

Different Slopes for Different Folks: A Psychology Perspective on Union Formation,
Relationship Quality, and Couple Dissolution

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Friday, September 08, 2006

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It is the nature of science to find that with progress in what we know comes a growing awareness of what we do not know. Our goal in this chapter is to describe recent progress in marriage and relationship research from the tradition of psychology. After laying that foundation, we describe what we believe are some of the most promising new directions in our field.

There are two essentials to understanding the scope of what we present. First, by “psychological couples research,” we are referring generally to the body of relationship research conducted by psychologists. We focus on research that is closely tuned to the functioning and characteristics of individuals and the dynamic processes of couples rather than those broader societal phenomena typically associated with fields such as sociology and economics (ethnography being an obvious exception). Hence, the chapter title reflects the field we attempt to briefly describe here—that which focuses on the relationship trajectories of individuals and individual couples. Although it is only relatively recently that sophisticated tools for analyzing trajectories have become widely used, this frame sets apart what psychologists tend to study, regardless of methods. Even in cross-sectional studies where there are no actual trajectories being studied, the conceptual focus among psychologists is still typically on what the data mean for individuals and couples at the micro level.

Second, regarding the scope of this chapter, we make no attempt to present a thorough review of either the past or the future of our field. That task would require an entire volume, not to mention several years of our lives. A specific result of this fact is that virtually any lists of citations we present here are mere samplings; and the reader will note our liberal use of the

abbreviation “e.g.” as we go. Our goal is circumspect in the desire to capture the *Zeitgeist* of our field at this moment by looking back and forward in time.

The Past that Framed the Present

A substantial number of couples researchers in psychology come from clinical psychology. As such, there has been a focus on problems in relationships—especially marriage—with research employed to illuminate the roots of such problems and inform interventions. This can be seen in the studies of a number of areas that have been mainstays of psychological couples research: (1) the dynamics of marital deterioration (e.g., Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Gottman, 1993); (2) the “prediction” of marital distress and divorce (e.g., Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989), (3) the development and assessment of couples therapy (e.g., Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2006); and (4) the prevention of marital distress and divorce (e.g., Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001; Markman et al., 1993; Stanley et al., 2001).

Perhaps because of the clinical psychology tradition, it also seems to us that our psychologist colleagues have been extraordinarily interested in not only learning how things work, but in learning how things can be changed. In essence, this can be seen in a recurrent emphasis on understanding risk and protective factors, and a generalized interest in lowering risks and improving the quality of life. For example, Stanley (2001) argues that more attention be placed in prevention efforts on risk factors that are dynamic, and relatively changeable, than static. Static risk factors, such as parental divorce, surely matter, but one cannot change the past to lower one’s risks in the present. What appear to be historical risk factors such as parental divorce likely influence the present through more dynamic risk factors such as views on commitment, relationship confidence, and communication ability (see Amato, 2001; Amato &

DeBoer, 2001; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000).

The field of psychological couples research also has a rich tradition of intervention outcome research which provides important information about the mechanisms underlying the phenomena we study. Most research fields like psychology, sociology, and economics are hopelessly mired in arguments about what is causal and what is selection. These arguments are appropriate because we rarely can conduct true experiments on major questions about relationships, and only true, highly controlled experiments can clearly isolate causality. Alas, we cannot assign individuals to parental divorce or non-divorce conditions, to marriage versus cohabitation, or to poverty or riches. A value of intervention outcome studies is that they can be accomplished with reasonable experimental rigor. Because intervention research is usually based on a theory of the mechanisms behind interventions, such studies provide information on causal theories (see Coie et al., 1993). As one example, if your theory suggests that teaching couples to manage conflict better should lower relationship distress, outcome studies that use interventions so designed that show expected benefits provide evidence for (without proving, of course) such a theory (see Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Snyder et al., 2006).

Such a strong focus on the amelioration or prevention of marital distress may explain the relative paucity of research on early couple development and mate selection among clinical psychologists; such work has been more the focus of researchers in family science and human ecology (e.g., Surra, Gray, Cottle, Boettcher, & Jarvis, 2004) or social psychology, exemplified in the work of Caryl Rusbult and colleagues who have published a vast body of work on the nature of the development of commitment in romantic relationships (e.g., Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). If it is fair to say that psychology has focused more on the dark side of relationships than the positive, this is no where more in evidence than the extensive and vast

body of work done in the area of conflict in relationships, to which we now turn.

How Do I Hurt Thee, Let Me Count the Ways

In the words of Chance the gardener, from the movie *Being There*, psychologists “like to watch.” Psychology’s roots in the analysis of behavior date back to Pavlov’s classical conditioning and Skinner’s operant behaviorism demonstrations. Most agree that humans are different from dogs, pigeons, and rats, but there is a fundamental belief among behaviorists that human relationships function according to the same principles that have been explored in animal experiments. The perspective that now dominates much psychological couples research is the broader behavioral model of social learning theory. Social learning theory builds on behaviorism, but also holds that we learn by observing the behavior of others, not merely by direct reinforcement. The theory originally grew mostly from research on criminal (Burgess & Akers, 1966) and aggressive behavior (Bandura, 1977), but is now applied more broadly. (Direct implications of these roots for romantic relationships are purely unintentional on our part.) Among various contributions, social learning theory provides a strong theoretical system from which to understand how parental relationship behavior affects children. The central notion is that children observe what their parents do, learn from it (for good or bad), and act on that learning in their own adult romantic relationships. As just one example, one may observe her parents arguing repeatedly and unproductively while growing. As an adult, she may tend to withdraw from talking with her partner about difficult issues, not because of anything he is doing that bodes poorly for open communication, but because she has learned more generally to believe that communication is fruitless.

