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A Prospective Longitudinal Study of Marriage from Midlife to Later Life

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Abstract

This prospective longitudinal study explores the relationship between marital functioning at midlife and in later life as measured by global coding of marital interaction process. Couples participated in home interviews at midlife, then again 25 years later. During home interviews at both waves couples completed a questionnaire describing their family, then discussed differences of opinion about the family. Marital system variables were coded by trained coders from taped discussions. Coded measures of the marital interaction supported a relationship between midlife and later life marriage. Connection at midlife was positively related to warmth/support and clear interpersonal boundaries in later life; more connection at midlife was also related to less depression in later life. More individuation at midlife was associated with less conflict in later life. Evidence was also found for enhanced marital functioning in later life: more warmth/support, clearer interpersonal boundaries, more comfort with differences, and less covert conflict.

Keywords

marriage; later life marriage; healthy marriage; prospective longitudinal; interaction process; connection; individuation

This prospective longitudinal study explores the relationship between marital functioning at midlife and marital functioning in later life as measured by the coding of marital interaction process. Couples participated in home interviews at midlife, then again 25 years later. During home interviews at both waves couples completed a questionnaire describing their family, then discussed differences of opinion about the family. Discussions were coded on global scales. Marital functioning is defined here by connection and individuation in the marital relationship. Connection processes focus on affection and a supportive family climate, nurturing trust and self esteem. Individuation focuses on respect and clear interpersonal boundaries within the family, nurturing personal autonomy and self differentiation. Two questions are addressed. Is there continuity from midlife to later life in marital functioning? Is there evidence for increased or decreased functioning from midlife to later life?

Continuity and discontinuity of marital functioning over time has been a major focus of social science research (rBadbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Gilford & Bengtson, 1979;

Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Noller & Feeney, 2002) although almost all longitudinal research using interaction process has focused on early marriage. Studies evaluating communication process in early marriage have found continuity over several years (T. Bradbury, 1998). There is an established relationship between marital communication and marital satisfaction in early marriage (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990) and support for the negative effects of conflict (Noller & Feeney, 1998).

Marital communication in general is related to quality of life. There is support for a relationship between quality of marital communication and marital satisfaction (Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2016; Lorenz, Hraba, & Pechacova, 2001). A high quality of dyadic interaction has been shown to be associated with the marital satisfaction of women (Schmitt, Kliegel, & Shapiro, 2007). Couple communication process is related to conflict resolution and relationship quality (Overall & McNulty, 2017). Marital quality is also associated with parenting and child well-being (Tanner Stapleton & Bradbury, 2012). Marital support and effective problem-solving skills are associated with resilience to economic adversity (Conger & Conger, 2002).

Marital functioning is also associated with physical health (Miller, Hollist, Olsen, & Law, 2013; Proulx & Snyder-Rivas, 2013; Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014; Walker & Luszcz, 2009). Health of a partner can influence marital conflict; wives report higher levels of conflict when husbands' health is poor (Iveniuk, Waite, Laumann, McClintock, & Tiedt, 2014). A higher quality of marital satisfaction in later life is also associated with subjective wellbeing (Carr, Freedman, Cornman, & Schwartz, 2014).

As people are living longer, there are more and more later life marriages. Thus there has been increasing research interest in couples from midlife to later life (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2000). Later life is associated with greater emotional empathy and more pro-social behavior, defined as willingness to contribute to charities (Sze, Gyurak, Goodkind, & Levenson, 2012). Greater empathy could suggest increased marital functioning in later life. Research also suggests that older couples experience more positivity than midlife couples (Smith et al., 2009). Marital interaction studies with older couples find more affective positivity (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994), less conflict and a greater potential for pleasure than in middle-age couples (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). This may be due to the increased stressors involved in career and child rearing at midlife. Later life couples report lower amounts of disagreement than mid-life couples in areas such as money, religion, recreation, and children (Levenson et al., 1993). In older couples, conflict appears to be less emotionally negative and more affectionate than in middle-aged couples (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995).

Some researchers have found that quality of marital satisfaction decreases with time, particularly after the birth of children (Perren, Von Wyl, Burgin, Simoni, & Von Klitzing, 2005); others, that it increases (Carstensen et al., 1995; Gorchoff, 2016). The trajectory of marital satisfaction may well be curvilinear, decreasing during the child-raising years and increasing afterward, perhaps mediated by depression (Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1996; Gagnon, Hersen, Kabacoff, & Van Hasselt, 1999). As most of the research evaluating marital quality or satisfaction over time has been grounded on cross-sectional studies, some

results may be spurious and reflect primarily cohort effects (Glenn, 1998; VanLangingham & Johnson, 2001). That is different cohorts were measured at the same point in time. The current study helps address this issue as it includes one cohort measured at two points in time, midlife and later life.

