

8

Broadening the Scope of Couples Research: Pragmatics and Prevention

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The theme of this volume is couples in conflict. That theme was chosen because couples' conflict appears to contribute to a variety of societal ills, including domestic violence (Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, Bates, & Sandin, 1997), psychopathology (Paykel, Myers, Dienelt, Klerman, Linenthal, & Pepper, 1989), substance abuse (Halford & Osgarby, 1993), children's mental and physical health (Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, & Kiernan, 1991; Emery, 1988), and aspects of the physical health of partners (Newton, Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, & Malarkey, 1995; Schmaling & Sher, 1997). In chapter 5, Bradbury, Rogge, and Lawrence contributed to this discussion by persuasively arguing that an overly narrow focus on conflict to the exclusion of other variables related to couples' distress and dissolution has inadvertently limited the scope, precision, and utility of our knowledge about the causes of marital deterioration. In making this argument they emphasized one point and alluded to another, both of which I would like to address in more detail. First, and most heavily emphasized, is their point that a range of phenomena in addition to conflict are likely to contribute in meaningful ways to the health or deterioration of a marriage, and that we as marital researchers should begin actively including a much broader range of relationship phenomena in our studies. The second point alluded to by Bradbury et al. is that adopting practical application as a goal should be a fundamental aspect of our pursuit of knowledge in this context. My goal in this chapter is to argue that our straddling the fence between positivism and pragmatism should be more deeply considered, and that an increased emphasis on the pragmatic truth criterion may be essential if expanding the scope of study in marriage beyond conflict is to adequately translate into useful knowledge.

TOWARD BROADENING THE SCOPE OF COUPLES RESEARCH

Bradbury, Rogge, and Lawrence argued that the marital field's emphasis on conflict, although it has proven fruitful to date, may also be limiting progress. They asserted that marital conflict is a low base rate phenomenon and thus may play a more restricted role than more frequently occurring phenomena. They also maintained that the developmental link between good problem-solving skills and the

long-term health of marriage has not yet proven to be a strong one, suggesting that although conflict might differentiate distressed from happy couples, it might not be the most important factor determining the developmental course from happy couple to distressed couple. Finally, they argued that there is a good possibility that other variables besides conflict may prove to be of equal or greater importance in the prediction and influence of marital deterioration. In particular, they cited positive relationship variables such as self-disclosure, demonstrated understanding, active listening, social support, sex, and compatibility. They also raised the issue that specific individual characteristics may create enduring vulnerabilities to relationship deterioration. Those characteristics include neuroticism, conflict and divorce in families of origin, psychopathology, and attachment history. Finally, they noted that extrafamilial stressors like economic hardship, work stress, and what they called struggles within a family's ecological niche may also contribute substantially to the satisfaction and stability of couples' relationships. These arguments are compelling and offer the promise of broadening the scope of couples research as well as increasing our precision in terms of predicting couples' developmental course.

I am persuaded by Bradbury et al's., argument, and agree that there are compelling reasons for us to begin actively broadening the scope of our research beyond a narrow focus on conflict and problem solving. In addition, however, and speaking more to the second point just cited, I emphasize more strongly the role of pragmatic considerations in the context of this broadening.

PRAGMATICS

Truth criteria (Pepper, 1942) refer to those principles by which we judge the belief-worthiness of data. Within the philosopher Rorty's (1982) formulation, they might be better conceived as the fundamental assumptions we make about the purpose or *function* that data are intended to serve. Both Pepper and Rorty were consistent in noting that the ultimate function of data differ depending on one's adopted philosophical "worldview" (Pepper's term). Rorty distinguished among Platonists, Positivists, and Pragmatists. Platonists do not really concern us in this context. However, Positivists and Pragmatists do, because I suspect that we as social scientists, and as relationship researchers in particular, have begun to drift between these two perspectives. In an attempt to briefly clarify this suspicion, I give a thumbnail description of each school.

For the Positivist, the assumption is that data function to bring us closer to the Truth with a capital T. In other words, one might say that the function of the scientific endeavor is to bring us closer and closer to *the* reality, which exists pristine and independent of the act of inquiry. Or even more simply, we gather data in an attempt to reveal to ourselves the way things really are. The belief-worthiness or quality of data are judged by the degree to which they can be

argued to correspond with Reality or the Truth. Both Rorty and Pepper referred to this as the *correspondence theory of Truth*. Statements are true because they correspond to the way things are (Rorty, 1982). From this perspective, a description of a reliable association between two variables provides us with a glimpse of the Truth and is therefore of value. The Truth, by correspondence criteria, pursues a picture of an assumed reality, but does not necessarily require that the information be useful toward any particular goal.

