a talented person, as long as other specific beliefs support that general one.

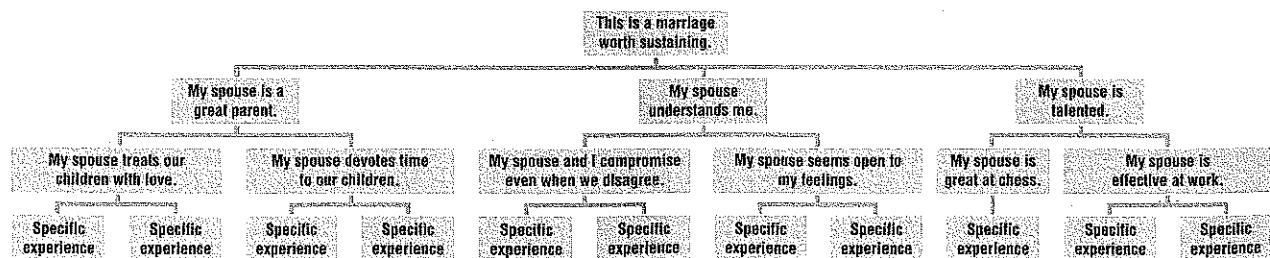


FIGURE 20.1. Cognitive representations of a marriage are organized hierarchically.

Cognitive Structure and Motivated Reasoning in Marriage

Although spouses may be motivated to maintain positive views of their partner and their marriage, there is no reason to expect spouses to be equally motivated to maintain their positive views at every level of abstraction. Global beliefs, because they subsume a greater number and range of behaviors and experiences, tend to be more evaluative than specific beliefs. For example, the global belief "My partner is dependable" has a far greater evaluative range than the more specific belief "My partner is punctual," because being dependable encompasses a greater range of behaviors than being punctual. It follows that spouses should be more invested in maintaining the belief that their partners are dependable than the belief that their partners are punctual and even more invested in maintaining beliefs if those beliefs are more general. In other words, spouses care more about their global beliefs about the marriage than about their specific ones.

Support for this premise comes from research on newlyweds, whose representations of each other tend to be quite positive and whose motivations to protect and preserve those positive evaluations tend to be quite strong (Neff & Karney, 2005). In a sample of 82 first-married newlywed couples, spouses within a few months of their wedding were asked to rate each other on two different scales. One assessed views of the partner's global worth using a version of Rosenberg's (1979) Self-Esteem Scale, modified to refer to the partner rather than the self and including items such as "On the whole, I am satisfied with my spouse" and "My spouse has a number of good qualities." The other scale assessed views of the partner's standing on a set of more specific dimensions (e.g., intelligence, physical appearance, social skills) adapted from Swann's Self-Attributes Questionnaire (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). The distribution of spouses' scores on the two scales is presented in Figure 20.2. As Panel A of the figure reveals, scores on the global measure were highly skewed, such that the modal response of both husbands and wives was the highest possible score on the scale. In fact, 46% of husbands and 53% of wives gave their partners the highest possible rating. Yet, as Panel B of the figure reveals, these globally

positive views did not correspond to equally positive views about their partners' specific attributes.

Whereas the global ratings were positively skewed, the more specific ratings were more or less normally distributed. About half of the spouses gave each other a perfect score on the global measure, but only about 20% of them reported a score of 100 or higher (out of 114) on the specific measure. In other words, among the spouses who were unwilling to admit to having less than a perfect partner in general were a large number of spouses who were willing to admit that their "generally perfect" partners were not perfect in every way.

If spouses are to maintain a coherent representation of their relationships (i.e., if their feelings about their marriages are to make sense), recognizing their partners' imperfections represents a challenge. How can one reconcile the positive global belief "I was right to marry this person" with the specific experience of an emotional conflict, a betrayal, or the mundane irritations and disappointments that are likely to arise in any long-term relationship? Most of what has been described as motivated reasoning in intimate relationships involves the use of cognitive mechanisms for meeting this challenge. That is, processes of motivated reasoning in intimate relationships allow partners to recognize specific negative information about their relationships while protecting or enhancing their positive global evaluations of their relationship.

