A. Institutional Structuring of Life Course Trajectories

Parental Identification, Couple Commitment, and Problem Solving among Newlyweds

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INTRODUCTION

The rapidity of the social and economic changes that characterized industrial and post-industrialized societies in the last century was accompanied by corresponding changes in family structure and relationships. The transitions from rural to urban-industrial and from an industrial to the current post-industrial information based society have all been associated with fundamental alterations in family composition, values, and goals.* By the late 1960s the "baby boom" generation, seeking greater social equality and personal freedom, tended to put off marriage for longer periods and were more likely to live together prior to marriage (Cherlin, 1992; Lindsey, 1990). Between the 1960s and 1970s the divorce rate doubled, the number of children born out of wedlock rose dramatically, and there was a proliferation of single female-headed households (Cherlin, 1992).

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*See Modell and Hareven (1973) and Hareven (1978; 1982), for depictions of the transition from rural to industrial societies. Elder (1974) and Komarovsky (1940) for discussions of the impacts of the great depression on family life, Elder (1974), Elder and Rockwell (1978), Cherlin (1992) for data relevant to changes in family life in the post depression, World War II years. See also Cherlin (1992) for a discussion of post "baby boom" era changes in family structures.

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Perhaps the most profound change in Western societies in the past three decades has been that married women with or without children are now an integral part of the employed working population (Bielby, 1992). Some scholars have attributed the rise in the divorce rate directly to the dislocations in family life produced by this phenomenon (see Cherlin, 1992 for a discussion of these issues). Although the ultimate effects on family structure and relationships is still not clear, it is apparent that as women seek and obtain greater opportunities in education and the work place, their roles as wives and mothers are inevitably modified or altered.

In this first decade of the 21st century there is no evidence that these rates or processes of change will diminish or crystalize. Thus the alterations in family structures and values experienced during the life cycle of the baby boomer generation do not portend greater stability or predictability over the life cycle of the next generation. The rapidity of the social and economic changes has left young people entering marriage with uncertain priorities and conflicting expectations. They are provided with few if any standards about how to balance their obligations to jobs/careers, spouse, marriage, and children as well as how to plan for their futures.

We remain a society in flux. It is reasonable to expect that the current generation of families will continue to be challenged by social, economic, cultural, and personal conditions that were not faced by their parents. Now as in the past century the rapidity of social changes has placed great demands on the adaptive capacity of individuals and families alike. The effects of changing social conditions on family structure and relationships as well as the ways families have adapted to such changes have been well documented by social historians and life course scholars (see as examples key studies by Laslett, 1971; Hareven, 1982; and Elder, 1974). However, the question of the specific characteristics and behaviors used by families to make effective adaptations has not been thoroughly investigated. One approach to addressing this question derives from the assumption that families whose members have the requisite problem-solving skills will make the most effective adaptations. Given this assumption, the fundamental questions that I will address in this chapter are what are the attributes that enable families to be effective problem solvers? And what are the conditions that foster or hinder couples from obtaining these attributes?

A basic premise underlying the theory and the research to be discussed below is that the course of action an individual selects in a given situation is based on prior experiences in similar situations. Moreover, every action an individual takes is accompanied by an expectation of how others in the environment will respond to that action (Donahoe & Palmer, 1994). The extensive body of research by Elder and his colleagues is exemplar of this principle. They have repeatedly demonstrated that people's inabilities (and by implication abilities) to adapt to changing conditions over the life span are effected, in large part, by their prior histories in their families of origin (see Caspi & Elder, 1988; Elder, 1974, 1981; Elder & Rockwell, 1978).

My effort to account for the development of problem-solving skills in family behavior therefore starts by considering the impact of family of origin experiences on the behaviors of the key family subgroup, the marital partners. Although there is clear evidence that childhood experiences affect adult behaviors in family relationships and that adults who have had positive relationships with their parents as children tend to have positive marital relationships, there remains some question as to how pervasive these influences are on couple problem-solving over the course of a marriage (cf., Tallman, Rotolo, & Gray, 2001). Marriages involve the coming together of two people with different family experiences and, consequently, different learned behavioral patterns and expectations. To function effectively couples need to resolve these inevitable differences. In the process they may be called upon to alter or modify patterns of behavior and orientations learned in their formative years. Such a process

could involve weakening parental influence over offsprings' marital behaviors over the course of time.

It is this process through which individual partners come together to resolve key problems that is the focal point of the investigation to be described in this chapter. In subsequent pages I develop and test a model that incorporates both individual and couple level behaviors. Beginning with parent-offspring relationships the model stipulates a set of individual experiences, orientations, and dispositional states, which are hypothesized to influence the partners' readiness and effectiveness in working jointly to resolve their marital problems. The model is tested with couples who were observed over the first two years of their marriage. It is during these first years that couples establish interaction trajectories effecting the long-term quality and stability of their marital relationship (Huston et al., 2001; Huston & Houts, 1998; Karney, Bradbury, & Johnson, 1999; Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). The research reported below is based on the premise that these long-term outcomes can be attributed to the couple's success or failure in confronting and resolving their key interpersonal problems during these critical years.

I begin by first defining problem solving and the problem-solving process as they are viewed in this investigation. These definitions and distinctions serve to specify the scope conditions of the present study. I then present the theoretical and empirical basis for developing a model that stipulates key experiences hypothesized to contribute to effective marital problem solving. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of the test of the model, an evaluation of its findings, and an exploration of its implications for understanding the adaptive capacities of couples to deal with the vicissitudes of a society in flux.

