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MARRIAGE: A DECADE REVIEW^{1, 2}

Gottman, J. M., & Notarius, C. I. (2000). Decade review: Observing marital interaction. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 927-947.

Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. (2010). Marriage in the new millennium: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 630-649.

Marital Interaction and Outcome¹

Throughout the 1990s, many technological advances in the field of data collection have resulted in new understanding and advances in the prediction of marital outcomes. For example:

1. The effects of marriage on couples' (and their children's) health outcomes have gained extensive attention.
2. The study of the relationship between marital interaction and common psychopathologies has considerably expanded.
3. Theories about the interaction of behavior, perception, and physiology have been constructed.

The Study of Couples Over Time¹

Developmental Transitions: For decades, a family's life cycle has been used to describe and predict the natural history of couples over time. For example, it has been empirically found that couples experience a significant decline in their relationship satisfaction after the birth of their first child. Pursuant to this trend, the following are some of the findings from studies in the 1990s:

A. Divorce Prediction:

1. Disagreement and anger were related to low levels of concurrent marital satisfaction, but also to chronological improvement in marital satisfaction (Gottman and Krokoff, 1989).
2. Couples heading towards divorce were found to have more negative interactions than positive, and they recalled their interactions with negativity (Gottman and Levenson, 1992).
3. Ratios of positivity to negativity during conflict discussion and four negative interaction patterns (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling) were identified as divorce predictors (Gottman, 1993, 1994).

B. Transition to Marriage:

1. Disengagement during a premarital problem-solving discussion is found to be negatively associated with marital satisfaction at 18 months and 30 months of marriage (Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990).
 2. Anger was not found to be a significantly dangerous emotion (Gottman et al. 1998).
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3. The husband's rejection of his wife's influence, negative initiation by the wife, a lack of de-escalation of the wife's low-intensity negative affect by the husband, or a lack of psychological soothing of the male spouse were all found to be divorce predictors (Gottman et al. 1998).

C. Transition to Parenthood:

1. Parenthood is found to be both extremely stressful for the majority of couples. On average, 40% to 70% of couples experienced a drop in marital quality after becoming parents, which can lead to depression. Post-birth marital conflict increased by a factor of 9 (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).
2. Beginning parenthood also corresponded with an increase in joy and pleasure. Longitudinal studies have found strong linkages between the pre-birth marital system, the parent-child system, and the child's subsequent emotional/social and cognitive development (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).

D. Couples at midlife and beyond:

1. Older couples (in their 60s) are less likely to be emotional than middle-aged couples (in their 40s) as they attempt to resolve marital conflicts (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995).
2. Middle-aged couples display greater levels of anger, disgust, belligerence, and whining than older couples (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995).
3. Middle-aged couples displayed more interest in their partner and more humor, but less affection than older couples (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995).
4. Overall, older couples indicated their feelings with more emotional positivity than did middle-aged couples (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1994).

The Study of Power

In *Understanding Family Process* (Broderick, 1993) the author organized the family process (relational space) into three major areas:

- i. the regulation of interpersonal distance,
- ii. the regulation of transaction, and
- iii. the regulation of 'vertical space' by which he meant power (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).

According to Gottman, Notarius, Gonso, & Markman, 1976, in a therapy context, these three subdivisions are known as:

- i. positivity/caring
- ii. responsiveness
- iii. status/influence

A. Power studied with more precise observations:

1. Coding of couple's influence patterns was implemented during a study of the Inventory of Marital Conflicts (Olson & Ryder, 1970).
2. Egalitarian couples were found to have the highest Time 1 marital satisfaction and fewer negative MICS behaviors (Weiss, Hope, & Patterson, 1973).

B. Power explored in the context of gender relational hierarchy

Balance in power between husband and wife is related to marital quality.¹

1. Egalitarian couples had the highest Time 1 marital satisfaction and fewer negative MICS behaviors (Weiss, Hope, & Patterson, 1973).
 2. In most marital conflict discussions, women were found to be the initiators (Ball, Cowan, & Cowan, 1995; Oggins, Veroff, & Leber, 1993).
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3. The outcomes of about 96% of marital conflicts were determined by the way the conflict interaction began, including the degree of negative affect and the amount of criticism involved (Gottman, 1994; Gottman et al., 1998, p. 7)
 4. In resolving marital conflict, men opted for a coercive style, whereas women had a more affiliative approach (White, 1989).
 5. Women played a more important role than men in raising the issue of marital conflict, planning the solution, being an active participant, and mobilizing the conflict discussion (Ball, Cowan, & Cowan, 1995; Oggins, Veroff, & Leber, 1993).
 6. While women conceived their power during the initial phases of a conflict discussion as illusory, men were perceived as more influential in controlling the content and emotional depth of the later phases of the discussion (Ball et al., 1995, p. 303)
 7. The escalation of negativity was used to sequentially operationalize the rejection of influence: for example, escalation from complaining to hostility (Coan, Gottman, Babcock, and Jacobson, 1997).
 8. Negative affect reciprocity was re-conceptualized as the rejection of influences and broken down into two types:
 - i. Responding to negativity in kind. For example, anger being answered with anger.
 - ii. Escalation. For example, anger is responded to with contempt (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).

