

A Psychological Perspective: Marriage and the Social Provisions of Relationships

The drive to establish connection and intimacy with another person is powerful. This is true among heterosexual and nonheterosexual people, among members of all ethnic and racial groups, and among persons at all levels on the socioeconomic ladder. This drive for connection and intimacy exists among those who want children and those who do not. It exists among those temperamentally suited to be good partners and those who are not.

THE PROVISIONS OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

What do we seek in our quest for close connection with another? Robert Weiss (1974) described six different relationship *provisions*. It is useful to view these provisions as a starting point from which to consider the changes in the status of marriage so compellingly described in the invited papers in this issue. By focusing on the provisions that we gain from relationships, I shift the question from “Is the retreat from marriage good or bad?” to “In the context of the current retreat from marriage, how can people gain what they need from relationships?”

The first provision described by Weiss (1974) is *attachment*, emotional bonding from which one derives security. The sexual bond may be included in this provision. The next is

reassurance of worth, assurance that the individual is viewed as competent and as a person of value. The third provision is *guidance*, the availability of advice and information when it is needed. The fourth is *reliable alliance*, knowledge that the other can be trusted to provide help and tangible assistance in times of need. The fifth is *social integration*, a sense of shared values, interests, and companionship. The last is the *opportunity to provide nurturance*, being needed by another for love and care.

The articles in this series document that people are pursuing these interpersonal goals outside the institution of marriage. One could argue that some people have retreated from marriage because it did not offer them one or more of Weiss's six relational provisions. For example, the high rates of divorce undermine perceptions of marriage as a source of attachment security. Traditional gendered marital roles that placed women in a subservient position deprived women of reassurance of worth (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). In past generations, greater rewards were provided for performing the roles of wife and mother, but in the current context, less value is placed upon these roles (Cherlin, 2004). Other sources of reassurance of worth, such as achievement in the workplace, may be viewed as less available for women within the confines of marriage. For low-income women, the changing structure of the labor market and the decrease in high-paying production jobs made it difficult to find men who offered reliable alliance in the form of

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regular contributions to household income (Huston & Melz, 2004; Oropesa & Landale). For low-income men, lack of employment opportunities may highlight their inability to support a family, depriving them of self-respect and reassurance of worth from their partner.

According to Huston and Melz (2004), marriage is viewed as more self-defining than cohabitation. Marriage represents a public statement regarding one's identity. Thus, gaps in social provisions offered by a marriage may be viewed as more significant than the same gaps in the context of cohabitation. When they are not married, people may define themselves less in relation to their partners and more in relation to their own merits and assets. Marriage is a more binding union than cohabitation (Cherlin, 2004). A cohabiting individual may still be seeking the "SuperRelationship" with a true soul mate described by Cherlin.

WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN?

The needs of children cannot be neglected in a discussion of the extent to which marriage meets important human needs. Weiss's six provisions are also useful as a way of thinking about what children need from their families. Developmental psychologists view secure attachment to the primary caregiver as a crucial component of healthy development (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1970). Reassurance of worth is a cornerstone of self-esteem development in children (Kernis, Brown, & Brody, 2000; Scott et al., 1991). Throughout the rearing and socialization process, children require guidance from parents. Children are completely dependent upon parents to meet their material needs, so reliable alliance is important. Social integration, a feeling of belonging to a network of similar others, is an important aspect of family membership (Cohen & Westhues, 1995; Mandelbaum, 1969). The opportunity to provide nurturance is less relevant to young children than to adults, although it certainly emerges in later life when aging parents require assistance from adult children.

Although adults may benefit from impermanent relationships, children generally do not. For an adult, there may be little harm from terminating a romantic relationship that lacks one or more valued provisions. The individual may in fact benefit because a more satisfactory relationship may be found to replace that which

was terminated. In the absence of children, a pattern of serial monogamy may meet psychological needs for some people, especially if relationships last long enough to reach a significant level of intimacy and comfortable companionship (i.e., 5 or more years).

Current wisdom would not view such a pattern as optimal for a child, however (Amato & Booth, 1997). Continuity of caregivers is important for optimal development (Essa, Favre, Thweatt, & Waugh, 1999; Raikes, 1993). When a parent leaves the home, it is not because the child and parent have reached a mutual agreement to go their separate ways. ("You know, Dad, I think we should take a break and see less of each other for a while. I just don't have the same feelings for you that I used to.") The departure of a parent is not in response to the child's fading love for that parent. Children typically experience the departure of a parent as a loss. Children also experience a significant drop in financial resources upon a parent's departure, thus exposing them to a range of additional stressors (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1998).