Research on attributions in relationships (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 2000) has offered a clear example of these processes at work. Spouses are most likely to think about and seek causal explanations for each other's behaviors when those behaviors are either negative or unexpected, such as when they represent experiences that are not easily reconciled with existing representations of the relationship (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). In terms of the hierarchical diagram in Figure 20.1, making an attribution represents linking a specific experience with some higher order global perception. An attribution of blame, in this view, is drawing a link between a specific transgression (e.g., he was 30 minutes late for our date) and a more global statement about the transgressor (e.g., he is a thoughtless person). In terms of relationship maintenance, an

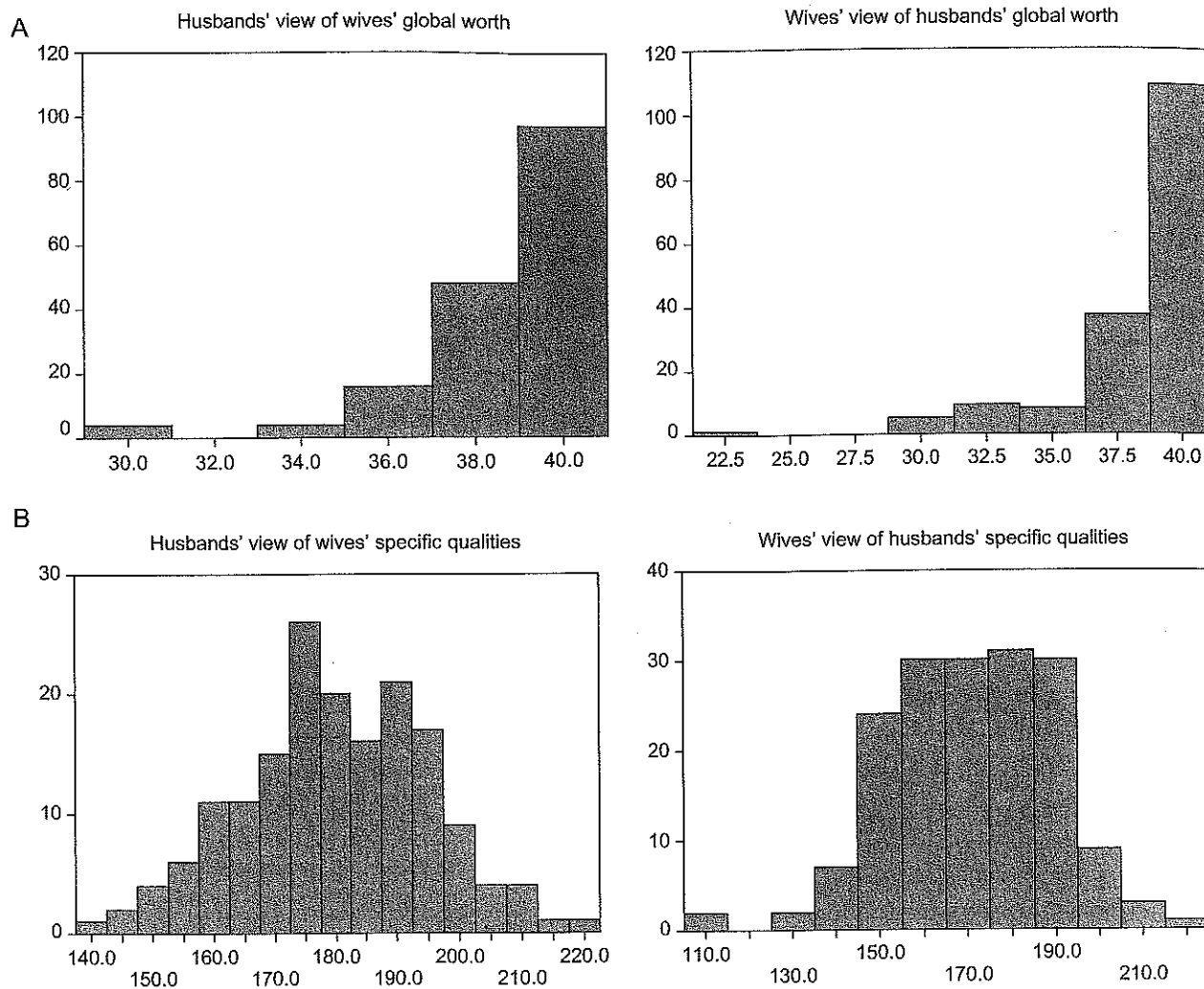


FIGURE 20.2. Distribution of global versus specific partner evaluations among newlyweds. A: Spouses' global esteem for each other, assessed via a version of the Rosenberg (1979) Self-Esteem Scale. B: Spouses' ratings of each other's specific traits, assessed via Swann's Specific Attributes Scale (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994).

