Couples under Stress: Studying Change in Dyadic Closeness and Distance

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Over the past two decades, there has been a growing interest among family researchers concerning the effects of stress on marital relationships. This research has been guided, implicitly or explicitly, by family stress theory (Boss, 2002; Hill, 1949; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), which posits that adaptation to a crisis in the family social system is dependent on the nature of the event and its hardships, the resources available to the family, and the perception of the situation.

As a focusing lens through which to study marriages under stress, family stress theory has a number of strengths: It is relatively simple, easy to operationalize and test, and is useful for explaining a wide range of situations affecting the family. It also offers a means of predicting when declines in marital satisfaction are likely to occur and is useful for explaining change in marital quality and stability over time (Karnes & Bradbury, 1995). Although a number of other theoretical models have been developed that focus on marital relationships under stress (e.g., Bodenmann, 1997; Karnes & Bradbury, 1995), family stress theory has continued to guide research on this topic.

Indeed, the majority of research has supported the assertion that stressful events have a deleterious effect on marital relationships. Scholars have found this to be the case with respect to a variety of sources of stress, both normative life transitions and nonnormative and catastrophic events. However, a number of studies have also shown that stressful experiences may actually strengthen marital relationships, resulting in increased cohesiveness and tighter couple bonds. Other studies have found even more complex patterns of change in marital relationships. For example, relationships may change in certain dimensions but not in others, or they may be negatively affected in some aspects and positively in others (Lavee & Mey-Dan, 2003). Indeed, Burr and Klein (1994), who studied family functioning and marital satisfaction along various stages of the coping process, conclude that "considerably more variation is seen in the way family systems respond to stress than is generally recognized in the stress literature" (p. 123).

Given the emphasis of family stress theory on marital outcomes, the theory's shortcoming lies in the lack of attention paid to systemic processes and interpersonal interactions that may explain different patterns of change. Therefore, a different approach is needed if we are to gain a better understanding of what transpires within couples and how intimate partners interact under stress. Examinations of short-term outcomes and changes in couple relationships under stress may shed light on these patterns and enhance theory building. The two studies reported below utilized different methodologies to investigate interactional processes among couples under stress.

Study I. Closeness-Distance in the Daily Lives of Couples: A Repeated Time Sampling Study

A limitation of many studies that have dealt with the impact of stress on marital...
CASE STUDY continued

relationships is that they have assessed the effects of a stressful event on the relationship after the event has occurred. Thus it is hard to assess change in a relationship associated with the event from the findings of such studies. One approach to achieving a better understanding of what transpires within couples in times of stress is to employ a short-term longitudinal design and a repeated time sampling method to examine the repeated sequences of the effects of stress on the couple relationships (Larson & Almeida, 1999). Such a method has been used for estimating the effects of daily stresses and strains on changes in dyadic closeness (Lavee & Gilat, 2000).

Daily reports were collected from a sample of 94 couples over a 7-day period. These reports included checklists of daily hassles, interpersonal conflicts, and positive and negative mood, and a measure of the sense of dyadic closeness. In addition, the couple’s marital quality, as a relatively stable characteristic of the marital system, was measured before the couples began reporting on their daily experiences.

The data were analyzed using the hierarchical multivariate linear modeling approach (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), which is an application of hierarchical models with repeated observations nested within persons or couples (for a description of the analytic strategy, see Larson & Almeida, 1999).

Excluding the first day of reporting, analyses were based on 564 diary days. A change model was estimated, namely, the extent to which a change in dyadic closeness from the previous day, as reported by one spouse, is related to the level of stress reported by the other spouse. In addition, the moderating effect of marital quality was estimated to enable an examination of whether the association of daily stress and change in dyadic closeness is shaped by it.

The analysis showed that for both spouses, sense of closeness was negatively associated with the other spouse’s stress; The more stress a person experienced in a certain day, the less closeness (or more distance) his or her spouse reported. This effect, however, was stronger for women than for men.

Marital quality had a significant main effect on the level of closeness: Couples who had high-quality relationships reported more closeness than did those in distressed marriages, regardless of the stress level. However, in both happy and distressed couples, more stressful days were associated with increased dyadic distance.

These findings may suggest that daily stress has a negative influence on relationships. However, greater distance may not necessarily be bad for a marriage. It might be that in some couples, one or both spouses use “relationship-focused coping” (Coyne & Smith, 1991), whereby when one spouse detects stress in the other, he or she avoids behaving in ways that might be burdensome and refrains from making demands on the stressed spouse’s time and attention. This may depend on the partners’ approach-avoidance strategies and the couple’s pattern of distance regulation under stress (Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

STUDY II. MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH CANCER: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A child’s life-threatening illness is often characterized not only by its traumatic impact on the parents, but also by ups and downs in the child’s condition, which are accompanied by rising and falling stress levels in the family. In a qualitative study of parents whose children had been diagnosed with cancer, in-depth interviews were conducted with 21 couples. A theme that ran through the interviews was that affective communication, supportive behaviors, and emotional closeness changed in times of heightened stress (such as immediately following the diagnosis, during signs of relapse, oration) of stress (such as improvement, from the was term promising).

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of relapse, and in times of physical deterioration) as well as in times of reduced stress (such as when the child’s condition improved, when the child was released from the hospital, when medical treatment was terminated, or when lab tests showed promising results).

Two opposite patterns of relationship changes were observed in stressful times versus less stressful times: Distancing couples pulled away from each other when relapse occurred or the child’s physical condition deteriorated. Under heightened stress, such couples exhibited escalating tension and a growing emotional and physical distance. However, some of these couples tended to draw closer together again when the child’s health improved. In contrast, bonding couples felt closer to each other soon after diagnosis and whenever the child’s medical condition deteriorated, demonstrating more intimate and supportive communication. Two other couple types did not experience significant changes in their relationships. Distant couples had little affective communication and mutual support before the child’s illness and remained distant from each other in both “good” and difficult times, and fluctuating couples went through periods of closeness and distance that appeared to be unrelated to the child’s condition.

The analyses further indicated that these patterns of dyadic closeness and distance were related to the parents’ emotional and behavioral reactions in times of heightened stress, their level of comfort with and reactions to their spouse’s behaviors, and their approach or avoidance strategies in support seeking and giving.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND THEORY

Although most research indicates that experiencing stress has a deleterious effect on marital quality, studies also show a more complex pattern of relationship change. As the two studies reported above demonstrate, time sampling methodologies may enhance our understanding of the repeated sequences of marital relationship change under stress, and qualitative research may shed light on other processes of dyadic interactions and relationship change.

Some important questions still await further research and theory building: What determines couples’ interactions under stress? Under what circumstances do spouses get closer together or become more distant from each other? What accounts for “ups and downs” in a relationship at various points in the stress process? Do different sources of stress and/or stress levels elicit different behaviors and different patterns of couple interaction? Does culture shape the ways in which marital partners regulate distance in time of stress?

Research that focuses on the adaptive process and ways of interaction among couples under stress may enhance theory building and help to increase our understanding of the complex patterns of change in marital relationships.
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