Marital Problems, Marital Disagreements, and Marital Conflicts

A marital problem is defined here as a situation that occurs when one or both partners believe(s) that the current state of their marital relationship is not as it should be and that rectifying the situation requires some individual or collective behavioral changes. It is important to note that externally induced problems such as economic distress or the illness of a spouse is not considered here as a marital problem *unless* the condition can be directly attributed to the deliberate actions of a spouse, and these actions affect the marital relationship (cf., Tallman, 1988; Tallman et al., 1993).

Disagreements take place when the partners express different views as to how the problem might be resolved or even whether a resolution is necessary. When managed appropriately, disagreements can be considered as an initial step in problem resolution (Gottman, 1993; Vuchinich, 1999).* Disagreements often arouse feelings of anger, fear, frustration, and resentment eliciting fight or flight responses on the part of one or both spouses. When such emotional reactions and behaviors color the couple's interactions over an extended period of time, the couple can be described as involved in "marital conflict". The more extended the marital conflict, the more difficult it will be to solve the underlying problem (Vuchinich, 1999: 185–193). In brief, I propose that the process of solving marital problems begins with couple disagreements and whether these disagreements are confronted determines whether they dissipate or escalate into serious marital conflict.

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*Gottman and Vuchinich refer to such behaviors as "conflicts" rather than disagreements, I prefer to reserve the term conflict for serious and prolonged confrontations characterized by hostile interactions.

Problem Solving

It will be helpful to draw a distinction between coping and problem-solving behaviors. Coping refers to mechanisms people use to avoid experiencing a stressful situation. Problem solving pertains to taking actions designed to remove the source of the problem (Tallman, 1988; Tallman et al., 1993). Most marital problems are dealt with through coping mechanisms such as avoidance, humor, denial or by comparing one's plight with other married couples that "could be worse". The focus here is on the less common, but in my view, more crucial, problem-solving behavior. Problem solving, as compared to coping, is potentially the more profitable behavioral choice because it offers the possibility of eliminating the source of the problem. Problem solving is also the more precarious alternative because it increases the chances that strong negative emotions will emerge accompanied by harsh accusations and counter accusations. Although it is frequently the case that couples who ignore or are not aware of potentially troubling issues may never have to confront them because they dissipate over time (Vuchinich, 1999: 188–189), the failure to perceive some situations as problems can contribute to their growing seriousness and thereby increase the difficulty of their eventual resolution (Noller & Feeney, 1998: 14–15).

The Problem-Solving Process

Virtually all marital problems are interpersonal problems that are initiated by disagreements between the partners. The problem-solving process starts when the partners acknowledge that they disagree about an issue. This shared acknowledgment involves the identification of some event or incident that pertains to perceived troubling, inappropriate or damaging behavior on the part of one or both partners and the recognition that they differ in their allocation of responsibility, their ideas as to how the problem should be resolved or both. This state of affairs inevitably involves the arousal of strong emotions. How these emotions are expressed is critical in the eventual resolution of the problem. There is a remarkable degree of consensus among investigators indicating that negative affect is a key component in impeding effective problem solving and increasing the rate and intensity of marital conflict (Forgatch, 1989; Gottman, 1979, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Huston & Charost, 1994; Jacobson, Follette, & McDonald, 1982 to name just a few). As in most conflagrations, it takes two to make a fight. Conflicts develop only if angry or accusatory expressions incite responses in kind, or even more damaging, withdrawals into bitter silences. When these types of exchanges are carried on for extended periods of time they contribute to a growing sense of futility and the belief that the couples' problems are intractable (Huston and Vangelisti, 1991).

Conditions Influencing the Control of Negative Affect

If conflict is to be avoided and problem solving is to take place when disagreements arise, at least one of the partners must act in a way that avoids or derails the potential for reciprocal patterns of emotionally negative and accusatory expressions. If one partner "A" voices his or her concerns through angry criticisms, complaints or derogatory and demeaning statements aimed at damaging partner "B" 's character and stature, the key to resolving the conflict rests on the behavior of B. If he or she responds by a counterattack or withdrawal the problem will

more likely escalate into another round of negative exchanges or degenerate into mutual with-drawal in which one or both partners silently keep or intensify their negative image of the other (Gottman, 1979). However, if B does not respond to A's attacks in kind but rather reacts with positive or neutral affect while offering alternative modes of action, the chances that the problem will dissipate or be resolved are greatly improved (Rusbult et al., 1991; Tallman et al., 2001). If extended marital conflicts and their contribution to persistent and debilitating marital problems are to be reduced, we would want fewer persons ready to take accusatory or aggressive stances and more persons willing to be accommodating and even make concilia-tory initiatives (cf., Lawler, Ford, & Large, 1999). The question is what are the conditions that contribute to the former behaviors and which lead to the latter? The remainder of the chapter is devoted to my effort to answer this question.

DEVELOPING AN EXPLANATORY MODEL

Family Background

There is a considerable body of research indicating that marital problems tend to be trans-mitted from one generation to the next. Most of the research focuses on the transfer of prob-lematic behaviors from parents to offspring (Amato, 1996; Belsky & Pensky, 1988, Caspi & Elder, 1988; Tallman et al., 1999). Parents who because of personal, interpersonal, social or economic conditions are ineffective in dealing with their family problems are also likely to be ineffective in their child-rearing practices (Patterson, 1982; Simons et al., 1994). Erratic, neglecting, coercive, inconsistent or harsh parenting behaviors increase the likelihood that children when they reach adulthood will develop similar orientations and behaviors in their intimate relationships (Caspi & Elder, 1988; Gottman & Katz, 1989; Simons, Whitbeck, & Wu, 1994; Whitbeck, et al., 1992). Thus persons with unhappy childhood experiences are more likely to be tentative, wary, and defensive in their own intimate relationships; behaviors that do not facilitate effective problem solving.