adaptive attribution is one that severs this link, allowing the perceiver to recognize the transgression without acknowledging that it may have more global implications for understanding the partner or the relationship (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Something such as "Oh, he must be struck in traffic" does the job nicely. By attributing blame for the transgression to an external and uncontrollable source, the specific negative experience can be acknowledged while its implications for more global representations of the relationship are defused. With respect to positive behaviors, adaptive attributions serve the opposite agenda, drawing and strengthening the links between specific positive behaviors ("He bought me my favorite perfume!") and their

global implications ("He is such a thoughtful husband, and he knows my taste so well").

McNulty and Karney (2001) directly linked the nature of newlyweds' attributions to the way spouses integrate their global and specific perceptions of their marriage. In that study, spouses were asked to complete a 7-day nightly diary in which they rated the day's experience of several specific domains of the relationship (e.g., our communication, my spouse's intelligence, my spouse's appearance) and then rated their global feelings at the end of the day (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your marriage today?"). Diary reports have been an especially powerful research method to address these issues, because multiple repeated assessments of

both specific experiences and global evaluations allow researchers to evaluate how fluctuations in specific experience across days covary with the variability of global evaluations of the relationship across days (e.g., Gable & Reis, 1999; Neff & Karney, 2009). A strong within-subject covariance between these reports implies that an individual's global feelings about the relationship are sensitive to changes in his or her specific experiences, whereas a weak covariance implies that the individual is able to maintain stable global evaluations despite fluctuations in specific experience. Across this study, the covariance between spouses' global and specific ratings of the marriage varied significantly across spouses, and the quality of their attributions accounted for part of this variance. For spouses who tended to blame their partners, the covariance between global and specific ratings was relatively high, consistent with the idea that blame helps to link specific experience to global implications for the marriage. For spouses who tended to forgive their partners, the covariance between global and specific ratings was relatively low, consistent with the idea that forgiveness helps to sever or weaken links between specific and global perceptions.

Other cognitive processes in close relationships may serve similar functions. In their ideal standards model, for example, Fletcher and Simpson (2000) suggested that the association between a specific experience of a relationship and its global evaluation is moderated by whether the specific experience is consistent with the perceiver's standards and ideals. In terms of the hierarchical model in Figure 20.1, the ideal serves as a decision rule for linking specific experiences with more global judgments. For example, being unsatisfied with one's sex life (a specific judgment) is only a problem for global evaluations of the relationship as a whole if one holds standards that a satisfying sex life is a requirement for a good relationship. Indeed, for people who hold that standard, sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are strongly correlated, but for people who do not endorse that standard, they are not (Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1992). When specific experiences in the relationship vary across domains, or when they change over time, the adaptive response for motivated spouses is to adjust their standards, such that

whatever aspects of the relationship are positive at the moment are also deemed crucial for successful relationships, and whatever aspects are lacking are deemed irrelevant or unnecessary (cf. Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000).

Neff and Karney (2003) observed exactly this pattern in newlyweds who had been asked to rate 20 different relationship domains in terms of their importance for successful relationships generally and then later evaluated their own relationships on the same 20 domains. Consistent with the view of standards as decision rules, global satisfaction with the marriage was highest among spouses with the strongest positive correlation between perceiving that a specific domain was important and perceiving that the same domain was positive in their own relationships. For these couples, their standards highlighted the global implications of positive domains and minimized the global implications of negative domains. Furthermore, as spouses' perceptions of specific domains of the marriage evolved over the next 2 years, global satisfaction was most stable among spouses whose standards proved most flexible. When a particular aspect of the relationship deteriorated over that period, these spouses declared that this aspect was not as important to successful relationships as they once believed it to be, thus severing the link between that domain and their global judgments of the relationship.

Further examples abound. Gable and Poore (2008) used experience sampling techniques to examine links between specific positive and negative thoughts about a relationship and global satisfaction with it. Partners' motives affected how these levels of evaluation were linked: Global satisfaction covaried more strongly with positive thoughts for those with approach goals but covaried more strongly with negative thoughts for those with avoidance goals.