On the other hand, for the Pragmatist, the assumption is that the function of data gathering is to precipitate effective action. To paraphrase Rorty paraphrasing Dewey, data for the pragmatist are seen as tools rather than pictures. In other words, we gather data to increase our effectiveness in the world rather than to take a picture of Reality. To put it even more simply, we gather data because doing so has proven to be one of the most useful of all human endeavors, ever. The quality of data from a pragmatic perspective are judged by the degree to which they are more or less useful within the context of a specified goal. According to William James, calling a statement "true" is a kind of compliment paid to sentences that have shown themselves to be useful within a particular context. From this perspective a demonstration of association is valuable only if it allows us to behave or cope more effectively. In this context, perhaps the most useful type of association is one in which the independent variable is *manipulatable* and the effect on the dependent variable is *lawful*. Put differently, pragmatics hypothesizes that demonstrating that some action reliably results in a predictable consequent is likely to be the most useful type of data. Such a demonstration of utility does not, however, make any claim to correspond to some reality external to the demonstrated association.

My proposal is that we, as basic researchers in the marital area, begin to give more deliberate and serious consideration to the pragmatic truth criterion. My argument is that this is not simply an academic exercise, but that it may have dramatic implications for the questions that we choose to ask, the variables we choose to include in our studies, and the ultimate utility of our work in the alleviation of marital suffering. Specifically, I propose that we give serious consideration to the goals that we are adopting in our research and the degree to which we are committed to the pursuit of Truth or utility. My inclination is that if expanding the scope of basic couples research beyond conflict is to be fruitful, we as researchers will have to remain conscious of pragmatic truth criteria. As a beginning to the conversation, I argue that pragmatics should at least be a consideration, if not necessarily a requirement of basic couple functioning research.

PREVENTING MARITAL DETERIORATION: BREADTH IS GOOD, PRAGMATICS ARE ESSENTIAL

In chapter 5, Bradbury et al. noted that the efforts of basic scientists in the field of couples research are most likely to be useful in efforts aimed at *preventing* relationship deterioration and the associated negative sequelae. I argue that both prevention and treatment programs can benefit from the efforts of basic scientists if pragmatic criteria are regularly considered early in the planning stage of basic research. In fact, I assert that an adequate therapeutic assessment of couple functioning is impossible without broad and pragmatic basic couples research. This has been made most clear to me during work developing the Marriage Checkup, a secondary/indicated prevention program for couples at risk for marital deterioration (Cordova, Warren, & Gee, in press). In this section I briefly outline the Marriage Checkup program to serve as an example demonstrating the essential role that broad and pragmatically informed basic couples research can play in prevention efforts.

Traditionally, interventions for couple distress have been at the tertiary level; providing treatment for couples distressed enough to actively seek therapy. Unfortunately, such interventions reach only a minority of couples that could benefit from treatment. Most distressed couples seek no treatment at all and, of those that do, most seek help from medical doctors and clergy (Doherty, Lester, & Leigh, 1986; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). In addition, there is reason to believe that for many couples, a tertiary intervention is simply too little too late (Jacobson & Follette, 1985; Jacobson, Schmaling, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1987). On the other end of the spectrum, primary prevention programs have been developed and tested and appear quite promising (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). However, these programs are also limited in their utility because they target premarital and newlywed couples and do not address the needs of already-established couples. Between the extremes of tertiary and primary interventions are those couples in the early stages of relationship distress who may only have one or two significant problems that have not yet irreversibly damaged their relationship. These "at-risk" couples are the natural clientele of a secondary preventive program. However, no such program currently exists. In response to the need for the development of a secondary preventive, we have developed a program we call the Marriage Checkup (MC).

The MC is an informational marital health service consisting of two components—a thorough relationship assessment and a professionally delivered feedback report. The design is based on the principles of motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991), and the goals are to address immediate problems and prevent future relationship deterioration. Early treatment development research has provided promising evidence that the MC is effective at attracting both satisfied couples seeking guidance and reassurance, and couples that can be objectively identified as at risk for marital deterioration (Cordova, Warren, & Gee, in press).

ASSESSMENT OF COUPLE FUNCTIONING: USING DATA PRAGMATICALLY I

One of the basic premises of the MC is that couples must be provided with objective, accurate, predictive, and useful information pertaining to the health and stability of their relationships. The goal is to provide couples with information that they can use on their own to improve the quality and stability of their relationships, presenting that information in a way that maximizes its potential to motivate change. My contention is that such an assessment is most useful when what is being assessed has been empirically determined to be predictive of, or at least reliably associated with, marital deterioration. This is important for two reasons. First, it is assumed that variables that have a demonstrated relationship to marital deterioration are likely to be the most effective indicators of risk and the most effective targets of change. Second, motivational interviewing strategies require that people be provided with objective information supported by empirical research because the presentation of unbiased information is expected to be least likely to precipitate client defensiveness and most likely to increase motivation to change.