Linking Childhood Experiences, Individual Orientations, and Couple Relationships

Much of the research discussed above emphasizes the impact of family experiences on indi-viduals. But the experiences of one individual may not be sufficient to predict the course of a marital relationship. Several recent studies demonstrate the obvious but sometimes over-looked fact that marital relationships are a product of dyadic, rather than individual behaviors (Rusbult et al., 1998; Tallman et al., 1999, 2001). If childhood experiences influence the course of marital relationships, then the backgrounds of *both* partners should be necessary to account for how marital relationships develop.

Even if the family influences on the personalities and predispositions of both partners are considered, it remains necessary to explore how this mix may be modified in a new emerg-ing marital relationship. Not only does the intensity and immediacy of this new intimate rela-tionship exert a powerful independent effect on the two partners, they are likely to be faced with problems that differ from and were unanticipated by their parents. The changing oppor-tunity structure, especially for women, the cultural and ethnic variability that characterizes life in the post-industrialized world, combined with high rates of geographical and social

mobility, make it likely that the backgrounds and histories of persons getting married in the past few decades will be dissimilar on a number of key dimensions. Given these conditions it seems inevitable, in an era when romantic love is the prime criterion for the decision to marry, that many of the expectations partners bring into their marriage will not be realized. The question is, what aspects of the emerging relationship make it possible for some couples to overcome these unmet expectations while others succumb to disappointments and either dissolve the relationship or grow increasingly disenchanted with one another? Part of the answer I suggest is in how they deal with their disagreements.

The Relevance of Commitments

Since disagreements tend to arouse feelings of annoyance and resentment in most people, why do some give vent to these feelings more readily than others?* Some spouses are simply intent on winning the argument. Some may be so fearful of retaliation from their partner that they refuse to express their disagreement. Such persons are likely to engage in silent withdrawal from exchanges. Other spouses may care more about their partner's feelings or about the well-being of their marital relationship than they do about protecting themselves or seeking release for their frustration. Such orientations are key elements of marital commitment (Leik, Owens, & Tallman, 1999; Lydon, 1999; Rusbult, 1980). It seems reasonable to expect that spouses with strong commitments to the marriage will be likely not only to control their use of negative expressions, but to persist in seeking appropriate resolutions to the disagreements with which they are confronted. In brief, there should be a positive relationship between marital commitment and marital problem solving.

Forming and Maintaining Commitments

Interpersonal commitments have been generally viewed as a developing and changing process rather than a single decision (Lawler and Yoon, 1993; Leik et al., 1999; Rusbult, 1983). The process begins with the partners' attraction for one another (Levinger, 1976, 1999). Attraction is considered here as the total of the partners' positive assessments of their spouse's attributes and traits. It is these assessments that initially draw people together. The degree to which partners feel attracted to one another creates an incentive to do things with and for each other; that is, exchange goods and services. If these exchanges are mutually satisfying there is a desire to continue the process. Repeated exchanges foster increasingly strong emotional ties and stronger feelings of pleasure and satisfaction with the relationship (Lawler & Yoon, 1993; Lawler et al., 1995; Lawler & Yoon, 1996). The result is that the partners grow dependent on one another for more and more goods and services, not the least of which are love, admiration, and affection. With growing dependence there is an increasing desire for a continuing relationship as well as a growing sense of vulnerability if the relationship were to be severed (cf., Tallman, Gray, & Leik, 1991). Commitment assures the former and protects against the latter.

However, principally because of growing dependence and vulnerability, partners may be reluctant to make strong commitments if they do not trust their spouses' good intentions and shared commitment to the relationship (Hsiao, 1998; Kollock, 1994). A spouse's trust in

*I do not consider here cases of biochemical malfunctioning that affect impulse control.

his or her partner represents some confidence that the partner's future behaviors will continue to be a source of satisfaction (Hsiao, 1998). At the couple level, it represents faith in the partners' mutual attachments and involvement in the relationship (Holmes, 1991). Trust derives from two sources, one is the spouse's experiences prior to the relationship, generally in his or her family of origin, the other is the evolving experiences and exchanges with his or her partner (Boon & Holmes, 1991; Tallman et al., 1999).

Much of the commitment process discussed so far focuses on the individual benefits to the spouses, but commitment requires a shift in focus from the assessment of individual benefits to a concern for the strength and well-being of the relationship (cf., Lawler & Yoon, 1993; Leik & Leik, 1977; Leik et al., 1999; Scanzoni, 1979). The final component of commitment therefore consists of a willingness to expend personal "costs" for the sake of the relationship. "Costs" refer to the investments, difficulties, painful events, disappointments, and rewards forgone that partners are willing to endure. To the extent that couples share the same readiness to bear costs, they can be considered to share a similar level of commitment.

This linkage between attraction, satisfaction, mutual trust, and the willingness to assume costs is important not only in the formation of commitment but in maintaining commitment throughout the course of the marriage.

Parent–Child Relationships and Marital Commitment

Most students of developmental processes seem to agree that childhood interactions with parents or parent surrogates provide people with their first experiences in intimate loving relationships (Gopnik et al., 1999). The ebb and flow of parent–child interactions give children their earliest evidences of the pleasures and the dangers associated with close relationships. I am not aware of research linking adult–parent relationships with adult marital functioning. It seems reasonable, however, to surmise that other things being equal, positive parent–child relationships are likely to be carried forward when the child reaches adulthood. If this is true, then, based on the previously described parent–child research, it should follow that identification with and respect for parents should influence adults' dispositional sets toward their partners. The important implication that derives from prior research is that a bridge is established between generations. Thus, people who come from stable family backgrounds should be more likely to feel closer to and more admiring of their parents than those who come from conflicted households. Such people should also be more inclined to view their marriage partner's traits and behaviors in the best possible light; whereas persons with less affirming conceptions of their parents may enter marital relationships with more ambivalent feelings, both about themselves and their partners.* Thus from the beginning of the marriage onward the potential for strong commitments should be greater for persons who experience positive relationships with their parents.