In addition, Murray and Holmes (1999) observed that satisfied partners compartmentalize negative perceptions of each other with "Yes, but" refutations, finding reasons to deny that specific failings in the partner have global implications for the relationship. Frye and Karney (2002) also observed that satisfied spouses recalled that specific marital problems were improving over time, even when longitudinal

data indicated that they were not; the more spouses demonstrated this bias, the less perceptions of specific problems affected their global satisfaction with the marriage.

What do all of these cognitive processes have in common? In each of them, motivated spouses process specific experiences in ways that protect or enhance desired global evaluations of the relationship. For specific experiences that are consistent with their global evaluations (i.e., positive experiences), the links between the experience and the evaluation can be strengthened through processes that focus more attention on those experiences or highlight their broader implications. For specific experiences that are inconsistent with global evaluations (i.e., negative experiences), the links between the experience and the evaluation can be weakened through processes that deflect attention from those experiences or minimize their broader implications. In all cases, motivated reasoning is a process of assimilating new information into the existing representation of the relationship.

Limits on Adaptive Cognitive Processing in Marriage

Research on cognitive processes in marriage and other intimate relationships has been very successful at identifying mechanisms through which motivated partners protect their positive feelings about their relationships. This research has been less successful at addressing the undeniable fact that these cognitive processes often fail. Despite all of these mechanisms for assimilating specific experiences, people's representations of their marriages and intimate relationships usually accommodate to them in the long run.

How does motivated reasoning fall short? The hierarchical model of marital satisfaction in Figure 20.1 suggests two routes by which global evaluations may change despite spouses' desire to preserve them. First, negative experiences and perceptions may accumulate beyond the individual's ability to assimilate them. Second, spouses may lose the motivation or capacity to engage in motivated reasoning, even if their concrete experiences in the relationship remain relatively constant. Considerable research has supported each of these routes.

Route 1: Negative experiences accumulate. In a marriage or long-term relationship, the beginning of the relationship provides abundant positive experiences to support desirable global evaluations of the relationship, and negative or inconsistent experiences can be rationalized or explained away. However, when spouses forgive their partners for transgressions, declare that an unmet standard is no longer important, or state that a relationship problem is improving, the global implications of a negative experience are minimized, but the experience does not disappear. Negative experiences may remain in memory. More negative inputs require more effort to assimilate into positive views of the relationship, and eventually even the most motivated spouses may not be able to sustain a positive evaluation of the marriage any longer.

Classic models of marriage emphasize this gradual accumulation of specific negative experiences as the mechanism driving change in global marital satisfaction over time. Behavioral models of marriage, for example, explicitly argue that, "to the extent that normal marital disagreements are not handled well, unresolved negative feelings start to build up, fueling destructive patterns of marital interaction and eventually eroding and attacking the positive aspects of the relationship" (Markman, 1991, p. 422). Social ecological models draw attention to the way external contexts affect marital outcomes (e.g., Hill, 1949), but still the effects of external stress are usually described as a gradual process such that "minor stresses originating outside the relationship and spilling over into marriage . . . lead to mutual alienation and slowly decrease relationship quality over time" (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009, p. 108). The view that negative experiences can build up over time is a common feature of several other prominent theoretical frameworks as well, including Aron and Aron's (1986) self-expansion model, Bradbury and Fincham's (1988) contextual model, and Reis and Shaver's (1988) intimacy process model.

These perspectives are perfectly consistent with a motivated reasoning account of marital satisfaction. As Kunda (1990) noted in her original description of motivated reasoning, the motivated perceiver needs to find some basis for reaching a desired conclusion; without that basis, even the most desired

conclusion may be impossible to sustain over time. These incremental models of marriage highlight different sources of negative experience—stress, unresolved conflict, boredom—that can shrink the available sample of positive experiences on which positive global views of the marriage can be based.

Kelley's (1967) covariance model of attributions made the links between experience and cognition even more explicit. In that seminal model, Kelley explained that the way people understand a specific behavior from someone they know well (e.g., whether or not they blame a long-term partner for a particular transgression) rests on how the individual's current behavior matches their memories of his or her prior behavior. A unique transgression (e.g., my spouse is late for a date but is usually on time) is easy to explain as the product of a temporary, external cause, and therefore has no bearing on our relationship. A frequent transgression (e.g., my spouse is always late) is harder for the motivated perceiver to reconcile with a positive global view of the partner's punctuality. According to Kelley, a strong covariance between an individual and an observed behavior trumps people's motives to decouple their perceptions of the individual from that behavior.