Systemic Model

The measures used here to evaluate the couple's relationship are connection and individuation. They are measured by coding interaction process. Connection processes focus on affection and a supportive family climate, nurturing trust and self esteem. Individuation focuses on respect and clear interpersonal boundaries within the family, nurturing personal autonomy and self differentiation (Author et al. 2005).

Researchers and theorists acknowledge the importance of connection, individuation, and related concepts for understanding the family-individual interface (Benson & Deal, 1995). Connection and individuation are sometimes described as independent processes (D. C. Bell & Bell, 1983; Bengtson & Grotevant, 1999; Grotevant & Cooper, 1998; mamolu, 2004). However, they have often been conceptualized as opposite ends of one continuum, with a midrange balance between connection and individuation seen as the healthier position (Minuchin, 1974; Olson, 1993). Adolescents develop both individuation and connection with respect to their parents, with well-functioning young people reporting a close connection with parents while at the same time demonstrating high levels of autonomy and individuation (Apter, 1990; Cooper, 1999; Grotevant & Cooper, 1998; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). While connection and individuation are often empirically related, they are conceptualized here as separate and complementary processes (see Figure 1); couple and family systems can be high on one and low on the other (Author et al., 2007).

Connection

Individuals have a fundamental need to be cherished and nurtured (Bakan, 1966; McAdams, 1989). The basis for this need is an attachment circuit in the brains of all mammals; in humans, the attachment circuit motivates the desire for physical contact and emotional support (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The complementary process of caregiving is motivated by a separate brain circuit (D. C. Bell, 2001; Panksepp, 1998). The dynamic complementarity of the caregiving matched with attachment creates a connection relationship based on warmth, trust, and active positive dependency (Doi, 1981; Stern, 1985). Marriage and family systems have a warm, accepting climate.

Family members who receive caregiving from others that is empathic and responsive to their needs have internal working models that enable them to be open and secure in relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; George & Solomon, 1999; Heard & Lake, 1997). With security and support comes an optimism toward life (Berman & Sperling, 1994). Higher levels of support (caring, closeness, affection) lead to higher self esteem, more social competence, and better psychological adjustment.

Individuation

Just as people have a need to be cherished and nurtured, they also have a need to be autonomous and effective (Erikson, 1963). As toddlers begin to be capable of independent action, most parents partially refocus their caregiving actions on the child's needs for autonomy and effectiveness (Brazelton & Cramer, 1990; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). The dynamic complementarity of caregiving with self-efficacy is referred to as an individuation relationship. Marriage and family systems include clear interpersonal boundaries. In less individuated systems conflict is covert, as individuals are uncomfortable with difference and disagreement.

To the extent that a marital or family system has clear interpersonal boundaries where members are encouraged to think for themselves, speak for themselves, and accept others' differences, individuals demonstrate a capacity for autonomous action and an ability to direct their efforts effectively toward mastering the environment (Bowen, 1978; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Individuation increases as one's assertion of ideas and feelings is met by validation and acknowledgement and as mates are comfortable with individuality and with differences between them (D. C. Bell & Bell, 1983; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Clear interpersonal boundaries support a differentiated self and personal autonomy (Karpel, 1976; Stierlin, 1976). To the extent that a relationship has clear interpersonal boundaries and self efficacy needs are recognized, individuals will be encouraged to think for themselves, speak for themselves, and accept others' differences. People can develop a differentiated self and a capacity for autonomous action, learning how to direct their efforts effectively toward mastering the environment (Bohlander, 1999; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000).

Contributions of the Current Study

This prospective longitudinal study makes a contribution to the study of marriage by evaluating marital relationships at midlife, then again in later life on measures of connection and individuation. Comparisons were within a single cohort so that actual change could be evaluated. Marital interaction was recorded, then coded on global scales. The progression from midlife to later life marital functioning is examined. We looked both at continuity between midlife and later life marital functioning and at changes in functioning from midlife to later life.

Hypotheses

1. There will continuity in marital functioning from midlife to later life.
2. There will be improved marital functioning from midlife to later life.

METHOD

This study explores the relationship between marital functioning at midlife and marital functioning in later life within a single cohort. Couples participated in home interviews at midlife, then again in later life. Home interviews were held in the mid 1970s with 99 U.S. couples; 42 of the then elder couples were re-interviewed 25 years later. During the

interviews couples completed a questionnaire describing their family, then discussed differences of opinion about the family. Marital system characteristics were coded from the taped discussions by individuals trained in systems theory. The same group of coders coded both Wave 1 and Wave 2 interactions; an individual coder never coded the same couple at both waves. The coded measures were used to compare the marital systems at midlife and later life.