For example, the theory of change assumes that there is a difference in effectiveness between telling a couple that in the therapist's opinion their demand-withdraw style is bad for their marriage, and telling the couple that assessment results reveal a high degree of demand-withdraw behavior and that research studies have found demand-withdraw patterns to be associated with future marital deterioration. Theoretically, if partners are ambivalent about recognizing a problem and taking action to address it, then the first presentation is easier to discount and more likely to engender defensiveness. On the other hand, the second presentation, by providing a nonjudgmental description of the assessment results and research findings, is both less confrontational and more likely to be persuasive. Note, however, that the second presentation is only possible because the work of basic marital researchers provided evidence of the necessary association (e.g., Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). In addition, note that demand-withdraw behavior is, at least theoretically, a manipulable relationship characteristic. In other words, we identify a potential problem that the couple can do something about. If, on the other hand, the identified variable were not manipulable, like ethnicity or socioeconomic status, then providing that information to the couple does not suggest an appropriate course of action. In short, an intervention like the MC wholly depends on the information provided by basic researchers in order to be implemented effectively, but that information is only of use if it implies effective action.

In fact, the MC attempts to assess primarily those variables that have some basis in the empirical literature. Those variables include such demonstrated predictors of marital health and deterioration as global marital satisfaction (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995), psychological and physical aggression (e.g.,

Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997), intimacy (e.g., Prager, 1995), sexual satisfaction (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995), communication patterns (e.g., demand-withdraw; Christensen & Heavey, 1990), areas of desired change (Margolin, Talovic, & Weinstein, 1993), depressive symptoms (e.g., Beach, Whisman, & O'Leary, 1994), alcohol use (e.g., O'Farrell & Rotunda, 1997), and economic hardship (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999). In addition, because the marital *interaction* literature has also identified potential predictors of satisfaction and stability, the MC includes a communication assessment using the standard problem solving paradigm for both a wife problem and a husband problem separately. Assessed from these interactions are behaviors that the literature has suggested are either healthy or corrosive. These include demand-withdraw patterns (e.g., Heavey et al., 1995), Gottman's four horsemen (Gottman, 1994), negative reciprocity (Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993), wives' softened start-up and husbands' acceptance of influence (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998), and levels of positivity in relation to levels of negativity (Gottman, 1994; Huston & Chorost, 1994). Likewise, because Buehlman, Gottman, and Katz (1992) found that responses to questions about a couple's relationship history are statistically predictive of dissolution, the MC also includes the oral history interview (OHI) and assesses for such variables as "we-ness" and "husband fondness."

FEEDBACK ABOUT COUPLE FUNCTIONING: USING DATA PRAGMATICALLY II

All of the information gathered is compiled and used to construct a feedback report. It begins with basic identifying information and then recaps the couple's early history from first meeting through early marriage. This section is intended to begin the feedback session with what are almost always positive memories and an emphasis on the qualities of each partner that the other has found attractive and valuable. This section is informed by the work of Buehlman et al. (1992) and hypothesizes that a positive presentation of a couple's relationship history may not simply be a product, but may actually produce a positive relationship effect.

The report then provides a detailed description of the couple's strengths. These strengths vary from couple to couple, but might include highlighting areas of relationship satisfaction, emphasizing their commitment to marriage and children, emphasizing affection and compatibility, and highlighting those qualities or communication skills that have been shown to predict relationship stability. The function of this section of the report is to reorient couples toward their positive qualities. This is important for several reasons. First, couples often fail to appreciate the strengths they already possess and thus perceive their relationships more negatively than may necessarily be warranted. Second, a reorientation toward the positive qualities of the relationship begins to set the stage for positive sentiment override, which may help offset some of the day-to-day annoyances within the rela-

tionship. Third, the identified strengths form the basis from which the couple can work on their own to address or seek help for any identified problems. Finally, this section is provided before discussing the couples' problems in order to increase their hopefulness about their relationship before addressing their difficulties. Notice that this "strengths" section *requires* that literature tell us something useful about what is predictive of relationship stability and satisfaction. For example, we frequently use findings about positive relationship qualities (e.g., self-disclosure and social support, husband fondness, accepting influence) and even the absence of negative predictors (e.g., contempt and stonewalling). In short, the only way to offer an informed opinion about what relationship characteristics can be considered strengths is to have a broad basic predictive and pragmatically applicable marital literature to draw on.