Whereas some specific marital problems may be hard to assimilate because they occur too frequently, other marital problems may be hard to assimilate because they are too severe. Motivated reasoning may be an effective means of preventing minor issues from escalating within a marriage, but some issues are not minor. Addressing those issues with purely cognitive responses may lessen their sting in the short run but may not motivate any direct action to resolve those issues, leaving couples vulnerable to deteriorating relationships in the long run. McNulty, O'Mara, and Karney (2008) demonstrated these risks in the early years of marriage by examining how the severity of couples' marital problems moderated the well-known effects of adaptive attributions on the development of their marital satisfaction over time. For couples who rated their marital problems as relatively mild, adaptive attributions predicted more satisfying and more stable marriages, consistent with prior research (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). For couples who rated their marital problems as relatively severe, however, the

traditional effect was reversed: Couples who were willing to blame each other for transgressions maintained more stable satisfaction over time, whereas those who refrained from blame experienced steeper declines. Changes in the problems themselves mediated these effects, such that severe problems got worse for couples who refrained from blame, and these changes accounted for the steeper declines experienced by that group. In other words, the motivated reasoning that worked well for spouses in generally healthy relationships allowed more serious problems to fester in couples with issues that needed to be addressed directly.

In an independent sample, McNulty (2008) made a similar point about forgiveness, showing that couples who demonstrate skill at communicating effectively in a laboratory interaction task benefit from forgiving each other, but couples who are less effective at communication experience more declines when they are more forgiving. A subsequent daily diary study (McNulty, 2010) identified a potential mechanism for this effect: Forgiving a partner's negative behavior on a given day was associated with a greater likelihood that the behavior would recur on subsequent days. When marital problems are severe, it appears that the poet Shel Silverstein was right: "THINKING you can just ain't enough!" (Silverstein, 1974, p. 158). Rather, resolving serious marital problems requires direct confrontation and communication, actions that motivated reasoning may inhibit rather than promote.

In sum, motivated reasoning may fall short as a mechanism of relationship maintenance when (a) too many negative experiences accumulate, (b) the covariance between negative experiences and one's partner is strong, or (c) negative experiences are severe and require attention. With respect to promoting long-term happiness in marriage, one obvious (but still nontrivial) implication of this work is that global marital satisfaction should be easier to sustain when spouses maximize positive inputs into their representations of the marriage and minimize negative inputs. Put another way, spouses with plenty of material with which to support positive views of their marriage should have an easier time doing so, and spouses with many experiences inconsistent with positive views of the marriage will

eventually have a harder time supporting those views. Behaviorally oriented marital therapies and interventions (e.g., Christensen & Jacobson, 2002; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994) are grounded in this point, asserting that if couples could be taught to behave better and interact with each other more effectively, they would have more positive experiences with which to support positive views of the marriage and fewer negative experiences to detract from those views.

Route 2: Capacity for motivated processing declines. Motivated reasoning takes ability and effort. Some people, owing to their personal history or personality (e.g., Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995), may have limits on their capacity to process specific experiences in ways that support desired conclusions. Others may temporarily lack this capacity, owing to distraction (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988), exhaustion (Baumeister, 2002), or inebriation (Steele & Josephs, 1990). For all of these reasons, the likelihood that spouses will effectively assimilate negative experiences within a generally positive evaluation of the marriage varies across individuals and can vary within individuals over time. If the way spouses process their specific experiences changes over the course of the marriage, global marital satisfaction may change over time even if spouses' specific experiences within the marriage remain relatively constant.

Several individual difference variables account for variability in the tendency for spouses and partners to respond to specific relationship experiences in ways that support positive global views of their relationship. Anxious attachment, for example, is an enduring model of the social world that views close relationships as highly desirable but also highly dangerous. Individuals characterized by anxious attachment should be vigilant to signs of risk and should, therefore, be more likely to interpret negative behaviors from their spouses as confirmation of their global fears and concerns. Indeed, in a 14-day daily diary study, anxiously attached individuals were more reactive to specific relationship experiences than were more secure individuals (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Whereas secure individuals maintained optimism about their

relationships and felt equally close to their partners regardless of the specific events of each day, anxious individuals were more optimistic about the relationship and felt closer to their partners on days when their partners had been supportive than when they had experienced conflict with their partners.