Sample

Wave 1 Sample (1975–76)—Structured home interviews were conducted with 99 couples and their families at midlife. All couples had adolescent children; the relationships between family functioning and adolescent development was a primary focus of the original study. However, during the Wave 1 home interview, the couple interview preceded the family interview. This was a white, middle-class, non-clinical sample (Author et al., 2005). Subjects were recruited through one of three high schools in one suburban district. For the most part, the couples studied for this report were born during the Depression and married after World War II. About a fourth of the wives and husbands had at least one parent who was an immigrant from Europe. Husbands were age 38 – 53 (Mean 44.3, SD 3.80); wives were age 38–52 (Mean 42.2, SD 4.07). They had been married at least 16 years and had two or three children, at least one of which was an adolescent. Thirty-six percent of the husbands had graduated college; an additional 54% had completed high school. For the wives, 21% were college graduates; an additional 77% had completed high school.

Wave 2 Sample (2000–02)—Telephone interviews (1998–2002) were conducted with the now older parents. These focused on psychological well-being and adult child/elder parent relationships (Author et al., 2005, 2012). These interviews are not a part of the current study, but set the stage for the later life interviews. At the completion of the telephone interview, couples were asked if they would participate in a home interview. Thirty-nine couples were unable to participate because of the death of one or both of them (N = 15), illness (N = 8), divorce or separation (N = 6), or an inability to schedule because of location (N = 1). Nine couples either refused the telephone interview or completed the telephone interview, but refused the home interview. Of those able to participate, 82% (N= 42) agreed. At Wave 2, the husbands were age 62 – 78 (Mean 69.5, SD 4.15); wives were age 60 – 80 (Mean 67.3, SD 4.28).

Home Interview

Each home interview included a marital revealed difference task (Strodtbeck, 1951). The revealed difference task was based on mates' individual answers to selected items from the Moos Family Environment Scale (R. H. Moos, 1974, 1990). This scale is widely used to describe family functioning and has shown stability over time (R. H. Moos & Moos, 2002). The subscales we used were cohesion, organization, independence, expressiveness, achievement orientation, control, and conflict. After completion of the Moos scale, about 10 items were selected for discussion; the items reflected a variety of subscales on which the mates disagreed. Items were presented one at a time by taking them from an envelope. For each item, it was noted who responded true or false. Couples were asked to discuss the item and try to reach agreement as to the correct answer. They then marked the slip of paper

“true,” “false,” or “no agreement” before moving on to the next item. The interviewer was out of the room during this exercise. At Wave 1 the discussion was audio-taped; at Wave 2 it was videotaped. For both waves, the marital revealed difference exercise was coded for marital system variables, using a global coding scheme, by coders trained in systems theory.

Global coding

Marital system variables were coded from the taped couple interactions using the Global Coding Scheme (GCS: Author et al.). The GCS scales were derived from the Beavers-Timberlawn Family Evaluation Scale (Lewis, Beavers, Gossett, & Phillips, 1976) and the Family Behavioral Snapshot (Meyerstein, 1979). The items of the GCS included measures of mood, warmth, boundaries, comfort with disagreement, conflict, problem-solving ability, communication, and overall marital functioning. All interaction process variables in the GCS were measured at the interval level. Items from the GCS measuring climate and interaction were reduced by theory, factor analysis, and reliability to nine scales (see Table 1). These scales were then tested for both internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) and inter-coder reliability (Pearson correlations). Alpha reliabilities ranged from .68 (clear interpersonal boundaries) to .92 (warmth and support), while inter-coder reliabilities ranged from .44 (depression) to .75 (overt conflict).

The 9 emergent scales were then entered into a second-order principal component analysis for the second step of data reduction. Two components emerged, consisting of connection (warmth/support, depression [-], overt conflict [-], and humor) and individuation (clear interpersonal boundaries, comfort with differences and disagreements, problem solving efficiency, and covert conflict [-]). Alpha reliabilities were .81 for both connection and individuation. Inter-coder reliabilities were .72 for connection and .69 for individuation (Author). An overall measure of marital functioning weighted equally on both connection and individuation.

RESULTS

All scales were centered and standardized. There were no differences between the couples interviewed at both waves and those interviewed only once (at Wave 1) -- on connection or individuation.

Continuity—Using stepwise regressions, later life connection and individuation were each regressed onto midlife connection, individuation and overall marital functioning. Both later life connection ($\beta = .55, p < .001$) and later life individuation ($\beta = .34, p < .05$) were positively related to marital functioning at midlife.