Following psychology’s tradition, the pioneers of the psychological couples research field focused on observing couples’ behavior. In the 1970s, people such as Robert Weiss, John

Gottman, Howard Markman, and Clifford Notarius pursued observational analysis of couple interaction with great energy and skill (see for example: Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Gottman, 1979; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977; Markman & Notarius, 1987; Weiss & Heyman, 2004). There can be little doubt that this specific focus of the field was propelled by the then new availability of affordable video taping systems. If your intention is to observe something to learn from it, there is no substitute for being able to watch over and over again—the essential technical ability that allowed for the development of consistent (reliable) coding systems. Coding couple behavior in terms of constructs such as supportiveness, listening skills, withdrawal, and negativity became a central focus of couples research by psychologists. The emphasis on observable behavior, and especially on conflict, grew dramatically over the past decades. Laboratories set up for video-taping couples are ubiquitous among our colleagues in psychology.

A related major innovation came in the form of work elucidating how behavior and thought relate in interpersonal relationships. Tom Bradbury, Frank Fincham, and colleagues focused on cognitions in a series of studies that provided insight about the internal processes associated with couple behavior (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000). Evidence from these and other studies show that it is not only the behaviors that matters, but how people think about behaviors, both in terms of attributions for what has occurred and expectancies about what will occur. In distressed couples, partners routinely make negative interpretations about the other's behavior (e.g., Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000). So, if it annoys me when you *do* that, it really annoys me when *I think* you did it on purpose. Although challenging to study because it is not directly observable, much is likely to be gained in the years ahead in the study of cognitions and

relationships. We would expect similar benefits from the combined study of emotion, cognition, and behavior, as evidence builds from various directions of the importance, even primacy, of emotion in cognition and behavior (choose best cite).

The emphasis on observable behavior, and especially on conflict, grew dramatically over the past decades. Laboratories set up for video-taping couples are ubiquitous among our colleagues. As we shall briefly describe, the study of couples as they discussed issues proved immensely fruitful—yet oddly limiting at the same time. These studies were part of the foundation of a larger body of work (based on both observational methods and self-report) showing the various ways in which conflict behavior and negative interaction affect major life outcomes. And conflict as a focus of study has been very productive.

Much evidence shows that relationships that are characterized by chronic negative interaction are damaging to adults and the children living with them. Negative interaction includes patterns such as frequent escalation of conflict, criticism, invalidation, withdrawal, demand-withdraw, contempt, and so forth. Such patterns differentiate happy from unhappy couples (e.g., Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Fincham & Beach, 1999; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Further, negative patterns of interaction are one of the best discriminators of which couples will go on to experience chronic distress, break up, or divorce, and which will succeed (e.g., Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004, Gottman, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Chronic negativity in adult (e.g., parental) relationships puts children at greater risk for a variety of negative outcomes, such as decrements in school performance, and various forms of acting out behavior (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1994; Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Such findings are well replicated. Negative interaction also is associated with depression,

anxiety, and reduced work productivity (e.g., Beach & O'Leary, 1993; Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997; Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, & Kessler, 1996; Halford & Bouma, 1997; Snyder & Whisman, 2004).

Not a bad few decades of work, but it has increasingly been noted that this near unitary focus on conflict has limited our view of marriage and relationships (see Heyman, 2001 for an excellent review and critique). Fincham and Beach articulated how a narrow focus leaves us with an incomplete picture; they describe how other important variables such as commitment, personal history, and context can greatly influence the meaning and effects of conflict behavior (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Fincham, 2003). In essence, we have been guilty of knowing well a number of parts of the elephant, however, this singular focus likely leaves us short of truly understanding the whole animal.

In this vein, John Gottman and colleagues began to argue that we had got it all wrong by focusing so much attention on what unhappy couples do wrong rather than what successful couples do right (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Not all of what they had to say, or the foundation upon which they said it, was received with sympathetic ears. Stanley, Bradbury, and Markman (2001) challenged their assumptions about the theories of others, their labeling and discussion of constructs versus actual measurement, and their statistical methods. Nevertheless, Gottman et al. were onto something important that resonated with the points Fincham and Beach were making. Maybe we had overdone the focus on conflict. We had done it well but what did we have to show for it? (Quite a bit, actually, but still, this left one with a sad Peggy Lee song looping in the mind: "Is that all there is?") In this same time period, Stanley and Markman (1998) noted that the field was beginning to move toward richer constructs such as commitment, acceptance, forgiveness, and sacrifice. This movement represented a growing desire among

researchers in our field to grapple with constructs that were more complex to describe and measure, but also more positive and closer to the reasons people form and wish to maintain relationships. (Stanley, 2007).