In sum, I propose that persons' abilities to resolve their marital problems are initially learned in their families of origin. Moreover, the quality of their relationships with their parents affects their readiness to view their spouses' attributes and behaviors in a positive light, thereby enabling them to experience ardent feelings of attraction. The more likely partners are to be strongly attracted to their spouse, the greater the probability that their interactions will be experienced as satisfying. The more satisfying the interactions, the more frequently they will occur. This growing cycle of positive perceptions and satisfying interactions on the part

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*See Huston et al. (2001) for evidence that many couples enter marriage with strong conceptions of their partner's inadequacies. Our data also show that some couples express serious couple disagreements and conflict from the first days of their marriage.

of both spouses increases their reliance on one another and their trust in each other's benevolence. Coexisting with this mutual belief that the partner is trustworthy is an emphasis on fostering the well-being of the relationship even at some personal cost to the individual partner. Finally, this commitment process is expected to contribute to effectively solving problems primarily because it emphasizes the collective well-being of the marriage relationship over personal benefits to the individual. Consequently strongly committed spouses would be more likely than those who were less committed to restrain their impulses to strike out or strike back when they have disagreements with their partners.

THE MODEL

The above discussion provides the basis for deriving a six-factor model designed to link spouses' experiences in their families of origin with their appraisal of their partner's attributes, their satisfaction in the marital relationship, and the processes through which they become a cohesive group capable of effective problem solving. Figure 5-1 provides a depiction of this hypothesized set of relationships.

The model depicts the separate experiences of husbands and wives which contribute to their joining together in collective endeavors such as solving their interpersonal problems. The key constructs in the model can be interpreted as latent factors, each of which is defined by specific measured indicators. Formulating the model in this way makes it possible to use structural equation modeling as a mode of analysis. This allows for testing the sequential process predicted by the model. The exogenous factor is "Parents' Marital Status" which is used as a surrogate for parental marital conflict in the husbands' or wives' families of origin. As indicated earlier, parents' marital relationships affect parent–child relationships and these childhood experiences can be carried into adulthood affecting adult offsprings' relationships with their parents. Thus the path between factors 1 and 2 represents the hypothesis that respondents from stable family backgrounds will be more likely to identify with their parents and hold them in higher respect than those whose parents divorced. The hypothesis that persons who are positively identified with their parents should be more inclined to consider their
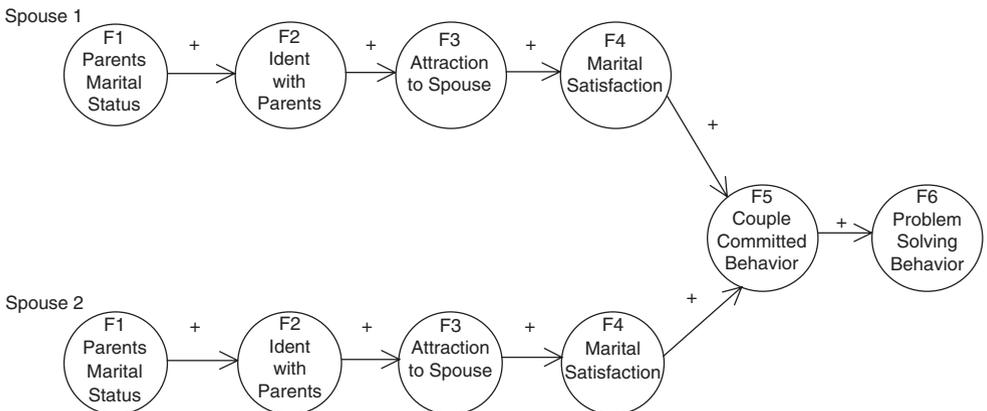

FIGURE 5-1. Model depicting hypothesized sequence of family influences, disposition toward partners, and behaviors affecting couple problem solving.

partners as highly attractive people is reflected in the path between factors 2 and 3; the path between factors 3 and 4 predicts a positive relationship between attraction and marital satisfaction; and the path between factors 4 and 5 links marital satisfaction to the couples' mutual committed behaviors. Finally, the committed behaviors represented by factor 5 are linked to effective couple problem solving as indicated by the control of hostile emotional outbursts in problematic situations.

Factors 1 to 4 all reflect personal experiences. Although factors 3 and 4 pertain to couple commitment, they represent the individual benefits contributing to the desire to make a commitment or the perceived benefits resulting from the commitment. Factor 5 is comprised of indicators of reciprocal attachments such as mutual trust (cf., Holmes, 1991) and the readiness to expend personal costs for the well-being of the relationship. Since factor 6 pertains to interactions it can only be measured at the couple level. The model is intended to account for couple behaviors beginning in the first few weeks or months of marriage and extending over the next two years.

SAMPLE, DESIGN, AND MEASURES

Design

The data used to test the model come from a longitudinal five-year, three wave study of newly wed couples. The sample was drawn during 1991 and 1992 from marriage registration records in two mid-sized cities in the State of Washington. Couples who had not been previously married, were over the age of 18, and did not have children were eligible for sample selection.