The next section of the feedback report presents the raw scores from the relevant questionnaires along with objective interpretations of those scores. These are presented in an interviewing style designed to increase partners' motivation to attend to potentially problematic areas. A detailed description of these procedures would exceed the current page limitations but, in short, partners are asked for their responses to each set of scores and any responses that indicate an increased motivation to attend to and work on that area of the relationship are encouraged and specified. For example, partners scoring in the low range on the "conventionalization" scale of the revised Marital Satisfaction Inventory (Negy & Snyder, 1997; Snyder, 1997) might be informed that scores in that range tend to indicate that the partners might be under emphasizing the positive qualities of the relationship. The partners would then be asked for their reaction to that interpretation. Any response that indicated some increased awareness of that difficulty and willingness to work on it would be reflected and amplified. The goal would be to increase the likelihood that the partners would work to be aware of their tendency to under emphasize the positive qualities of their relationship and to moderate that tendency in the future. Data supporting the potential utility of this approach are primarily derived from the substance abuse literature (e.g., Miller & Rollnick, 1991).

The last section of the feedback report details any specific problem areas identified by the assessment, and provides a menu of suggested strategies for addressing those problems. Each of the sections of the feedback report, including review of the assessment results and the suggested strategies for addressing identified problems, draws heavily on the marital research literature. For example, the discussion of problem areas frequently focuses on providing partners with information to help normalize common problems such as early declines in marital satisfaction (e.g., Markman et al., 1993), declines in relationship satisfaction associated with the transition to parenthood (Belsky, 1990), and commonly encountered sexual problems (e.g., Spence, 1997). In addition, the available typologies research can be used to normalize couples' conflict styles, particularly with couples that can be described as volatile or conflict avoidant (Gottman, 1994; also see Fitzpatrick, 1988).

PRAGMATIC BASIC COUPLES RESEARCH

The point of describing the MC is to demonstrate that prevention programs are likely to rely heavily on the findings of basic couples research that identify both risk factors for relationship deterioration, as well as factors that protect against such deterioration. The work of basic researchers is likely to be most useful if it is both broad and pragmatically informed. Although it is necessary to assess and address conflict as part of prevention and treatment programs, focusing exclusively on conflict limits the breadth and potential effectiveness of these interventions. Other factors *do* play an important role in relationship functioning, and our clients can only benefit from our increasing knowledge of these factors. For example, because of the potential benefits to the couple, it is important to have information about relationship strengths as well as factors that are protective during predictable challenges like the transition to parenthood. It is also important to be able to provide useful information about other aspects of the relationship that might be affecting satisfaction and stability, including outside stress, psychopathology, and substance abuse.

My argument is that the MC and other prevention and treatment programs are able to make the most use of variables that imply useful action because either they are directly manipulable or at least they are lawfully related to other manipulable variables. As Bradbury et al. noted in chapter 5, although neuroticism has been consistently identified as predictive of relationship deterioration, it is difficult to determine how to make use of that information in a clinical intervention. My suspicion is that our pursuit of this type of knowledge has been primarily informed by our positivist leanings toward truth by correspondence criteria. In the context of the MC, however, it hardly seems useful to tell couples that one partner has scored highly on a neuroticism scale and that research has found this to be associated with relationship deterioration. What the couple is supposed to do with that information is not immediately obvious. On the other hand, if these basic studies had considered pragmatic truth criteria, then they might have also included variables more easily available for manipulation and assessed the relationship between those variables and neuroticism in the prediction of dysfunction. For example, if *awareness* of one's own neurotic tendencies were included as a variable, researchers could analyze whether such awareness moderates the relationship between neuroticism and marital distress. If awareness of neurotic tendencies did moderate the relationship between neuroticism and marital distress, then prevention and treatment scientists are provided with a finding that implies potentially effective action. Without such manipulable correlates, such information is at least, and unfortunately, of no use and may even be counter-therapeutic (because it implies an incurably corrosive condition). The same could be said of demographic or "niche" variables.

Although our inclinations toward a correspondence theory of truth are reasonable and likely to remain central to our science as we navigate the waters be-

tween positivism and pragmatism, my limited proposal is that a more active nod toward pragmatism during the design phase of our studies will be maximally beneficial to a progressive research program that has a positive impact on the quality of people's lives. Note that I am not arguing that basic scientists must wholly subvert their more positivist interests to pragmatic demands. However, I am asserting that we should consciously consider what the ultimate goals of our science are within this domain. To what degree do they involve taking a snapshot of reality and describing it as it would have itself described? And to what degree do they involve embracing the more mundane goal of discovering what works to improve people's lives?

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