A Break from the Past

Fincham, Stanley, and Beach (in press) have written a treatise framing the limitations in our field resulting from the focus on conflict, and they further describe what they believe is the emergence of a new day for psychologically trained marital and relationship researchers. Here, we briefly summarize the major points they make before moving to specific, detailed examples of major contributions of psychological researchers and challenges for the years ahead. These psychologists argue that a focus on conflict has existed and that it has been limiting in our understanding of the dynamics of couple relationships. They give two examples to make the point about limitations. First, Fincham and colleagues have been showing that negatives are not merely the absence of positive, nor vice versa (see Fincham, Beach, & Kemp-Fincham, 1997; Fincham & Linfield, 1997). Such work shows that there is independent variance for positive and negative, even under the most rigorous requirements for it to be evidenced. This shows that a one-dimensional focus on conflict restricts understanding. Second, Fincham et al. use the evidence from various studies on partner support that show that positive support behaviors change the effects of negative interaction and conflict (Cutrona 1996; Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997). It must be admitted that our field has, at times, acted as if the negatives were the only important story, and some researchers have called our field on this tendency (see Fowers, 2001).

What Fincham, Stanley, and Beach suggest that transformation (or something very much like discontinuous, higher order change) is at the heart of the new emphasis, giving empirical

examples such as forgiveness and sacrifice. There are many other examples as well of the growing emphasis on more positive constructs, such as acceptance (Cordova, Jacobson, & Christensen, 1998; Jacobson & Christensen, 1998) or emotional intimacy (Cordova & Scott, 2001). Fincham et al., however, focus particularly on transformation, which we focus on later in this chapter under the heading of Social Exchange Theory. They not only note the dissatisfaction with the status quo among some theorists and researchers but, perhaps more importantly, the availability of tools and ways of thinking about problems that can move the field beyond a reliance on linear thinking and analyses. As Fincham et al. note, the strongest representation of the some of the new theoretical and mathematical possibilities in our field come in the form of the mathematics of non-linear dynamical systems, citing Gottman et al. (2002) for an historical overview.

If negative interaction and linear thinking was our past, transformation and the understanding of deeper, regulating beliefs and motivations may well be our future. We now leave this discussion of the past and how it flowed to the present, and turn to specific contributions and issues in the extant research produced by our field. We choose exemplars that highlight what we truly believe are the most central issues. Before turning a focus on couple dissolution and couple formation, we first mention two areas where psychology has provided particularly strong contributions that are closely related to core foci of our field: attachment theory coming from developmental psychology and mental health associations with couple functioning, coming more from clinical psychology.

Special Contributions: Attachment Theory and Mental Health

Attachment theory could become the “theory of everything” in relationship research by psychologists as it can be used to conceptualize a great deal of relationship phenomena. Yet, the

potential broad frame from attachment theory has been, in our view, somewhat limited in practice by the relatively narrow focus on manifestations of attachment anxiety over a more general theory of how people become and remain attached in adult relationships. Attachment theory is a domain that arose from developmental psychology in the original works of Harlow (1958) and Bowlby (1969). Overtime, the focus settled in on anxiety about attachments exemplified in the repeated use of the Ainsworth Strange Situation paradigm (cite). This focus resulted in analysis of such patterns as secure attachment, anxious-ambivalent attachment, and anxious-avoidant attachment.

A breakthrough in the application of these developmental models to adult relationships came in the now classic work by social psychologists Hazan and Shaver (1987). A secure attachment style has been associated with greater relationship commitment, trust, and satisfaction than anxious or avoidant attachment styles (Simpson, 1990). In contrast, insecure (anxious) attachment has been shown to prospectively be associated with the likelihood of remaining in unhappy marriages (Davila & Bradbury, 2001). Individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety experience more relationship conflict, relationship distress, and show a greater tendency for conflicts to escalate in severity (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Further, attachment theory has been productively informing approaches to marital therapy (Davila, 2003; Johnson, 1996), in that marital problems can be conceptualized as breaches in partner's felt security and as partner's attachment needs not being met. Interventions may attempt to help couples meet one another's attachment needs through care-seeking and caregiving behaviors (Davila, 2003).

Another domain of couples research where clinical psychology shows its roots is in the study of the association between relationship functioning and distress and mental health. A

substantial literature documents the relationship between mental health and marital health (see (Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990; Halford & Bouma, 1997; Whisman, 1999, 2001). Marital dissatisfaction is concurrently linked with higher rates of having a diagnosable psychiatric disorder, and shows associations with a number of specific disorders, including mood, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders (Whisman, 1999). For example, the presence of marital discord increases risk for major depressive disorder dramatically (Weissman, 1987). In addition, maritally distressed individuals are almost four times more likely than satisfied spouses to develop an alcohol use disorder in the coming year (Whisman, Uebelacker, & Bruce, 2006). Building upon the evidence that marital quality is linked with the partners' mental health, psychologists have begun to study whether couples therapy can be used for the treatment of individual psychopathology. Couples therapy has demonstrated effectiveness in the treatment of major depression in several studies (Beach, 2001; Jacobson, Dobson, Fruzzetti, Schmaling, & Salusky, 1991). Likewise, a growing and substantial body of research shows that couples therapy is an effective, if not the most effective, way to treat many forms of substance abuse (Fals-Stewart, Birchler, & O'Farrell, 1996; Fals-Stewart, Birchler, & Kelley, 2006).

