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Transition to marriage

Tara L. Cornelius

Kieran T. Sullivan

Santa Clara University, ksullivan@scu.edu

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Cohabitation rates may continue to increase, although most will still cohabit as a trial period before marriage, and will want to have their children within marriage. Furthermore, although modernization forces may encourage individuals to seek greater independence from their families, and greater equality between the sexes, significant religious and cultural forces will continue to play an important role in influencing marriage patterns and behaviors.

Robin Goodwin

See also Change in Romantic Relationships Over Time; Culture and Relationships; Divorce, Prevalence and Trends; Marriage Markets

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most look forward to this event with anticipation and excitement, the transition to marriage also involves adaptation to a variety of tasks that may fundamentally alter spouses' view of themselves and their alliances. During the first few years of marriage, spouses typically define new roles, which may be less individualistic and more interdependent; alter their social networks; and establish a core alliance with each other rather than with their families of origin. Additionally, more than 33 percent of divorces occur within the first 5 years of marriage. This entry presents theories about why couples succeed or fail in making the transition to a stable, satisfying marriage, identifies behaviors that put couples at risk for marital problems and behaviors that protect them from marital distress and divorce, discusses the impact of external stressors, and identifies the changes that individuals may experience in making the transition to marriage.

Theoretical Models

Several models have been developed to explain distress and divorce during the early years of marriage. The disillusionment model contends that as new marriages progress, spouses become disillusioned by the discontinuity between their idealized expectations before marriage and the actuality of their marital experiences. Before marriage, individuals may actively avoid conflict with their partners, manage impressions of themselves, and view their partners in the best possible light. During the early years of marriage, partners typically perceive a loss of love and affection, experience increased ambivalence about their relationships, and begin to view their partners and relationships in less positive lights. Some empirical evidence supports the disillusionment model because couples who divorce early in their marriage are more ambivalent about their marriages, report falling out of love at higher rates, and perceive their partners as less responsive to their needs.

Most researchers find that in happily married couples, a general decline in marital satisfaction occurs naturally. Therefore, some researchers have argued that disillusionment is an inevitable process as couples begin the transition from dating to newlywed marriage to early marriage, and therefore

MARRIAGE, TRANSITION TO

One of the most significant psychosocial adjustments in adulthood is the transition to marriage. Although most men and women in the United States will marry at some point in their lives and

cannot be a useful explanatory model because it occurs for distressed as well as happily married couples. The enduring dynamics model, in contrast, postulates that couples enter into marriage with at least some knowledge of the shortcomings of the relationship and their partner. Relationship distress, therefore, arises from interpersonal processes that are already present during courtship and that endure into marriage. This model suggests that differences between partners that are present while the couple is dating erode marital satisfaction over time and may contribute to eventual divorce. Some data support this model because the intensity of newlywed romance and negativity assessed at marriage predicts marital satisfaction 13 years later as well as, for couples who divorced, the length of time married before divorce.

Finally, the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model is an integrated model of marital processes that contends that marital quality is a function of enduring vulnerabilities that the partners bring to the marriage (e.g., attachment style, personality traits, etc.), stressful events experienced by the couple (e.g., relocation, starting a new job, having children, etc.), and the adaptive processes (e.g., social support, positive affective expressions, problem solving, etc.) couples use to contend with vulnerabilities and stressors. Considerable research has supported this model as a useful one in examining marital qualities, particularly marital problem solving, that likely moderate the effect of life events on spousal functioning. A strength of this more comprehensive model is that it reflects the diverse individual, relational, and external variables that contribute to marital quality and stability.

High-Risk Behavior

Research, guided by the theories presented, has identified behaviors in newlywed spouses that predict success in the transition to stable and satisfying marriages. Perhaps the most extensively studied area of marital relationships is communication behavior. Research on the verbal content of communication during problem-solving tasks suggests that negative behaviors distinguish satisfied from dissatisfied couples, especially hostility, stonewalling, and contempt. Rates of negative verbal communication during conflict discussions

have been shown to predict declines in satisfaction over time, particularly in the absence of positive affect and when the ratio of negative to positive behaviors is high (stable marriages typically evidence a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative exchanges). Growing evidence indicates that the specific emotions displayed in conflict discussions are even more powerful in differentiating distressed from nondistressed couples than is the verbal content of their discussions. For example, negative affect, particularly when it is reciprocated by the partner, appears to be a particularly powerful predictor of marital distress across many studies and has been shown to distinguish happily married from unhappily married couples after 4 years of marriage. Another important maladaptive pattern of communication is the demand-withdraw pattern, in which one member criticizes, nags, and makes demands of the partner (the demander), and the other partner withdraws and attempts to avoid conflict (the withdrawer). This pattern has been well established cross-culturally and is consistently associated with relationship dissatisfaction.

In addition to communication behavior, several studies of newly married couples indicate that the prevalence of intimate partner violence is substantially higher in young, recently married couples. If violence occurs early in the relationship, it is likely to continue, although its frequency may decrease overall. One third of engaged couples and approximately half of recently married couples report physical aggression in their relationship. The presence of physical aggression in a relationship is concurrently and prospectively associated with greater marital dissatisfaction and increases the likelihood of marital dissolution, even after controlling for psychological aggression, relationship length, and prior marital satisfaction. Aggression in newlywed couples reliably distinguishes between couples who remain married and those who become separated or divorced.