The first wave of data collection began in the spring of 1992 and the final wave was completed by the summer of 1995. An attempt was made to conduct the initial interview as close to the date of the marriage as possible. The interviews ranged from 2 to 219 days after the wedding, the median was 50 days. The second wave was administered approximately one year later and the third the following year. In each of the 3 waves husbands and wives were interviewed separately in their homes for approximately 90 minutes. Approximately 4 to 8 weeks following the interviews an appointment was made for couples to participate in videotaped interactions preceded by a brief interview. During this interview they were asked to complete a checklist indicating their major disagreements and the importance they placed on these disagreements. A facilitator, usually an interviewer who had previously met the couple, reviewed the checklist with them pointing out their major areas of disagreements. After a brief discussion the facilitator asked the couple to attempt to resolve one or more of the disagreements they indicated were most important. The facilitator then left the room indicating he or she would return in 15 minutes. Couples were aware that their discussion would be videotaped. These videotaped interactions provided the data for our measures of couple problem solving.

Sample

Two hundred and seventy-eight couples completed all of the data collection procedures for wave 1. This sample approximates the national data for newly married couples in 1992. The mean age at marriage for husbands was 26 and for wives it was 24 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, March, 1998).

Almost all husbands (92%) and wives (84%) were employed. Nineteen percent of the husbands and 25% of the wives were involved in some kind of educational or technical training program, indicating that some proportion of the husbands and wives worked and attended school simultaneously. The median and modal couple income was between $25,000 to $35,000 per year. The median and modal educational category was "some college" for both husbands and wives. This again is similar to the national average of men and women marrying for the first time (Vital Statistics, 1987). The sample consisted of 89% whites, 3% blacks, and 9% other minorities. This distribution underestimates the size of blacks and other minorities in the country but it reflects the racial distribution in the state of Washington in 1992 (World Almanac, 1992).

The attrition rate between years 1 and 2 was 15%. An additional 4.2% did not participate in the third wave of data collection. In addition, 13 couples were separated or divorced after year 1 and were eliminated from the study. Another 16 couples were dropped after year 2 for the same reason. The couples that left the study because their marriages had dissolved had significantly lower income, occupational status, and educational attainment than the rest of the sample. The analysis in this study was restricted to only those couples that participated in all three waves of interviews and videotaped interactions ($n = 198$ couples). Clearly those who left the study comprised couples that were either at risk for, or had experienced, greater marital conflict. This is likely to limit the range of scores on measures of marital interaction, trust and conflict laden interactions. Thus the loss of the most "at risk" couples provides a more stringent test of the model than I would have preferred.

Measures

Parents' *marital status*, the indicator of factor 1 in the model, was measured by responses to the question "What was your biological or adoptive parents' marital situation before you reached the age of 18?" Twenty-four percent of the husbands (52) and 27% of the wives (54) came from divorced families.

Latent factor 2, "Identification With Parents" reflects four indicators. Respondents were asked whom they felt closest to while growing up. For the purposes of this study I created dummy variables which coded husbands' and wives' closeness to either parent as 1 and closeness to "others" as 0. The second measured variable was based on responses to the question, "Which person (on a list of 15 options including biological parents, siblings, step parents, grandparents, and so forth) do you feel you are most like in your actions, attitudes, and values?" Again I created dummy variables for husbands and wives employing the same criteria used for the responses to the closeness questions, that is, similarity to either parent was coded 1 and similarity to "others" was 0.

Two scales assessing respondents' mothers' and fathers' character traits (measured separately for husbands and wives) were also included as indicators of latent factor 2. The scales each consisted of 13 adjectives representing parents' characteristics such as "strong", "moral", "generous", "trustworthy", and so forth.*

All of the indicators contributing to latent factors 1 and 2 were measured only during the first wave of data collection. The remaining variables, which form factors 3 through 6, were measured over all three waves of the study. Factor 3, the "Attraction" factor, represents the level of the spouse's appeal for the respondent. Two scales contribute to this factor. One is Zick Rubin's (1973) "Liking Scale". This scale reflects the respondent's respect and admiration for

*Exploratory factor analyses indicated that the 13 adjectives formed a single dimension on each of the scales.

his or her spouse as exemplified by such items as "I have great confidence in (spouse's) good judgment" and "I think that (spouse) is one of those people who quickly wins respect". In the second indicator contributing to factor 3 respondents were asked to rate their spouses on a scale of 0 to 100 on their intelligence, physical appearance, likeableness, friendliness, and understanding.

Factor 4 pertains to the respondent's satisfaction in the marriage. Two Likert style scales contribute to this factor. One asked respondents "How happy are you with your marriage at this time?" Responses were indicated on a five-point scale ranging from "very happy" to "not at all happy". The second scale asked respondents "How close do you feel toward your spouse today?" and responses ranged from "very close" to "not at all close". The fifth factor is labeled "committed behavior" because it focuses directly on the participant's involvement and investment in the marriage. It is formed by two different scales. The first is the Larzelere's and Huston's (1980) Dyadic Trust Scale. The scale consists of 8 items designed to estimate the respondent's sense of his or her spouse's benevolence and honesty in the marital relationship as evidenced by such statements as "My partner is primarily interested in his or her own welfare" and, " My partner is perfectly honest and truthful with me". The second measure is based on the "costs" a respondent believes he or she is willing to forgo for the sake of the relationship. Participants were provided with the following stem sentence "I would break up my marriage if"; they were then given a list of 10 options ranging from "My spouse and I were constantly bored with one another" to "My spouse continually yelled, screamed, insulted and hit me" and were asked to indicate on a four-point scale the extent to which they agreed with each option. Factor five represents the merging of the husbands' and wives' individual orientations into a combined level of commitment. Accordingly the two scales provide four indicators of the commitment factor, reflecting both husbands' and wives' "trust" and "cost" scores.