Although the associations between mental health and marital health are consistently found, much remains to be learned about these associations. The effects of couple functioning and depression are generally conceptualized as reciprocal and bidirectional (Davila, 2001), though further research is need to examine the direction of effects between relationship distress and other disorders. In addition, we know little about the mechanisms through which marital distress impacts spouses' emotional well-being, highlighting the need for studies of mediators of the association between marital distress and individual mental health (cf. Whisman, 2001). Moreover, at this time, we know little about the individual and relationship characteristics that

are associated with stronger (versus weaker) associations between couple functioning and depressive symptoms. Current psychological research is aimed at identifying these factors (e.g., (Davila, Karney, Hall, & Bradbury, 2003; Whitton, 2005) with the ultimate goal of informing clinicians' decisions regarding for whom couples-based intervention for psychiatric disorders is appropriate. Overall, the studies investigating the links between marital functioning and psychopathology reflect the broader interest of our field in knowing more about how the individual affects and is affected by the relationship.

How Do Couples Grow Apart and Come Apart?

What psychological couples researchers have gotten a great deal of attention for is the “prediction” of marital distress and divorce. While not actually studies where an outcome is predicted years ahead of time (see upcoming comment), such studies do show that variables assessed at an earlier time in a relationship, even prior to marriage, can discriminate among the eventual outcomes such as being happily married, unhappily married, or divorced. To our knowledge, the seminal work in this area was by our colleague Howard Markman, who in 1981 showed that couples' own communication ratings during their discussions were more strongly related to their relationship quality five years later than relationships quality measured at the same time point as their communication (Markman, 1981). This finding raised the possibility that how couples communicate was more strongly related to future satisfaction than was current satisfaction.

Over the past couple of decades, a plethora of studies have expanded on this theme (e.g., Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Clements et al., 2004; Gottman, 1994; Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996). This body of work has been well summarized and critiqued by

Bradbury and Karney (2004). This research also drew attention because of the implied assumption that one could “predict” how well a given couple would do over time. Despite some claims otherwise (citations withheld to protect both the innocent and the guilty), there are several reasons why it’s difficult to predict with any serious confidence how an individual couple will do. This is partly due to the simple fact that any social scientist is only able to measure a very thin slice of the variables that affect real outcomes in real life. More importantly, the types of studies often considered *prediction* are actually studies in which known outcomes (e.g., divorce) are classified based on variables measured earlier (e.g., before marriage). As Heyman and Smith Slep (2001) nicely demonstrated, such studies capitalize on sample specific variance, and taking the same equation that correctly classifies couples by outcome above chance, at say 85% accuracy in one study will produce a far lower classification accuracy in a different sample, perhaps something closer to 30% (just as an example). Although it let the air out of the balloon, their work provided a sobering reminder of the importance of cross-validation as well as replication. Nevertheless, certain patterns of conflict and communication are well-replicated risk factors for future problems (see Bradbury & Karney, 2004).

In fact, there are many variables known to be associated with relationship risk over time (see Stanley, 2001), for example: neuroticism and other personality dimensions (Bouchard, Lussier, & Sabourin, 1999; Kelly & Conley, 1987), parental divorce (Amato, 2001; Glenn & Kramer, 1987), dissatisfaction with partners’ personality and habits (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996), religious dissimilarity (Heaton & Pratt, 1990), briefer time together prior to marriage (Kurdek, 1993), marrying at a young age (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991), lower levels of education (Raley & Bumpass, 2003), differing levels of education (Bumpass et al., 1991; premarital pregnancy, (Kurdek, 1991), and remarriage (Booth & Edwards,

1992; Kurdek, 1991). If you are an interventionist, such a list, even though incomplete, raises the conundrum of “so many choices, so little time.” Following the historical emphasis on behavior, pathology, and conflict, therapists have tended to focus on behavior change in the area of communication and conflict management (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Lewis, 1986; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999). Further, in the above mentioned emphasis on prospective risk (the studies we will no longer refer to here as predictive), there was a great deal of empirical support for such a focus.

All of this work led to the dominance of the view that deficits in the ability to manage conflict well would undermine, over time, the positive bond that couples start out with in marriage. In our research group, this took the form of what we think of as the erosion model of relationship distress (Clements, Cordova, Markman, & Laurenceau, 1997; Stanley et al., 1999). The belief is rooted in Markman’s (1981) study showing that communication variables told one more about eventual couple adjustment than did couple adjustment, implying overall satisfaction was undermined over time by poor communication quality. The erosion model suggests that deficits in communication and affect regulation erode couples’ positive connection over time as the inevitable struggles of life put pressure on couples’ abilities to manage issues well.

Huston et al. (2001) challenged this view, which they called the emergent distress hypothesis, favoring what they called the enduring dynamics model. Following a sample of couples from before marriage to several years into marriage, they found more support for the view that couples who became distressed demonstrated characteristics of distress early on, rather than developing them over time. Their data led them to put forth that the larger culprit in negative outcomes is that couples become disillusioned, essentially falling out of love. Their suggestion is not that the difficulties managing issues well actively erodes love but that the

disillusionment is more fundamental and independent from the ability to deal with issues well in divorce outcomes, at least for some couples.