Protective Behavior

Supportive behaviors (i.e., empathic responding, constructive interactions, social support) have been associated with higher marital satisfaction, lower stress experience, and better psychological

and physical well-being. Longitudinal research suggests that newlyweds with poor social support skills are at increased risk of distress and divorce 2 years after marriage. Other researchers have expanded the concept of social support to include dyadic coping, which involves both ensuring the partner's well-being and enhancing the marital relationship. Research in this area suggests that more positive and less negative dyadic coping is significantly associated with longitudinal relationship satisfaction.

Positive affect, including expressing positive emotions, constructive engagement in the marriage, and empathic listening, is concurrently and prospectively associated with marital satisfaction. Some data suggest that positive affect can neutralize the effects of detrimental behaviors. That is, for some couples who display low levels of positive communication skills or high negative skills in problem-solving discussions, positive emotions such as humor, affection, and interest seem to diminish the negative effects, to the point where they have little bearing on declines in marital satisfaction. Conversely, the absence of positive affect appears to amplify the effects of unskilled communication patterns. This does not imply that *only* being positive is beneficial; some data suggest that exclusive positivity and excessive repression of negativity by wives is detrimental to marital relationships.

Cross-sectional research also suggests that acknowledgment of a partner's admirable qualities, pleasure derived from the relationship, and time spent with one's spouse are positively related to marital quality. For newlyweds, the relative novelty of the relationship and the excitement in forming a marital bond may also enhance marital quality. Data suggest that couples who maintain a high level of joint novel activities throughout early marriage may maintain higher relationship quality. Finally, relationship self-regulation, or the degree to which partners work at their marital relationship, predicts concurrent and longitudinal marital satisfaction for newlywed couples.

External Stressors

The stressful life events that couples experience in the early years of marriage have been linked to marital quality, in both cross-sectional and

longitudinal studies. When couples experience acute stress, they tend to report higher levels of problems in the marriage, communication difficulties, and a tendency to blame their partner for negative events. Research has also suggested that marital quality is lower among couples experiencing high levels of chronic stress and that chronic stress predicts more rapid declines in marital satisfaction. However, marital satisfaction is linked most strongly to stress when couples experience *both* chronic and acute stress; that is, negative life events are particularly detrimental when the external context places additional demands on an already strained system. Some evidence also indicates that physical violence is more likely to occur under conditions of high chronic stress combined with acute stress.

The effects of external stress on relationships may be attenuated by appropriate supportive coping responses in spouses. In general, positive responses, such as providing support and making allowances for the partner's aversive behavior, function to reduce the negative impact of stress on the relationship. For example, marital support has been shown to reduce the association between emotional distress and stressful economic events. Further, spouses who make relationship-enhancing attributions about their partner's behavior when under stress tend to fare better than do spouses who make distress-maintaining attributions about their partner's behavior.

Impact on Individuals

In addition to changes in the relationship, the transition to marriage involves changes in a variety of psychological and behavioral patterns for the individual members of the couple. One potential area of change for an individual is attachment style. John Bowlby originally speculated that infants develop working models of themselves (e.g., as lovable) and of others (e.g., as dependable) based on early interactions with caregivers, resulting in attachment styles that are presumed to be fairly stable across time. However, recent research has suggested that these spouses may transfer attachment functions (safe haven, secure base, etc.) from their family of origin to their spouse. The marital relationship, because it creates

a new caregiving environment and provides some psychological and physical distance from the family of origin, may be an opportunity for individuals to transfer their attachment functions to their spouses. Research examining attachment stability during the transition to marriage has confirmed that attachment representations are largely stable for most individuals, particularly for those who were securely attached before marriage. However, newlywed individuals with insecure attachment styles do tend to experience more security (i.e., feel less anxious about abandonment and more comfortable depending on their spouse) than they did before marriage.

A second potential area of change is in social networks. Newlyweds tend to go through a beneficial process of integrating social networks during the early years of marriage, reinforcing the couple identity and providing support for the new relationship. In contrast, newlyweds who continue to maintain predominately separate social networks may undermine the marital relationship and reinforce individuation and personal goals. Indeed, research has demonstrated that higher interdependence of family and friend networks predicts higher marital quality after one year of marriage, particularly for wives. However, these effects are not always positive. Some evidence indicates that maladaptive behaviors, such as drinking, may be fostered by integration of social networks.

Conclusion

Taken together, these data suggest that the transition to marriage is a complex one that involves many systematic and predictable changes at the individual, dyadic, and environmental level. The research has identified several robust correlates and predictors of marital *dissatisfaction*, but has been less systematic in the identification of those variables that contribute to marital *satisfaction*. If one assumes that marital satisfaction is more than just the absence of marital dissatisfaction, as considerable research and theory suggests, the research has less to offer for those facets that contribute to a lasting, fulfilling relationship. Future research is necessary to better elucidate those positive elements that can facilitate the transition in newlyweds and beyond.

Tara L. Cornelius and Kieran T. Sullivan

See also Abuse and Violence in Relationships; Expectations About Relationship; Marital Satisfaction and Quality; Predicting Success or Failure of Marital Relationships; Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model

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MARRIAGE AND HEALTH

A key human relationship for most adults is marriage, which confers economic, social, and psychological benefits such as increased earning potential, resources for raising a family, and fulfilling needs for security and belonging. Across a number of surveys, married individuals report greater happiness and life satisfaction and have a lower risk of clinical depression than do their unmarried counterparts. In addition to these benefits, marriage confers benefits for physical health. At the same time, marriages characterized by low marital satisfaction and high conflict have damaging effects on physical health. This entry reviews evidence for