Are the needs of adults and children thus in direct conflict? Perhaps on some dimensions, they are. A move toward less stable relationships among childbearing couples is problematic, within the context of either marriage or cohabitation. To the extent that marriage is a more stable relationship than cohabitation, the retreat from marriage among childbearing couples is problematic. If childbearing cohabitation becomes increasingly stable relative to marriage, as appears to be the trend in Quebec (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004), the trend away from marriage may be neutral with respect to the welfare of children. The instability of childbearing unions more generally merits consideration, however.

The question I pose is, What can be done to increase the social provisions available, over the life course, to both adults and their offspring? One consideration must be the needs of children for continuity of caregivers. At the same time, consideration must be given to the needs of children and adults to live in an environment that provides a favorable balance between positive and negative interpersonal transactions (Huston & Melz, 2004). In other words, our goal should be relationships that provide a larger portion of the six social provisions described by Weiss (1974) than of strife, criticism, and

isolation, and to secure this positive balance for both adults and their children.

KEY ISSUES

Economic Disadvantage and Families

Virtually all of the contributors to the special issue highlighted the damage wrought upon close relationships by economically deprived communities that offer few opportunities for stable employment and a decent income. The scarcity of male partners who can contribute to family support was cited as one reason for the low marriage rates in impoverished communities (Cherlin, 2004; Huston & Melz, 2004; Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Bradbury and Karney (2004) argue that the chronic stress of residence in an economically disadvantaged community erodes relationship quality and serves to amplify the negative impact of acute life events on relationships. Bradbury and Karney and Huston and Melz both argue that community economic development and investments in *human capital* through education, job training, drug rehabilitation, and health care may be the most cost-effective approach to strengthening family relationships. This argument has great appeal, but implementation would require national mobilization—a new “war on poverty”—to raise the nation’s standard of living. Sizeable economic rewards for locating businesses in impoverished neighborhoods, increased need-based financial aid for education, and economic incentives linked to the completion of education and vocational training among low-income youth are all potentially effective approaches to improving our standard of living and supporting stable family units.

Separating Parenthood From Partnership

Because the stability of childbearing partnerships is of particular importance, it would be highly desirable to foster even greater separation between the decision to engage in an intimate relationship with another adult and the decision to bear a child. Happily, the rate of adolescent childbearing is decreasing in the United States (Klerman, 2002), although much more could be done to promote effective birth control. In Iowa and other states, contraception is not covered in the required high school health

class. Thus, youth are deprived of information that would help them make childbearing a deliberate choice. Experiments with in-school health clinics that include contraceptive services have shown promising results (Bearss & Santelli, 1995; Edwards, Steinman, Arnold, & Hakanson, 1980), although many school-based health clinics have been forbidden by school boards from providing contraceptive services (Santelli et al., 2003). Contrary to popular belief, school-based clinics and condom availability programs do not increase sexual activity (Kirby, 2002). We must further decrease accidental and impulsive pregnancies and teach youth the importance of bringing children into stable households of married, cohabiting, heterosexual, gay or lesbian, or single parents who have prepared for their arrival and who have made a serious commitment to provide continuity in their world. Even if childbearing couples do not ultimately stay together, they must view their commitment to the child as permanent. For example, preventive interventions should teach long-term *coparenting* roles to parents whose personal relationship with each other has ended.

PREVENTIVE AND REPARATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Is Personality Destiny?

Bradbury and Karney (2004) and Huston and Melz (2004) both offer thought-provoking critiques of the prevailing approach to marital intervention. Both articles were critical of the current focus on conflict-resolution skills as the locus of preventive and reparative marital interventions. Huston and Melz’s view was particularly provocative: Huston’s research has led him to believe that good marriages require good people—that the stable personality traits of the two individuals determine whether their partnership will succeed. People with “good hearts” and low anxiety have stable and satisfying marriages. “Good heartedness” appears to be a mixture of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and a secure attachment style. I might ask where this leaves the rest of the population. If we believe that personality is relatively stable and not easily changed, Huston and Melz’s stance offers little hope for either preventive or reparative interventions. Huston and Melz’s answer is straightforward: If stable characteristics of individuals make or break relationships, people

need to choose their partners carefully. The logical extension of their stance is that preventive interventions should be targeted to young people—before they are married—and they should concentrate on how to select a good mate. Qualities of people who make good partners (e.g., conscientiousness, kindness, low anxiety) would be discussed, and qualities of good relationships (e.g., frequent and mutual provision of attachment, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, guidance, social integration, and the opportunity to provide nurturance) would be examined.

Can Rational Mate Selection Be Taught?

Unfortunately, research by Berscheid and Walster (1974) and others reveals that the intervention described above might work as a guide to selecting a best friend, but it is largely irrelevant to the selection of a romantic partner. Rational social exchange theory principles of rewards and costs apply nicely to the choice and maintenance of friendships, but romantic love defies all principles of reinforcement! Passionate love is fueled both by pleasure and by pain (Berscheid & Walster; Walster & Berscheid, 1971), and does not lend itself to sensible considerations of social provisions or earning potential. Calculated marriages certainly occur, but as noted by Cherlin (2004) and Huston and Melz, our society idealizes passionate love between “soul mates.” In certain social classes, men have found a soul mate in their paramour and a sensible life partner in their wife. This option was never socially acceptable for women, however, and would probably not be well received as a general recommendation for increasing the stability of marital relationships.