Factor 6 represents the degree to which couples use contemptuous and destructive statements when engaged in problem-solving activities. In the preliminary interview prior to engaging in their videotaped interactions, each partner filled out a separate checklist of 14 areas of possible disagreements and were asked to indicate on a scale ranging from 0 to 100 the extent to which they and their spouses disagree about each area. They were also asked to include any other areas of disagreement not covered by the checklist. Couples rarely added new items. The facilitator reviewed each partner's checklist pointing out shared areas as well as differences between the partners as to what they considered major disagreements. Couples were then asked to resolve one or more of these disagreements during their videotaped interactions. Although the problems couples sought to work on were not predetermined, virtually all couples focused on one or more of the following issues: "money", "who does what around the house", "communication", and "the time we spend together".

The videotapes were coded by trained judges who followed a written transcript while viewing a video monitor. The transcript was used primarily to assist the judges in clarifying words used by the partners in their verbal exchanges. The codes emphasized both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. Although both speaking and listening behaviors were coded, the analysis in this report is restricted to the speaking codes. Speaking behavior was assessed by taking into account voice intonation, facial expressions, and body language in the verbalizations of words and phrases. The coding system was based on a slightly revised version of John Gottman's Rapid Couple Interaction System "RCISS" (see Krokoff, Gottman, & Hass, 1989). In this method speaking and listening sequences are coded by "turns". A turn is the period of time in which one partner speaks and the other is listening. It lasts until the speaker stops talking or is interrupted. The emphasis is on the dynamic flow in the give and take that characterize couple interactions. Judges received 5–6 weeks' training in the coding

system using videotapes of pre-study couples. Virtually all tapes were double coded. Inter-coder reliability using Cohen's "kappa" ranged from .71 to .85. When coder differences occurred, the eventual code was determined by mutual agreement.

The specific codes used in this study include statements that are judged to be hurtful, demeaning, and seek to embarrass or humiliate the partner. They also include statements that escalate negative affect in the interchange by raising one's voice or increasing the level of anger extant in the exchanges. These codes fall under the category of "contemptuous state-ments". An indication of the predictive validity of this category of codes is its ability to dif-ferentiate the couples in the sample that divorced over the course of the study from the rest of the sample. Significant differences were found over all 3 waves between these two groups.* Thus, couple problem solving in this study is represented by the restraint in the use of contemptuous statements in the midst of resolving disagreements.

FINDINGS

The sequential pattern depicted in Figure 5-1 posits a set of individual experiences that facilitates the emergence of couple commitment; commitment, in turn, is associated with effective couple problem solving. The model was tested using the *EQS 6 for Windows* statistical package. The nor-mal theory maximum likelihood method was used to estimate the goodness of fit between the theoretical and data models. Tests were conducted separately for husbands and wives.

Figures 5-2a and 5-2b present the findings for wave 1 data. It should be remembered that these data were collected within the first few weeks and months of the marriage. Since neither partner had been previously married, the findings reflect the partners' orientations and behav-ioral patterns at a time when they were in the initial throes of negotiating essential marital roles and key aspects of their relationship. It is a time when each partner might be confronted with different expectations challenging his or her previously learned behavioral patterns.

As indicated in Figure 5-2a,b the theoretical model fits the wave 1 data well for both husbands and wives. Not only were all of the paths between latent factors significant but each of the measured variables was significantly related to its specific latent factor. Thus it appears that, at least in the earliest stages of the marriage, the presence or absence of marital conflict in the family of origin is significantly associated with the respondents' identification with and respect for their parents regardless of the gender of the respondent. The significant linkage between factors 2 and 3 provides the bridge between the partners' relationship with their parents and their marital relationship. These data support the hypothesis that respon-dents' positive identification with and admiration for their parents is associated with positive assessments of their marriage partners. Moreover this linkage holds for both husbands and wives, although it should be noted that the standardized path coefficient between factors 2 and 3 is considerably stronger for husbands than wives. The significant paths between factors 3, 4, 5, and 6 support the general premise that high levels of commitment to the relationship, as defined in this study, are associated with the lower use of contemptuous statements by cou-ples as they seek to resolve their disagreements.