Another view gaining momentum is that what distinguishes couples who thrive from those who do not is related to how they repair their relationship when they have difficulties. Gottman (1998) emphasizes repair attempts, drawing greatly on observational research about what couples who fail, fail to do compared to couples who succeed. Similarly, Weiss and Heyman (2004) propose the use of behavioral analysis and observation in the study how couples overcome stress and challenges. The growing field of research on forgiveness moves us in a similar direction; forgiveness is fundamentally the study of how couples might make major repairs (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). As before, psychologists have gone on to build on the basic science in this area to building and testing interventions (e.g., Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004). All of these developments are consistent with the major point made by Fincham et al. (in press): that the complexities of transformation are becoming more interesting to think about than unitary and solely continuous processes. In fact, this same issue is integral to considerations in the debate about whether or not some couples rebound from marital distress or not, without any “professional” intervention (Beach & Fincham, 2003).

So, what is most important in how couples come apart? Is it sheer negativity and lack of skillfulness to handle issues that overtakes positive connection? Is it something more like falling out of love? Or is what sets some couples apart from others the ability to get back on track after being derailed? Perhaps it's the presence of more negatives and less skillfulness in the context of the erosion of felicity that leads to an inability to use repair methods that other couples would more readily access. Maybe it's the overarching strength or weakness of commitment that

determines who really tries to stay on track or get back on track, accessing whatever transformative processes are at their disposal? Of course, the dilemma is that it could be a hundred other things that psychologists, sociologists, economists, and family scientists study, and quite possibly, things we have not yet even thought about studying. One thing is for certain. These are exciting times because the theoretical base is expanding and the methods are growing more sophisticated to tease it all apart.

How They Come Together and Stay Together

People meet, become attracted, spend time together, and sometimes form long-term, committed relationships. Our field of psychology has had the most to say about the last part of that statement, which is the subject of this section.

Exchange Theory (and Interdependence Theory)

The dominant theories in our field regarding couple formation and relationship persistence are interdependence theory (or, if you prefer, its cousin social exchange theory). Indeed, variations of these theoretical systems exist in many fields, including and especially psychology in the work of Thibaut and Kelley (1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and sociology (e.g., Emerson, 1962; Cook & Emerson, 1978). Regarding relationship formation, interdependence theory suggests that the tendency for relationships to develop and persist depends not on the personal characteristics or dispositions of the partners, but the interdependence of the partners in that specific relationship. In particular, level of dependence on the relationship, or the extent to which an individual relies on a relationship to meet her needs and to achieve desired outcomes, is determined by both satisfaction with the relationship and the perceived quality of alternatives to the relationship. Thus, the two main processes through which dependence increases and lasting relationships grow are 1) the experience of high positive and

low negative affect (high satisfaction) in the relationship and 2) the perception that one's most important needs can not be fulfilled outside the relationship (poor quality of alternatives). From such bases flowed the work of psychologists Levinger, Rusbult and colleagues, more often under the moniker of interdependence theory. Further, a great deal of the theoretical basis underlying the domain of commitment theory comes directly from these roots, particularly in the work of Johnson, a sociologist (1973; Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999), Rusbult (1983), and Stanley and Markman (1992).

Rusbult developed an expression and extension of interdependence theory, referred to as the investment model (Rusbult, 1983). The investment model suggests that dependence on a relationship depends not only on satisfaction and quality of alternatives, as suggested by interdependence theory, but also on the investment that an individual has put into the relationship. Investments refer to resources that are attached to the relationship and would be lost or lose value if the relationship were to end; they may take any number of forms including emotional investments such as self-disclosure (Stanley & Markman, 1992) and structural investments such as money and possessions (Johnson, 1973). Further, the investment model proposes that increasing dependence leads to a sense of allegiance to the relationship and feelings of commitment (i.e., a desire to persist in the relationship and feelings of emotional attachment; Rusbult, 1980). Numerous studies support the investment model, demonstrating that relationship commitment grows as satisfaction and investments increase, while perceived quality of alternatives decreases (e.g., Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). In sum, couple formation is conceptualized as a process wherein positive feelings and attraction (i.e., satisfaction) lead to behaviors and beliefs (i.e., investments) that develop a growing interdependence between two partners. These same intertwining, interdependencies can become

potential barrier forces (see Levinger, below) or constraints (see Stanley & Markman, 1992) that keep individuals in the relationship regardless of their current satisfaction with it.

Tests have strongly supported the theory underlying this body of work in a variety of samples; for example, in the prediction of responses to dissatisfaction (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982), the confirmation of the linkage between commitment and the devaluation of attractive alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), and the demonstration of accommodation during times of discordance between the desires of partners (Rusbult & Verette, 1991). The same theoretical framework addresses how two individuals come to develop an identity as a couple. Levinger noted that ". . . as interpersonal involvement deepens, one's partner's satisfactions and dissatisfactions become more and more identified with one's own" (1979, p. 175). In economic theory terms, this transformation produces an exchange market (between partners) that is noncompetitive, where the goal is to maximize joint outcomes (Cook & Emerson, 1978). Although one partner should not lose their identity in the other, couples develop a degree of we-ness (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998) that can be called couple identity (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Couple identity represents a change to where what is good for the self gets redefined into the broader goal of achieving what is good for "us."