Although negative reciprocity was found in all marriages, only the escalation type of negative affect reciprocity was found to be a predictor of divorce.²

C. Power studied with the mathematical modeling of marital interaction

1. Power was quantified as the ability of one's partner's affect to influence the other's affect (Cook et al., 1995; Gottman, Swanson, & Murray, in press).
2. Power imbalance caused by asymmetries in influence was found to be a predictor of divorce (Cook et al., 1995).

D. Power and Marital typologies

1. From a conflict perspective, Gottman found three types of couples:
 - i. Validating couples: high levels of involvement in conflict with no immediate attempts to engage in persuasion.
 - ii. Volatile couples: high levels of involvement in conflict with immediate attempts to engage in persuasion.
 - iii. Conflict avoiding couples: low levels of involvement in conflict with no engagement in persuasion (Gottman, 1994).
2. Although all three types of couples are equally likely to experience stable marriages, it was found that an imbalance of influence (or power) predicted divorce for each type (Cook et al. 1995).

Marital Interaction as Proximal Determinants of Family and Individual Well-Being¹

A. Health and Longevity

1. Numerous studies found marital distress to be related to a number of negative health outcomes, including suppressed immune function, cardiovascular arousal, and increases in stress-inducing hormones like catecholamines and corticosteroids (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).
 2. Researchers (e.g., Berkman & Syme, 1979; Berkman & Breslow, 1983; Bernard, 1982; Burman & Margolin, 1992; Shumaker & Hill, 1991) found that for men, marriages have more health-buffering effects. For
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women, distressed marriages cause more health-related problems than for men (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).

3. "Marital satisfaction is a strong predictor of life satisfaction and well-being" (Fincham & Beach, 2010, p. 633; Proulx et al., 2007).
4. "Relationship discord, and not relationship dissolution (e.g., divorce), was found to predict the incidence of mood, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders" (Fincham & Beach, 2010, p. 633; Overbeek et al., 2006).
5. "There exists a strong association between marital conflict and poor health" (Fincham & Beach, 2010, p. 634; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).
6. Arguing that health is not merely the absence of illness, some marital researchers have explicitly focused on the need for more attention to positive marital processes (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007; Fincham & Beach, 2010). Literature suggests that this shift is underway (e.g., McNulty, 2008).

B. Child Outcomes

1. Children in divorced or remarried families were found to be less competent and experienced more problems than children in nondivorced families (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).
2. Linkages were found between marital relationships, mother-child relationships and negative interactions observed by older siblings among children between 4 and 9 years old (Erel, Margolin, & John, 1998).
3. Children can be protected from the harmful consequences of marital conflict and dissolution by implementing a "coaching" meta-emotion philosophy (Gottman, 1997).
4. Vagal tone, a central child physiological dimension, protected children from the negative effects of marital conflict by calming the child down (Katz and Gottman, 1995).

"Coaching parents are aware of their child's emotions. They listen empathetically to the child's feelings, they help the child find words to express the emotion, and then they explore and implement strategies to deal with the emotion" (p. 934).²

The relative importance of the marital relationship within the whole family system is found to be the primary difference between first marriages and remarriages, not the quality of the marriage.²

C. Common Comorbidities

Marital interaction is found to be related to a variety of outcomes for the family members. These include:

