DR. VICTOR HARRIS

VICTORHARRIS@UFL.EDU

352-273-3523

3028 D MCCARTY HALL D,
GAINESVILLE, FL 32611

COMPILED BY:
PRAMI SENGUPTA

GRADUATE STUDENT
FAMILY, YOUTH AND
COMMUNITY SCIENCES

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SMART
Strengthening Marriages and Relationships Training

MARRIAGE: A DECADE REVIEW[1, 2]

[1]Gottman, J. M., & Notarius, C. I. (2000). Decade review: Observing marital interaction. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *62*(4), 927-947.
[2]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 Outcome[1]

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

1. effects of marriage on couple's health outcomes and children have gained extensive attention.
2. the study of the relationship between marital interaction and common psychopathologies have considerably expanded.
3. theories in relation to the interaction of behavior, perception, and physiology, and their predictive power have been constructed.

The Study of Couples Over Time[1]

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, empirically it has been found that couples experience a significant decline in their relationship satisfaction after the birth of their first child. Following this trend, the followings are some of the findings of the 1990s:

A. Divorce Prediction:

1. Disagreement and anger were related to low levels of concurrent marital satisfaction, but 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. Ratio 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 pre-marital problem solving discussion is found to be negatively associated with marital satisfaction at 18 months and 30 months after marriage (Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990).
2. Anger was not found to be a significant dangerous emotion (Gottman et al. 1998).

3. Husband's rejecting his wife's influence, negative startup by the wife, a lack of de-escalation of low-intensity negative wife 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 and pleasurable for majority of couples. On average, 40 to 70% of couples experienced a drop in marital quality, which can lead to depression. Marital conflict increased by a factor of 9 (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).
2. Parenthood also indicated an increase in joy and pleasure. Longitudinal studies have found strong linkages between the prebirth 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 aged 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 middle-aged couples (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1994).

The Study of Power[1]

In *Understanding Family Process*, a book by Broderick, 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 (Weis, Hops, & 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, Hops, & Patterson, 1973).
2. In most marital conflict discussions, women were found to be the initiators (Ball, Cowan, & Cowan, 1995; Oggins, Veroff, & Leber, 1993).

3. Outcomes of about 96% marital conflicts were determined by the way the conflict interaction began, including the degree of negative affect and 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 controlling silence and nonresponse that is in 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 sequence of rejection influence was operationalized by the sequence of escalation of negativity, for example escalation from complaining to hostility (Coan, Gottman, Babcock, and Jacobson, 1997).
8. Negative affect reciprocity was reconceptualized as the rejection of influences and broken down into two categorial types:
    i. responding negativity in kind, for example, anger is responded with anger
    ii. escalation, for example, ager is responded with contempt (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).

Although, negative reciprocity in kind 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 defined quantitatively 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 as a result of 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 these three types of couples are equally likely to experience stable marriages, it was found that imbalance in influence factors between these couple types indicated divorce (Cook et al. 1995).

Marital Interaction as Proximal Determinants of Family and Individual Well-Being[1]

A. Health and Longevity

1. Numerous studies found marital distress 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; Berkman & Breslow; Bernard, 1982; Burman & Margolin, 1992; Shumaker & Hill, 1991) found that for men, marriages have more health-buffering effects than in

women and for 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 (p.633)" (Proulx et al., 2007).[2]
4. "Relationship discord, and not relationship dissolution (e.g., divorce), was found to predict the incidence of mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders (p.633)" (Overbeek et al., 2006).[2]
5. There lies a "strong association between martial conflict and poor health (p.634)" (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).[2]
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)(p.635)," and "literature suggests that this is shift is underway (e.g., McNulty, 2008) (p.635)."[2]

B. Child Outcomes

1. Children in divorced or remarried families were found to be less competent and experienced more number of problems than children in nondivorced families (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).
2. Linkages were found between marital relationship, mother-child relationship and negative interaction observed by older siblings among children between 4 to 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 emotion, 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 marital relationship places within the whole family system is found to be the primary difference between first marriages and remarriages and not the quality of marital relationship.*[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 nondepressed couples (Johnson and Jacob, 1997).
   ii. Couples with a depressed wife experienced higher levels negatively 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, rigid and highly contingent behavior patterns characterized physically aggressive couples (Burman and Margolin, 1993).
   ii. Exist or withdrawal mechanism from either reciprocated or escalating hostility were not found among violent couples (Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993)

iii. In a marital conflict context, Gottman, Jacobson, Rushe, and Shortt, 1995, identified two types of batterers:
    - Type 1 men -- lowered their heart rates from baseline to a marital conflict interaction
    - Type 2 men -- raised their heart rates from baseline to a marital conflict interaction
iv. Both Type 1 and 2 men were found to inflict as much 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 more precipitated by the partner's verbal aggression or something else than by partner's physical aggression (p.633)(O'Leary & Slep, 2005)."[2]

3. Chronic Physical Pain
4. Hostility and Type-A Personality
5. Alcohol Use
6. Drug Use

Promising Trends in Marital Interaction[1]

A. Observing in Naturalistic Settings

1. Sixty-seven percent of conflicts ended in standoffs with neither husband nor wife yielded. The topic was eventually dropped (Vuchinich, 1985).
2. Thirty-three 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 demanded change (expressed through emotional requests, criticism, and complaints) and husbands withdrew (expressed via defensiveness and passive interaction) (Gottman & Notarius, 2000).*[2]

The Importance of Positive Affect[1]

1. Positive affect while discussing conflicts during the early months of marriage, was found to be the only predictor of marital happiness of stable couples and deferred divorce (Gottman et al. 1998).
2. A promising behavioral model of intimacy is developed where 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 Outcomes[1]

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 Management[1]

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) of stress predicted positive longitudinal outcomes like happiness and stability in a 2 year study of 70 Swiss couples.*[2]

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