This line of reasoning is consistent with the idea of the "transformation of motivation" described by Kelley and Thibaut (1978). Once a relationship has become interdependent, Kelley and Thibaut (1978) theorize that partners begin to take into account long-term goals for the relationship, enduring dispositions of the self and partner, and norms of the relationship in deciding how to behave. Based on these thoughts, they tend to depart from acting on the basis of their own self-interest and instead tend to act based on broader goals related to the relationship. This process of moving from acting based on self-interested preferences for behavior to doing so

based on reconceptualized preferences for joint outcomes of self and the partner is termed the transformation of motivation (Thibaut & Kelley, 1978). The individual who goes through this transformation of motivation is then more likely to forego self-interest and act in accordance with what would be best for both members of the couple or for the relationship as a whole. There is a tremendous amount of evidence for this transformation, not only in the research on interdependence theory and exchange theory, but most explicitly in the growing body of research on the nature of sacrifice in romantic relationships (discussed below).

Commitment

Approaches to studying commitment grew directly out of exchange theory. Work by commitment theorists Rusbult et al., Johnson et al., Levinger, and Stanley and Markman, provides a theoretical basis for understanding couple formation and relationship continuation. Different theorists seem to prefer different terms, and different theorists order the constructs in different arrangements depending on the primary research goals, but one model of commitment can often be translated into others.

In their work on the conceptualization and measurement of commitment, Stanley and Markman (1992) describe a model reflecting the basic push and pull of commitment for most relationships. Quoting from their work (1992, p. 595):

We view commitment as encompassing two related constructs: personal dedication and constraint commitment. Personal dedication refers to the desire of an individual to maintain or improve the quality of his or her relationship for the joint benefit of the participants. It is evidenced by a desire (and associated behaviors) not only to continue in the relationship, but also to improve it, to sacrifice for it, to invest in it, to link personal goals to it, and to seek the partner's welfare, not simply one's own. In contrast,

constraint commitment refers to forces that constrain individuals to maintain relationships regardless of their personal dedication to them. Constraints may arise from either external or internal pressures, and they favor relationship stability by making termination of a relationship more economically, socially, personally, or psychologically costly.

What they call constraint commitment can be further subdivided into variables that represent structural commitment, such as economic investment, and variables reflective of moral commitment, such as one's view about divorce or finishing what you start (Johnson et al., 1999). Where and how the distinction is made is, again, likely most related to the particular research question of interest. What Stanley and Markman focused on was the fact that people generally relate to two sides of commitment: the “want to” and the “have to,” harkening back to the classic motivational distinction in psychology of approach and avoidance, with constraint being related to the avoidance of costs of breaking up. Given the overwhelming focus in all fields of marital research on relationship quality as the key predictor of stability, there is, in our view, a widespread lack of studies where much is said or can be said about the obvious fact that many couples stay together, at least at times, for reasons other than happiness.

In the writings of the various commitment theorists mentioned here, there is a general belief expressed that constraints do not lead to one feeling constrained, or trapped, unless and until both satisfaction in the relationship and dedication to the partner have eroded. This could be the case because constraints are simply not thought about when all is happy or because relationship happiness itself may cause a reframing of any potential constraints as no constraint at all. Indeed, Stanley (2005) argues that constraints provide a positive, stabilizing influence in relationships that are otherwise generally healthy. Further, and perhaps untestable, is the

prediction that few relationships are satisfying enough to continue for years without some constraints that can put the brakes on compulsive and destabilizing behaviors during periods of unhappiness. Of course, constraints are quite destructive when they serve to keep people in dangerous and damaging relationships.

Commitment can be conceptualized as making a choice to give up other choices (Stanley, 2005). In a society that prizes hanging on to options, this becomes especially complicated. It can be argued that too many options, and too great an awareness on all one's options, can reduce quality of life. In fact, in an essay in the flagship publication of the American Psychological Association, Barry Schwartz (2000) highlights this fact, noting the limitations of rational choice theory for explaining important aspects of human behavior. Further, he argues for the benefits of constraints in human happiness and quality of life. In a similar vein, various studies from social psychology and human inference show that humans have profoundly protective mental mechanisms for reconceptualizing their plights (cites). In the words of social psychologist Daniel Gilbert, "we're more likely to look for, and find, a positive view of things were stuck with than of things we're not" (Gilbert, 2006, p. XX). If "today's dedication is tomorrow's constraint," as Stanley and Markman suggest (1992, p. 597), today's constraints serve to reinforce the development, maintenance, or re-development of dedication. "I'm staying, so I might as well make the best of this and give it my all." This prediction is both intuitive and consistent with social psychology research on how the mind works. It is also a reasonable interpretation of various longitudinal findings of Rusbult and colleagues, wherein emotional attachment leads to the co-evolution of increased commitment (measured similarly to how dedication is defined above), increased investments (considered by Stanley and Johnson as potential constraints), and alternatives being perceived as less attractive over time (a type of

constraint).