Personality as a Context for Intervention

One can defend a less deterministic role for personality in marital outcomes than that articulated by Huston and Melz (2004). According to work by Bradbury and Karney (2004) and Karney and Bradbury (1997), personality defines a starting point for marital trajectories. In their work with newlyweds, personality traits correlated with current level of marital satisfaction. For example, newlyweds who were high on negative affectivity were less satisfied with their relationships than those who were low on negative affectivity. The observed behaviors of

newlywed couples, however, rather than personality traits, predicted the rate of change over time in marital satisfaction. Bradbury and Karney fault the social learning approach to marital intervention for ignoring individual difference variables, but they view personality as a context in which to consider behavior, not as an inevitable determinant of marital outcomes. Given that skill level is more readily altered than personality, skill building remains a reasonable strategy for slowing the deterioration and sustaining the quality of marital or cohabiting relationships.

Because individual differences provide a context or starting point for the unfolding of marital relationships over time, we must understand the manner in which personality affects receptivity to interventions that strive to alter behavior (i.e., interactions between personality and responses to intervention). Bradbury and Karney (2004) suggest that effective intervention strategies should be tailored to the characteristics of program participants. This tailoring occurs in the office of every competent marital therapist who treats distressed couples. It is more difficult to achieve, however, in the context of preventive interventions, many of which are designed for broad applicability to unselected populations. An example of this kind of *universal* or *primary* prevention was cited by Huston and Melz (2004), in which Oklahoma delivers marital education based on the curriculum of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) developed by Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, and Clements (1993).

An alternative strategy is offered by Bradbury and Karney (2004) for tailoring preventive interventions to individual needs. They suggest that experiences in one’s family of origin, especially parental divorce, shape attitudes and behaviors relevant to marital success. Of course, most marital therapies (other than strict behavioral approaches) are built on this assumption, and therapists spend considerable time and effort elucidating links between the marriage of one’s parents and one’s current marital functioning. The challenge is to meet the special needs of specific subpopulations in preventive interventions. A more cost-effective approach than universal preventive intervention may be *selective* or *secondary* prevention, in which populations known to have specific risk factors for marital dysfunction are targeted for intervention. Bradbury and Karney argue that, just as public health programs target those with known

risk factors for disease (e.g., obesity, smoking, high cholesterol), preventive intervention programs should be made available to those with known risk factors for relationship dysfunction, such as parental divorce. Some combination of universal educational programs through the schools and more targeted selective preventive interventions offered by community organizations (YMCAs, PTAs, community colleges, community health clinics, churches) would probably prove beneficial.

Targets for Intervention

In our fantasy world, where funding is readily available for broad dissemination of preventive interventions to foster marital and relationship success, we are mindful that if we are to fulfill our societal responsibility, our interventions must be based on empirical research. Bradbury and Karney's (2004) contribution to this special issue attempts to apply the results of longitudinal research on marriage to preventive interventions. I highlight three of their major conclusions. First, exclusive focus on the prevention of destructive conflict behaviors, as promoted by some behaviorally oriented marital researchers, is clearly incomplete. Bradbury's research (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) shows that interaction quality in prosocial transactions, such as confiding a personal worry to one's spouse, predicts the course of marital satisfaction over time. I have found similar results in my own research (Cutrona, Russell, & Krebs, 2002). In both Bradbury's research and my own, the predictive significance of observed social support behavior is maintained even after controlling for negative behaviors during conflict-resolution tasks. Huston and Melz (2004) have found that a decline in love and affection, rather than an increase in strife, is the best predictor of marital dissolution. Clearly, an exclusive focus on improving conflict-resolution skills will not enhance social support nor fan the flames of love. There is a clear need for methods that will not only decrease destructive conflict but also will increase the store of social provisions and enjoyment that people derive from their relationships. Bradbury and his colleagues are currently testing a preventive intervention that includes a much larger dose of social support skill building than previous interventions (Rogge, Cobb, Johnson, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2002).