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*Logistic regression analysis testing whether the "contemptuous statements" predicts divorce during the course of the study yielded the following results: for wave 1 coefficient = 0.08, odds ratio = 1.09, $z = 4.057$, $p < .000$; for wave 2 coefficient = 0.07, odds ratio = 1.08, $z = 3.239$, $p < 0.002$; for wave 3 coefficient = 0.08, odds ratio = 1.08, $z = 2.860$, $p < .005$.
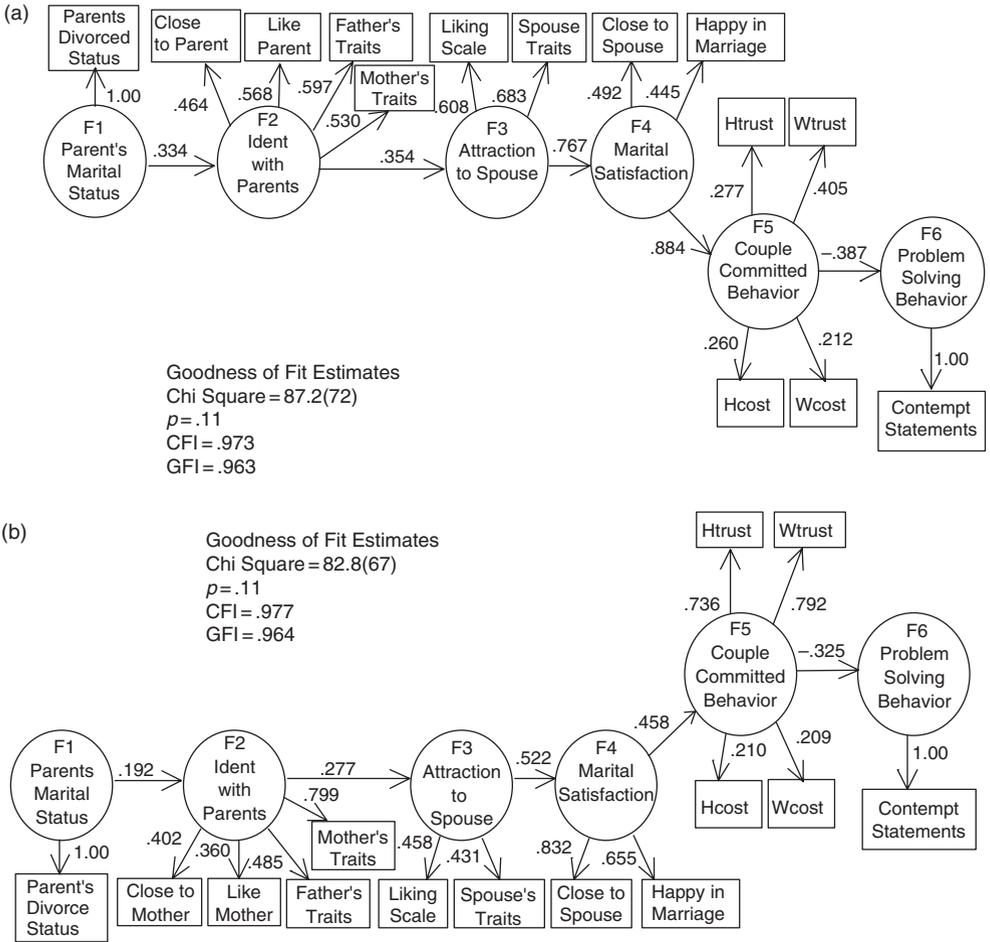
FIGURE 5-2. (a) Husband's wave 1 Measurement Model indicating goodness of fit with theoretical model, as well as strength of relationships between factors and between factors and measured variables. All reported standardized coefficients are significant at $p < .05$. (b) Wive's wave 1 Measurement Model indicating goodness of fit with theoretical model, as well as strength of relationships between factors and between factors and measured variables. All reported standardized coefficients are significant at $p < .05$.

Wave 2 and wave 3 data yielded similar results to those reported for wave 1 with the important exception that the path between the identification with parents factor (F2) and the attraction to spouse factor (F3) was no longer significant for either husbands or wives.* This lack of significance did not influence the overall "goodness of fit" of the models;† nor did it

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*The standardized coefficients for these paths were very low. For husbands they were: 0.06 and −0.101 for wave 2 and 3 respectively. For wives they were 0.004 for wave 2 and 0.027 for wave 3. Figures and complete data for waves 2 and 3 are not presented to conserve space.

†The goodness of fit estimates are as follows: for wave 2: Husbands' Chi Square = 73.3 (62) p = 0.16, CFI = .998; Wives' Chi Square = 71.6(67) p = 0.32 CFI = .998; for Wave 3: Husbands' Chi Square = 79.2(62) p = 0.07, CFI = 0.997. Wives' Chi Square = 86.4 (68) p = 0.07, CFI = 0.996.

alter the significant relationship between the paths representing the hypothesized commitment process and its effect on minimizing contemptuous statements.

Given this finding, I explored whether "Parents' Marital Status" (F1) might have a direct influence on any of the commitment factors without the mediating influence of the "Identification with Parents" Factor. I also explored whether significant paths or adequate fits could be obtained by linking the "identification with parents" factor to "marital satisfaction" (F4), "committed behavior" (F5), or directly to the problem solving factor (F6). None of these analyses yielded significant findings. It appears that after a year of marriage parental influences on the factors pertaining to the marital relationship are greatly reduced. These data, along with other recent findings (Tallman et al., 1999) suggest that as couples increasingly rely on their exchanges and interactions for personal and collective benefits, their assessment of their partners depends more on the results of those exchanges and less on parental or other outside influences.

The other result from the wave 2 and wave 3 models worth noting is the extremely high standardized path coefficients between factors 3, 4, and 5. This finding suggests that the factors hypothesized to form a commitment process are so closely related that they seem to represent a single construct. I tested this notion by doing a confirmatory factor analysis in which all of the measured indicators for the 3 factors representing the commitment process in this model could be combined to form a single factor. I included measures of both husbands and wives for this single test. The results strongly supported that conclusion (Chi Square = 17.8 (14) $p = 0.22$ CFI = 0.994, GFI = 0.989). I have used the model depicted in Figure 5-1 in this report however, because the theory tested here considers commitment as a process involving a series of choices and evaluations rather than a single decision, behavior, or orientation. The data demonstrate rather clearly that, for all three waves, the hypothesized process of commitment is linked to couples' restraint in the use of contemptuous statements as they go about resolving their most serious disagreements.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The vast majority of the couples who participated in this study can be considered as part of the vanguard of the post baby-boomer generation. This generation, like their parents before them, is confronted with changing social structural conditions that require novel and unanticipated behavioral adaptations. One important aspect of these structural changes is the growing relevance of women's labor force participation for the economies of the United States and other industrial societies. The increased opportunities for women in the educational and occupational spheres has produced serious challenges to traditional norms governing gender relationships both in the work place and the family. Although the established norms appear to many as anachronistic, no new agreed upon set of behavioral standards has been integrated into our social fabric.