What do these ideas lend to the concept of couple development? Simply put, relationships grow based on much more than a simple set of attraction forces and satisfaction. There is a complex interplay between desire, need, attachment, and anxiety about attachment, that fuels the development of couple identity and commitment to the future. It appears that how well and completely a couple moves through these developmental dynamics will be related to the strength of the foundation upon which they build a future. It seems likely, for example, that this developmental process sets the stage for how the partners give to one another or take from each other over time. This brings us to the compelling and growing literature on the nature of sacrifice in romantic relationships.

The research that's been conducted on sacrifice to date flows directly from both research on commitment and interdependence theory. It is a literature that compellingly supports the concept of there being a transformation of motivation that greatly changes the dynamic of the exchange between partners. Although research investigating sacrifice in romantic relationships is in its infancy, the existing evidence suggests that partner's tendencies to sacrifice, or forego immediate self-interest for the good of the partner or relationship, is strongly linked with commitment. Not only does commitment level predict the number of sacrifices performed for partners (Van Lange et al., 1997), but it also is associated with the degree to which individuals feel satisfied with sacrificing for their partner's benefit (Stanley & Markman, 1992) and their willingness to sacrifice, operationalized as reported willingness to give up important activities for the sake of a relationship Van Lange et al. (1997) and Wieselquist et al. (1999). Further, Whitton, Stanley, & Markman (in press) showed that commitment to the relationship's future is very important in determining how people, especially men, perceive every day sacrifices for their

partner to affect the self. If commitment is not present, they tend to feel that making a sacrifice was harmful to the self; however, in the presence of strong commitment, sacrifices are not perceived to go against long-term self-interest.

Sacrifice also appears to be important in the development and maintenance of long-term, healthy relationships. In a particularly compelling study, Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, and Agnew (1999) demonstrated that sacrifice serves to increase trust between partners, which fosters growth in commitment, and reciprocation of more sacrifice. Stanley, Whitton, Low, Clements, and Markman (2006) showed that satisfaction with sacrifice in early marriage discriminates between couples who will be satisfied in the long-term from those who will be distressed or divorced. Notably, these researchers found that early satisfaction with sacrifice is a better predictor of future marital adjustment than early marital adjustment levels.

Taken as a whole, such findings about the nature of sacrifice in romantic relationships provide further evidence of this concept of the transformation of motivation that is part of Thibaut and Kelley's formulation of interdependence theory. The current speculation is that sacrifice may be one robust window on couple functioning because it not only provides a window on the presence or absence of transformation, it likely functions as a strong behavioral signal between partners of commitment and security (Wieselquist et al., 1999). Indeed it may be that sacrifice functions as a particularly salient positive signal that counters the salience of negative behavior in relationships.

Cohabitation Research as a Window on Couple Formation

Since the topic of cohabitation apart from or prior to marriage is covered elsewhere in this volume (cites) in great detail, we make no effort to duplicate that work. However, this is also a particular focus of the authors of this chapter. We briefly describe our work here because

it is not only related to the overarching aim of this volume, it provides a particularly crisp example of how psychologists can approach an area that has been much more the focus of sociology historically.

Although trends in couple formation over recent decades suggest that cohabitation has become a crucial phenomenon to understanding how couples develop greater levels of commitment, studies on cohabitation have not historically measured dedication, inferring commitment from behaviors such as engagement or marriage. Stanley, Whitton, and Markman (2004) noted this, and directly assessed dedication commitment in a study using a random, national (U.S.) sample to compare married respondents who did or did not cohabit prior to marriage. Controlling for several relevant variables, they found that married men who lived with their wives prior to marriage reported significantly less dedication to their wives than those who did not. This finding led to speculation that the often found risks associated with premarital cohabitation may, in part, be related to a subset of couples where the males were always less committed to their partners; yet, some of these couples were nevertheless propelled by the constraints of cohabitation (relative to dating) into marriage. We call this inertia, suggesting that it becomes harder for some cohabiting couples to veer from the path they are on, even when doing so would be wise (see Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006 for a full discussion of this theory and related issues).

The central idea of inertia is that some couples who otherwise would not have married end up married partly because they cohabit. While this process may not occur for all or even most couples who cohabit, it happens often enough to account for part of the overall cohabitation effect. There is greater inertia favoring relationship continuance with cohabitation than with dating because, all other things being equal, constraints will be

greater with cohabitation (e.g., financial obligations, a shared lease, sharing a pet, pregnancy, loss of perspective on possible alternatives). At the same time, there is nothing about cohabitation that necessarily increases levels of dedication. Increased constraints may make it more difficult to terminate the relationship, but the partners may or may not feel more dedicated. Thus, some cohabitants could find themselves being less than ideally compatible but likewise find that ending the relationship has become difficult, tipping the scale toward staying together, and for some, marriage. (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006, p. 503 – 504)