The closely related construct of rejection sensitivity, defined as a dispositional tendency to perceive and react strongly to signs of social rejection, similarly operates to strengthen links between specific experiences and global perceptions of social situations (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). Research with rejection-sensitive individuals in romantic relationships has shown that they are significantly more likely to ascribe hurtful intent to their partners' negative behaviors than individuals who are less rejection sensitive, who are more likely to seek out external causes to excuse their partners' negative behaviors (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Low self-esteem is another well-studied individual difference that has this effect. Diary studies have revealed that partners with low self-esteem evaluate their relationships positively only on days on which positive events occurred but evaluate their relationships negatively on days on which negative events occurred. These links are significantly weaker among partners with high self-esteem (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). If maintaining marital satisfaction requires that spouses assimilate the inevitable disappointments of married life into a favorable view of the marriage as a whole, these studies indicate that some individuals are better at doing this than others. Over time, then, these individuals should be more vulnerable to declines in marital satisfaction and, in fact, each of these individual differences has been linked to poorer marital outcomes longitudinally (Collins, 2003; Downey et al., 1998; Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2003).

Whereas individual differences exert stable effects on the way spouses process their specific experiences, situations external to the marriage may also temporarily constrain spouses' capacity for motivated reasoning. To the extent that motivated reasoning takes effort, demands outside the marriage that interfere with spouses' capacity to exert that effort should increase the likelihood that negative

experiences in the marriage will affect spouses' global sentiments toward their relationships. This prediction aligns closely with models of self-regulation, which describe self-regulatory capacity as a limited resource that can be depleted, making subsequent efforts at self-regulation more difficult (Baumeister, 2002; Finkel & Campbell, 2001).

For couples, one prominent source of depletion is exposure to chronic and acute stress. Stressors such as financial strain, health problems, or interpersonal conflicts outside the home drain energy from spouses, leaving them with less energy to devote to the marriage (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). It follows that, during periods of elevated stress, spouses should be less able to make allowances for each other's negative behaviors than during periods of relative calm. Multiwave longitudinal research examining how the attributions that couples make for each other's transgressions covaries with the amount of stress in their lives has supported this prediction (Neff & Karney, 2004). Within-couples analyses have revealed that the same couples who give each other the benefit of the doubt during periods of relatively low stress are significantly more likely to blame each other for the same transgressions during periods of relatively high stress, even after controlling for the direct effects of stress on marital satisfaction and the kinds of problems that couples face. In other words, couples who can assimilate negative behaviors when stress is low may no longer do so as effectively when stress is high. Subsequent research has drawn on daily diary assessments to reveal the same patterns in the way spouses integrate specific and global perceptions of the marriage across days (Neff & Karney, 2009). During periods of low stress, the covariance between specific perceptions of the marriage and global evaluations of the marriage is relatively low, suggesting that spouses are effective at protecting their global feelings about the marriage from the vicissitudes of daily life. During periods of high stress, however, the links between specific and global ratings are significantly higher in these same couples.

These findings suggest that, consistent with models of self-regulation, spouses' capacity to maintain their relationships fluctuates as a function of the

other demands they face in their lives. For couples whose lives become more stressful over time, marital satisfaction should decline, all else being equal, as the demands external to the marriage make it harder and harder for spouses to do the work required to protect their global feelings about the relationship. Indeed, couples under stress do experience lower marital satisfaction, as well as satisfaction that declines more steeply over time (Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005). Identifying the ways in which stress affects relationships helps to explain the elevated divorce rates observed in lower income communities as compared with more affluent communities (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). To the extent that financial strain represents a chronic demand on coping resources for poorer couples, their marital satisfaction should be especially strongly linked to their specific experiences in the marriage. In fact, survey research has indicated that associations between marital satisfaction and acute stressful events are significantly stronger for poorer couples than for more affluent ones (Maisel & Karney, 2012).

Thus far, this section has addressed limits to spouses' ability to engage in motivated processing of marital experiences, assuming throughout that spouses are highly motivated to preserve positive global views of their marriage. Not all spouses are equally motivated, however. As early social exchange theories recognized (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), some partners are more dependent on their relationships than others and, therefore, some partners have more to lose if the relationship no longer proves satisfying. Variability in spouses' dependence on the marriage should not affect their ability to engage in motivated reasoning but rather the effort they expend on doing so, such that spouses who are highly invested in the marriage should be willing to assimilate more negative experiences into a positive view of the marriage than spouses who are less invested. Research drawing on the investment perspective on relationship commitment (Rusbult, 1980, 1983) has confirmed these predictions. For example, among college students in dating relationships, those reporting greater commitment to their relationships are more willing to forgive serious transgressions (e.g., infidelity) than is true of partners less committed to their relationships (Finkel,

Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). In other words, the committed partners assimilated betrayals that less committed partners could not assimilate. Moreover, the link between commitment and forgiveness was mediated by partners' cognitions about the event, such that commitment directly predicted the effort that partners expended on explaining and understanding the transgression, which in turn predicted greater willingness to forgive the transgression. Other research has made similar points: The more that partners depend on their relationships, the more they are willing to do to maintain them (e.g., Rusbult, Bissonette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998; Van Lange et al., 1997). Although far less attention has been paid to how commitment itself may change over time, this work identifies another route through which marital satisfaction may change: Spouses who grow less committed to or invested in their marriage should expend less effort on maintaining it and thus should experience stronger associations between their specific negative experiences and the global evaluations of their relationships.

In sum, when spouses begin to pay more attention and ascribe more global meaning to their negative experiences in the marriage (and less to their positive experiences), global evaluations of the marriage are likely to decline even if spouses' specific experiences within the marriage remain relatively stable. Research on cognitive processing in marriage and intimate relationships has highlighted three factors that can constrain the way spouses support their initially positive views of their relationships: (a) stable individual differences in the tendency to process specific experiences effectively, (b) demands arising from chronic and acute stress outside the marriage, and (c) changes in spouses' motives to preserve the marriage.

Conclusions. Given all of the pain associated with declines in marital satisfaction, why do initially satisfying marriages decline so frequently? In this section, I have described two routes through which initially positive evaluations of a marriage may change despite the proven ability of spouses to reconcile negative experiences of the marriage with a globally positive view of the relationship as a whole. The first route emphasizes the changing content

of marital experiences. In some couples, negative experiences become so prevalent, so frequent, or so severe that they overwhelm spouses' ability to integrate them with a positive view of the relationship, and the positive view eventually crumbles. The second route emphasizes changes in the cognitive processes spouses use to draw global conclusions about their marriage. In some couples, spouses' capacity to engage in motivated reasoning about the marriage is constrained by stable individual differences in the partners, by external demands that tax spouses' finite cognitive resources, or by changes in spouses' motives to preserve the relationship. These two routes are independent but not mutually exclusive. That is, changes in the content of the marriage need not imply changes in the processes spouses use to understand the marriage, but these changes can coincide. Stress, for example, tends to increase the specific problems spouses must confront and resolve (a change in the content of marital experiences), even as it constrains spouses' ability to address problems effectively (a change in the processes spouses use to understand those experiences; Karney & Neff, 2013).

These two routes to explaining change in marital satisfaction imply two routes for efforts to preserve it. The first, as noted earlier, is to maximize positive experiences within marriage and to minimize negative ones. An alternative, however, is to promote environments that nurture spouses' capacity to process the events of their marriage more effectively. If spouses' capacity to reconcile daily irritations and disappointments within a globally positive view of their marriage can be diminished by distraction or exhaustion, any treatment that minimizes distractions and prevents exhaustion may promote a happier marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 2005). Programs may not need to target marriages directly to have a big impact on the lives of married couples. Researchers in Norway made this point in their analyses of the effects of a 1999 law that subsidized parents who chose to stay home with their children in the first years after their birth (Hardoy & Schøne, 2008). The law made no mention of marriage or marital outcomes, but it did make life easier for families who took advantage of it. A natural experiment that compared families that were and were not

affected by the new policy revealed an immediate decline in divorce rates for families affected by the new law. If spouses are generally motivated to maintain their relationship, policies that make it easier for them to do so may be as effective an intervention strategy as programs that teach them how to do so.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite great strides over the past several decades of research on marriage, important questions about how marriages change over time remain unanswered. In this final section, I highlight directions for future research that would move the field forward.

We Still Need to Describe How Marriages Change

Although scholarship on change in marital satisfaction is nearly 80 years old, descriptions of how marital satisfaction changes over time remain pretty crude. Researchers know that newlyweds are generally satisfied and optimistic (Neff & Karney, 2005), and they know that divorced couples are generally angry and disappointed (e.g., Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Goode, 1956; Kitson & Raschke, 1981), but the course between these two poles has been sketched only vaguely. For example, change in marital satisfaction has frequently been described as a gradual process of deterioration and erosion. Yet, as noted earlier, evidence for this gradual process has been hard to identify (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010), leaving open the possibility that marital satisfaction actually changes suddenly and drastically if and when it changes. The hierarchical view of marital satisfaction described in this chapter raises the further possibility that change in marital satisfaction may follow different trajectories at different levels of abstraction. That is, changes in perceptions of specific domains of the marriage may accumulate gradually, whereas global evaluations of a marriage may be relatively stable until some threshold of specific negativity is reached, whereupon global evaluations may deteriorate rapidly.