Under these conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty, marital disagreements are inevitable. How and when couples confront and deal with these disagreements have profound implications for the long-term satisfaction and stability of the marital relationship. Dealing with these disagreements is particularly important during the transition from singlehood to marriage. It is during this period that the marriage partners are faced with the task of merging their individual goals and desires with the need to forge and maintain a viable and mutually satisfying marital unit. There is a consistent body of evidence suggesting that the effectiveness

with which couples deal with their problems during the first two years of marriage influences the long-term stability of the union. In this chapter I have attempted to identify some key elements and conditions that contribute to couples' abilities to resolve their problems during these early years of marriage.

The study reported above is limited to an investigation of marital partners' efforts to resolve rather than cope with their interpersonal problems. Such efforts begin with the couples' mutual acknowledgment about the nature of their disagreements. Disagreements, tend to arouse feelings of disappointment and at least some frustration on the part of the partners. Spouses' abilities or willingness to exercise control over the expression of these emotions, while working at resolving their differences, has been shown to be an essential component of effective problem solving in marital relationships. The model developed and tested for this study was designed to account for the antecedent conditions that contributed to spouses' abilities to practice such control.

The model depicted in Figure 5-1 sought to account for two primary influences, one emanating from respondents' experiences with their parents and the other pertaining to dispositions affecting the partners' commitment to the relationship. The essential underlying premise was that the more committed the partners were to the relationship, the less likely they would be to use hostile and accusatory speech when confronting their disagreements.

The model was tested with longitudinal data from a sample of 198 just married couples that had no children and had not been previously married. Three waves of data were collected over a two-year period. The first interviews and observations occurred within the first month or two of the marriage; two subsequent sets of interviews and observations were repeated at yearly intervals. Structural equation modeling techniques were used to determine the extent to which the theoretical model fit the data. The entire 6-factor model was supported for wave 1 data but the path from the factor representing respondents' identification with the parents (F2) and the attraction factor (F3) was not significant with waves 2 and 3 data. Given these findings I sought to modify the model by exploring whether significant paths could be found for either parent's marital status (F1) or the identification factor (F2) with any of the 3 commitment factors in waves 2 and 3. No significant paths were found.

This lack of association between the "Identification with Parents" factor and the factors leading to marital commitment in waves 2 and 3 suggests a tendency for couples to separate themselves from parental influences early in the marriage. Even within wave 1 data, these associations were weaker, albeit significant, than the linkages between the other factors in the model. This was especially true for wives; whose path coefficients between "parental identification" and "attraction to spouse" were considerably lower than those of husbands. The finding is at least suggestive that the women in this sample evidenced a distancing from traditional family ties that is greater than that experienced by their husbands. It also suggests that in this era of rapid social change the parental experiences and knowledge are perceived as less relevant than might have been the case in earlier eras.

Unlike the indicators of parental influence, the sequence of factors representing the commitment process—"attraction", "satisfaction", "committed behavior"—maintained the same directional pattern over the three waves of data collection. Moreover, the relationship between the "committed behavior" factor (F5) and effective problem-solving behavior, as indicated by restraint in the use of contemptuous statements (F6) was significant for all 3 waves of data collection. In brief, although parental influences on the marital commitment process appear to decline within the first year of marriage, the hypothesized relationship

between the commitment process and effective problem-solving behavior is maintained over the entire two years of the study.

Paradoxically there are data, not reported in this chapter, demonstrating that all 6 measured variables contributing to the commitment factors declined in value over the two-year period.* This is not altogether surprising. The factor most often studied in family research is marital satisfaction, and declines in measures of this variable are frequently reported for couples in the early years of marriage (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998; Kurdek, 1998). It is likely that, with increased experience, spouses lose some of the romantic halo that colors their perceptions during the first months of marriage. The data reported here suggest however that, even in the light of more realistic assessments of their partners' attributes, the couples that maintain the most positive perceptions of these attributes are more likely to stay committed to the marital relationship and, consequently, are best able to deal effectively with their marital problems (see Kurdek, 1998 for evidence regarding the importance of *rate* of decline as an indicator of marital distress as opposed to absolute differences).

There is another possible explanation for the finding that declining scores in the measures contributing to the commitment factors do not change the overall patterns of findings. The conception of commitment proposed here is based in part on the premise that with each phase of the process couples grow more dependent upon one another. Increased interdependency increases the sense of loss if the marriage were dissolved. Consequently, the desire to resolve marital disagreements should be high and the tendency toward relationship-damaging statements during those disagreements would be curtailed. Thus, as interdependency grows, the stability of the marital relationship should increase even if the factors contributing to commitment do not increase.

The findings pertaining to parental influences are of special interest given the importance placed on early childhood experiences in the developmental literature. A reasonable interpretation of the available data is that modes of relating in intimate relationships that were learned in childhood play a significant role in influencing the early course of such relationships in adulthood. Thus, early experiences in the family of origin should affect an individual's chances of forming and maintaining successful marital relationships. The data reported here and elsewhere, however, raise the possibility that proximate intimate relationships with one's partner can become sufficiently important even in the first few years of marriage to overcome such early childhood influences (Tallman et al., 1999, 2001). This suggests that the assertion that "the first years last forever",[†] which has been extrapolated from brain research and the research of developmental psychologists influenced by attachment theory, has been overdrawn. The brain, despite the massive pruning of synapses that takes place in early childhood, remains a "plastic" instrument capable of adaptations throughout life. It may be more difficult to change or relearn behavioral patterns in adulthood, but as the noted developmental psychologists Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff, and Patricia Kuhl state, "Even as adults the process of making new connections, pruning old ones, and generating new brain cells continues to go on" (Gopnik et al., 1999: 189; see also Bruer, 1999: 174–180). The data presented in this chapter suggest that a parallel process can take place in developing marital relationships.

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*These data and other descriptive statistics of the variables used in this study are available on request.
[†]The phrase is used facetiously by Bruer (1999: 54).

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