Inertia is a psychological theory that has implications for the experience versus selection debate in this field. In a mate selection framework, sociologist Norval Glenn referred to a similar risk he called premature entanglement (Glenn, 2002). Inertia implies that there is a subset of couples among those who cohabit premaritally who would not have married had they not been living together. Further, since those who are fully committed to marriage *prior* to cohabitation or marriage are not risking marrying someone partly because of the constraints of cohabitation, the greatest risk should be among those who cohabit prior to having mutual plans for marriage. Kline (now named Rhoades) et al. (2004) tested this theory, finding that those who began cohabiting prior to engagement experienced more marital distress than those who cohabited only after engagement or marriage, both before and shortly after marrying. In a subsequent study, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (in press) examined trajectories of dedication over a longer period of time, finding that men in couples who cohabited prior to engagement were less dedicated than their wives, before marriage and years into marriage. The differences held up when controlling for both religiosity and marital adjustment, suggesting that dedication has

substantial surplus conceptual value in this line of research. These results suggest that there is something about cohabitation prior to a clear, mutual plan for marriage that favors asymmetrical commitment levels, and marriage, itself, does not reduce the asymmetry. Given that many couples now drift into cohabitation rather than make clear decisions about the transition (see Manning & Smock, 2005), this line of results is particularly important.

The body of research on cohabitation is beginning to arrive at a place where implications are clearer for relationship education and intervention programs. At the same time, the psychology perspective would suggest that before steadfast conclusions about the effect of cohabitation on individual and couple functioning can be drawn and before clear advice can be doled out, more needs to be known about the psychology behind the phenomenon. For example, we need a better understanding of why individuals choose to cohabit and what they believe cohabitation means for the future of their relationships and we need more information on how different reasons or motivations for cohabitation may affect relationship outcomes. The focus of psychology research on cohabitation is less about tracking the phenomenon and more about understanding what this relatively new phase in couple development means for individuals, couples, and their futures.

What Psychology Offers

Psychology has played a strong role in examining an important range of constructs with regard to romantic relationships, including but not limited to: communication, conflict, affect regulation, attributions, attachment, intimacy, commitment, couple identity, partner support, sacrifice, and forgiveness. These constructs either flow fundamentally from the field of psychology or have been given their own stamp within the field of psychology. Behind this list there is, of course, an intricate web of theory about relationships in general and marriage in

particular. These are rich theoretical systems with strong empirical foundations and can further inform couples, marital, and family research.

Of course a discipline is characterized not only by the theoretical systems that are historically favored but also by the methods used by those of that discipline. Perhaps more than most other disciplines, psychology has two distinctives here. First, with its roots in behaviorism, there's been a great deal of work in our field on the observation of couple behavior. While there have been limitations in this work, the methods themselves are powerful and useful and will be increasingly put to use in the study of a wider field of constructs. Secondly, for a variety of historical reasons, psychology has been particularly focused on quality of measurement. There has been an extensive interest in the field of psychology on the development of reliable and valid measures. This emphasis on the quality of measurement no doubt relates to several factors in the history of psychology, including the history of experimental psychology which was always closely associated with statistical sophistication, the historical focus of clinical psychology on valid diagnosis, and the general reliance in the field of psychology on smaller samples than would be used a disciplines such as sociology or economics. What is lacking and statistical power due to sample size can be made up for, at times, with more precise measurement.

One of the methodological contributions that we believe our field will make family science grow come flows from our history of research on individual development and change over time. New statistical techniques that allow for modeling individual changes over time and within-person or within-couple variation in changes over time (e.g., latent growth curve analysis, multilevel modeling) offer new options for examining complex hypotheses about relationship development. For example, we now have the ability to test hypotheses about non-linear changes in relationships over time or about how differences between partners in terms of how they view

their relationship relate to later relationship stability or other outcomes. Such techniques mean that we are able to focus on not only understanding mean differences between groups (e.g., those who cohabit before marriage versus those who do not or those who receive behavioral couples therapy and a control group), but also on slope differences (e.g., how individuals or couples change over time).

Yet even with advances in methods and statistical tools, great challenges lie ahead for our field. We will mention two. First, given that the couple tends to be the unit of analyses of greatest interest for psychologists, statistical tools that take into account the dependency in the data between partners are needed. In some areas, such as outcome research, this has not proved to be all that challenging. Routinely, the different partners are merely treated as repeated measurements within the couple. When more complex theoretical questions are in view, however, things become complex rapidly. The management of statistical dependency between partners in a complex structural equation model, reflecting a theory to be tested, is one example. Methods, and maybe more importantly, standards, for such tasks are emerging, but the techniques and issues are challenging. For all the interest in dyads in our field of dyadic research, we observe that there are too few studies that actually do, or can do, much that informs us about the dyadic processes in a specific sample. Second, as is not unique to our field, making really compelling statements about what actually changes before what else, and to what effect, is a subject of great complexity and even, at times, frustration. Since so little of what many of us are interested in knowing more about can be examined in experiments, we are left to various devices to try to at least inform our theories about development and cause. Simple solutions are not going to be forthcoming, but techniques to make better conclusions about cause and effect appear to be emerging in all of the fields represented in this volume. Such advancements cannot

come soon enough.

Conclusion

Here, we have covered much yet just scratched the surface of the field of relationship and marriage research as conducted by psychologists. We have focused on areas of research that reflect the unique perspectives psychologists tend to bring to relationship research, particularly in terms of constructs and methods that have dominated the field. As we hope we have shown, our field has much to contribute in a number of specific areas that are of great importance in understanding couple processes and outcomes. Here's to the bright future that lies ahead of working out the gritty, gooey stuff of relationships with our colleagues from across disciplines.

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