To date, two obstacles have prevented the development of more refined views of change in marriage. First, assessments of marital satisfaction in

longitudinal research have generally not been sensitive to possible differences in how specific versus global perceptions of the marriage may change over time. Future longitudinal research on marriage would benefit from assessing different levels of evaluation separately. Second, the resolution offered by most longitudinal designs is extremely low. For example, the picture of change that emerges from longitudinal research depends greatly on the frequency and duration of data collection, yet choices about how often and how long to assess couples are generally driven by practical rather than theoretical considerations. The result is research that often goes months or years between assessments, leaving large gaps wherein unknown changes in the marriage may be occurring. The move toward daily diary assessments of married couples (e.g., Murray, Bellavia, et al., 2003; Thompson & Bolger, 1999) is a welcome complement to long-term longitudinal studies, but daily measurements of marital satisfaction are as arbitrary in their way as annual or biannual measurements. When are no researchers are pestering them, how frequently spouses evaluate their marital satisfaction or how salient those evaluations are in their daily lives is not known. Qualitative studies that describe the role of marital satisfaction in spouses' emotional lives would be a first step toward developing an empirical foundation to guide the design of future longitudinal research.

Emphasize Systems, Not Variables

Psychological research on marriage has identified numerous individual differences, cognitive processes, and external stressors that each account for variance in marital outcomes over time. Yet lists of significant predictors do not by themselves accumulate to inform or elaborate on existing models of marriage. As this review I hope has made clear, many variables that have been studied in parallel lines of research may actually operate in very similar ways (e.g., attachment models, self-esteem, and rejection sensitivity). Advancing the understanding of marriage will require not more variables but more research that draws links between variables and compares their relative or combined influence on developing relationships. This goal is especially important as policymakers seek out marital research

to inform their efforts to improve the lives of couples and families. To guide their efforts, program developers will need more than merely significant results; they will also need to know which potential targets of their interventions have substantial effects on marital outcomes. Providing that guidance requires research that includes multiple domains of marital functioning, that examines how different domains interact as a system, and that reports and gives proper attention to effect sizes.

Do Not Take Generalizability for Granted

Marital research has identified many contextual variables, such as socioeconomic status, income, and country of residence, that are strongly associated with marital outcomes but are impossible to manipulate experimentally. The size of these effects is often substantial, suggesting that, even though human beings across the planet want more or less the same things from intimacy (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992), different determinants of successful intimacy may prove more or less important for different couples in different cultures and contexts. Addressing this variability will require efforts to improve the sampling in marital research, which has to date relied heavily on White, college-educated, middle-class samples of convenience (Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). Ironically, these samples have been drawn from segments of the population with the lowest risk of divorce, whereas those couples at highest risk (e.g., less affluent and non-White) have been underrepresented, prompting comparisons to the drunk who, having lost his keys in an alley, searches for them under a streetlight because the light is better there. The time is past due for research on marriage that obtains large, diverse, representative samples, so that the generalizability of models of marital development may be examined directly.

Get Interdisciplinary

The centrality of marriage to adult development ensures that it will be a phenomenon of enduring interest to multiple fields of study outside of psychology. Indeed, what is known about the prevalence of marriage and divorce comes from research by demographers and sociologists (e.g., McNamee &

Raley, 2011; Sweeney & Phillips, 2004). The best work on the effects of employment on marital outcomes has been conducted by economists (e.g., Roy, 2011). Some of the most exciting research on the effectiveness of marital interventions is being conducted not by clinical psychologists but by policy analysts (Wood, McConnell, Moore, Clarkwest, & Hsueh, 2012). The need to build bridges between psychological research and these other disciplines is as acute today as it was when Berscheid (1995) expressed it nearly two decades ago. By placing spouses' psychological and behavioral processes within their cultural, economic, and historic contexts, interdisciplinary research on marriage offers the best hope for advancing the understanding of how marriages and other long-term intimate relationships develop over time.

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