1. Depression
 - i. Depressed couples experienced more negativity than non-depressed couples (Johnson and Jacob, 1997).
 - ii. Couples with a depressed wife experienced higher levels of negativity than couples with a depressed husband (Johnson and Jacob, 1997).
 - iii. Depressed wives perceived marital interactions as hostile and tended to become more negative over the course of their interaction (McCabe and Gotlib, 1993).
 2. Violence
 - i. Reciprocity of hostile affect and stronger, long-lasting, and highly contingent behavior patterns characterized physically aggressive couples (Burman and Margolin, 1993).
 - ii. Exit or withdrawal mechanisms from either reciprocated or escalating hostility were not found among violent couples (Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993).
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- iii. In the context of marital conflict, Gottman, Jacobson, Rushe, and Shortt (1995) identified two types of batterers:
 - Type 1 men -- lowered their heart rates from baseline during a marital conflict interaction
 - Type 2 men -- raised their heart rates from baseline during a marital conflict interaction
 - iv. Type 1 and Type 2 men were found to inflict similar amounts of actual physical damage.
 - v. A World Health Organization study across ten countries showed that 15% - 71% of ever-partnered women had experienced physical or sexual violence, or both, at some point in their lives by a current or former partner and that such experience was associated with increased reports of poor physical and mental health (p. 632) (Ellsberg et al, 2008).²
 - vi. Men were more likely than women to report partner physical aggression as the precipitant for their own aggression, whereas women's aggression was precipitated more often by the partner's verbal aggression or by something else other than their partner's physical aggression (p. 633) (O'Leary & Slep, 2005).²

3. Chronic Physical Pain

Spouses of chronic pain patients demonstrate more solicitous behavior, i.e. doting and expressing concern over partner's pain levels or capabilities (Romano et al., 1991). Turk, Kerns and Rosenberg (1992) explored this further, finding that

- i. positive attention from spouses to displays of pain were associated with reports of more intense pain, higher observed pain frequency, and greater disability; but
- ii. negative spouse responding to pain was associated with increased affective distress.

4. Hostility and Type-A Personality

- i. Sanders, Smith, and Alexander (1991) found a relationship between Type A personalities and hostile marital behavior in both husbands and wives.
- ii. Brown and Smith (1992) found a strong relationship between marital hostility and heart rate reactivity.
- iii. Spousal love and support was associated with a lower risk of angina in men (Medalie & Goldbourt, 1976)

5. Alcohol Use

- i. Jacob and Krahn (1987) used cluster analysis to compare marriage dyads in which husbands were alcoholic, depressed, or neither (control). Their interpretation of the results showed that the three most salient factors of marital interaction were positive evaluation, negative evaluation, and problem solving.
- ii. Later analysis by Jacob and Leonard (1992) found that the depression condition reflected greater variation from the control group than the alcoholic condition did, but that the depression condition also showed lower negative reciprocity than the alcoholic condition.

6. Drug Use

The marital interactions of husbands in distressed marriages with drug abuse patterns were compared to the interactions of husbands in distressed relationships without the element of drug abuse. This allowed the researchers to control for the effects of marital stress. Findings indicated that the substance-abuse condition was associated with more abusiveness, lower problem-solving, and more partner-blaming (Fals-Stewart & Birchler, 1998).

Promising Trends in Marital Interaction¹

A. Observation in Naturalistic Settings

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1. Sixty-seven percent of conflicts ended in standoffs in which neither husband nor wife yielded. The topic was eventually dropped (Vuchinich, 1985).
 2. Thirty-three percent of conflicts ended in a withdrawal reaction, in which one person retracted from the discussion (Vuchinich, 1985).
 3. “Low levels of positive affect and high levels of negative behavior foreshadowed rapid declines in satisfaction” (p. 631).²
 4. “High levels of positive affect buffered the effects of high levels of negative behavior” (p. 631).²
 5. Attention to couples facing challenging circumstances has made it clear that conflict can no longer be assumed to be entirely stable, even as substantial continuity in conflict from family of origin to later marital relationships has been documented (p. 632).²

B. Focus on Sequences or Patterns of Interaction

1. Observational studies found “demand-withdraw” to be the most commonly occurring pattern in marital interaction (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).

The demand-withdraw pattern is mostly observed as wives demand change (expressed through emotional requests, criticism, and complaints) and husbands withdraw (expressed via defensiveness and passive interaction) (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).²

The Importance of Positive Affect¹

1. Positive affect while discussing conflicts during the early months of marriage was found to be the only predictor of marital happiness, stable couples, and deferred divorce (Gottman et al. 1998).
2. A promising behavioral model of intimacy has been developed in which intimacy is operationalized as a dyadic event sequence in which one partner’s expresses a personal vulnerability and the spouse responds in an accepting, non-punitive manner (Cordova, 1998).

Immediate Interactional Outcomes¹

1. Partner’s behavior, especially wives’ emotional validation and husband’s problem-solving facilitation, determined satisfaction with an immediately-preceding conversation (Haefner, Notarius, & Pellegrini, 1991).

Stress Spillover Management¹

1. Couples who relapsed and refused change showed higher levels of spillover-stress into marriage than couples who maintained change (Jacobson, Schmaling, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1987).

“Dyadic coping” (p. 941) with stress predicted positive longitudinal outcomes like happiness and stability in a 2-year study of 70 Swiss couples.²

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