Compensation for Skill Deficits

A second point that I highlight from Bradbury and Karney's (2004) application of basic research on marriage to the design of preventive interventions is their finding that qualities such as positive affect can compensate for deficits in specific skills. The power of positive affect is reminiscent of Huston and Melz's observation (2004) that good-hearted people make good marriages. Clumsiness or lack of sensitivity in communication can be neutralized by humility, laughter, and basic kindness. Positive affect probably neutralizes negative behavior because of its influence on attributional processes. When negative behavior is attributed to a partner's current stressful life conditions or lack of opportunity to learn good conflict-negotiation skills from parents, a thoughtless comment has much less impact than when it is attributed to malice (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). My own research has shown that social support exchanges within marital relationships build trust over time, and that trust contributes to benign attributions for negative spouse behaviors (Cutrona, Russell, & Gardner, in press). Intervention strategies that protect the emergence and growth of trust may be a valuable addition to those that promote communication and negotiation skill. They may also make it less important whether people attain a high level of communication skill because failures will be attributed to benign factors.

Protection Against the Deleterious Effects of Stressful Life Events

The destructive influence of stressful life events on marital relationships is the third contribution that I highlight from Bradbury and Karney's (2004) application of empirical research to preventive intervention design. Bradbury and colleagues (Bradbury & Karney; Cohan & Bradbury, 1997) cite research that both chronic and acute negative life events are damaging to marital quality. In recognition of this phenomenon, a new generation of preventive interventions, which explicitly try to slow stress-related marital decay, are under development. A unique preventive intervention, Couples Coping Enhancement Training (CCET), was designed in Switzerland to prepare couples to deal with stressful events before they actually experience them (Widmer, Cina, Charvoz, Shantinath, & Bodenmann, in press). CCET integrates

cognitive-behavioral approaches with concepts from theories of stress and coping. Communication training includes both traditional components (e.g., clear communication, nondestructive conflict) and units on how to *protect* communication quality when it is challenged by stressful life events. Couples learn about their own and their partner's preferred coping techniques and how to recognize potential clashes that may result from differences in their coping styles. CCET has showed preliminary evidence of effectiveness, although it has not yet been subjected to a randomized trial (Widmer et al., in press). A similar intervention, the Partners in Coping Program, was designed to prevent marital decline among couples in which the wife has been diagnosed with breast cancer (Kayser, in press). Other promising interventions that strive to prevent stress-related decline in marital quality include Devilly's (2002) program for war veterans and their spouses, and programs for couples in which one partner is HIV positive (Pakenham, Dadds, & Lennon, 2002; Pomeroy, Green, & Van Laningham, 2002).

MAXIMIZING RELATIONSHIP PROVISIONS

I have argued that the crucial question is not, "What is the future of marriage?" but rather, "How can we maximize access to needed social provisions among both children and adults?" Integrating across all seven invited articles, five answers emerged. The first answer, prominent in all of the articles, is to work systematically as a society to decrease the economic conditions that have proved so devastating to family life in impoverished neighborhoods. In the United States, the retreat from marriage is greatest among low-income individuals. On many levels, it appears that the poor simply cannot afford to bind their fate to another in the current economic context. The second answer is to further distance the desire for an intimate relationship with another adult from the commitment required to raise a child. A stable coparenting union is a desirable context for optimal child development. Marriage has become a deliberate decision rather than the default. Childbearing should follow suit. Life course choices that do not include childbearing should be more acceptable, and the social welfare system should reward self-sufficiency among low-income youth rather than assigning dollars based exclu-

sively on the number of dependent children. Preoccupation with adolescent virginity should be overshadowed by public policies that prevent the conception of unwanted children who have little chance of a secure future. Much as marriage has become a "capstone" achievement, so also should childbearing be delayed until a secure couple relationship (same-sex or opposite-sex) or network of caregivers (e.g., a single woman and her family and friends) has been established, financial security has been secured, and a true lifelong commitment can be made to the child.

The final solutions concern preventive interventions that could better equip men and women in their pursuit of rewarding relationships. Some authors suggested universal interventions that teach basic relationship skills in the schools. One component of such interventions should be mate selection, although I am skeptical regarding the success of attempts to make rational what appears to be a largely irrational selection process. Skill-building interventions should emphasize techniques not only for avoiding destructive relationship conflict but also for enriching one another with all of the social provisions described by Weiss (1974), and for enjoying the privilege of sharing one's life with another person. Relationship classes should include healthy role models of gay and lesbian relationships, to bolster the self-regard of sexual minority youth, and to chip away at prejudices that reduce homosexuality to one-dimensional sexual liaisons, ignoring the multidimensionality of a loving lifelong same-sex commitment. High-risk groups, including those whose parents divorced or who modeled high-conflict low-nurturance relationships, should have access to preventive interventions that expose them to alternative models of long-term partnerships (i.e., the possibility of caring and nurturance and respect). "Attributional leniency"—fostering more benign attributions for careless or hurtful partner behaviors—may be possible once preconceptions from childhood are separated from the actual reality of one's partner. Finally, preventive interventions should be available to couples who face specific high-stress situations, such as the diagnosis of serious illness, problem behavior in a child, or unemployment. Such interventions should give couples explicit tools to protect their relationships as they cope together with adversity.

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