Results of stepwise regressions of specific Wave 2 scales on Wave 1 connection and individuation were as follows. Warmth and support ($\beta = .42, p < .01$) and clear interpersonal boundaries ($\beta = .35, p < .05$) in later life were positively related to connection at midlife. Depression in later life ($\beta = -.39, p < .01$) was negatively related to connection at midlife. Both overt ($\beta = -.40, p < .01$) and covert conflict ($\beta = -.35, p < .05$) in later life were negatively related to individuation at midlife.

Change—Paired t-tests were conducted to see if there was a suggestion of positive or negative change between midlife and later life. Overall, in this sample, there was a positive change in overall marital functioning from midlife to later life ($t = 2.82, p < .01$). Increased marital functioning was reflected in four of the eight subscales: warmth/support ($t = 2.50, p < .05$), clear interpersonal boundaries ($t = 1.78, p < .05$), comfort with differences ($t = 3.16, p < .01$), and (less) covert conflict ($t = -2.47, p < .05$). Depression, humor, overt conflict, and problem solving effectiveness remained constant.

DISCUSSION

The primary focus of this prospective longitudinal study was on connection and individuation processes in the marital system. Couples participated in home interviews at midlife, then again 25 years later. During home interviews couples completed a questionnaire describing their family, the Moos Family Environment Scale, then discussed differences of opinion about the family during a revealed difference task. The marital interactions were coded for marital system variables on global scales. We looked both at continuity between midlife and later life marital functioning and at changes in functioning from midlife to later life.

There were significant relationships between marital functioning at midlife and connection and individuation in later life. In particular, connection at midlife was positively related to warmth/support and clear interpersonal boundaries in later life, and negatively related to depression in later life. Individuation at midlife was negatively related to both overt and covert conflict in later life.

Overall, there was also increased marital functioning from midlife to later life for this cohort. Increase functioning included more warmth/support, clearer interpersonal boundaries, more comfort with differences, and less covert conflict. There was no significant change for depression, humor, overt conflict, or problem solving effectiveness.

The findings of continuity from midlife to later life add to the knowledge base of midlife to later life couples based on a prospective longitudinal design. The findings are also consistent with those who have found that later life marriages are in various ways better functioning than midlife marriages. The findings suggest that some affective qualities (e.g. depression, humor and overt conflict) are stable from midlife to later life. Whereas others, particularly those associated with individuation (e.g. clear interpersonal boundaries, comfort with differences and covert conflict) are areas which can show improvement from midlife to later life. Some aspects of marital interaction and marital quality are probably more grounded in physiology; this may account for lack of improvement in such areas. Depression may be an example of a variable having a stronger physiological component (Bus et al., 2015; Lebowitz, Ahn, & Holen-Hoeksema, 2013).

Limitations—There are several limitations in the reported analyses. The sample was quite homogeneous: white, intact, middle-class, suburban couples. All were married at least 16 years and had 2 or 3 children. This was a non-clinical sample. The homogeneous sample was an intentional design decision, given the small sample size, in order to examine effects

of system process without the confounds of family structure or race- and ethnicity-based cultural differences. The homogeneity of the sample might be expected to have minimized effect sizes. While we expect processes we have identified to be relevant to other families, we cannot speak to the effects of ethnicity, class, or family structure. Midlife interactions were coded using audiotapes and later life interactions were coded using videotapes. Thus method bias could conceivably account for some changes. However, there was no overall pattern or bias, i.e. some scales showed change from midlife to later life while others, like depression and overt conflict, did not.

Strengths—There are several strengths in this research. One of the strengths is the prospective longitudinal design; each couple was interviewed at midlife and again 25 years later. Both interviews took place in their own home, which might have made them more likely to feel “at home” and fall into typical relational patterns. Another strength is that the marital measures were based on behavioral data. Taped marital interaction process was coded by coders trained in systems theory. Observational data can provide an “outsider” perspective and may allow more objective measures because the outside observer will have no motive for presenting the study families in a favorable light. An outside observer can also describe or code actual behavior based on a theory-based “map” not available to those whose behavior is being described (D. C. Bell & Bell, 1989; Hampton, Beavers, & Hulgus, 1989).

At Wave 1, the couples studied for this report had been married at least 16 years and had two or three children, at least one of which was an adolescent. At Wave 2 they were in their 60’s and 70’s. Overall, the study gives evidence both for continuity of marital functioning from midlife to later life and for improvement in several aspects of marital functioning from midlife to later life. It must be remembered that whenever a study such as this is done, even a prospective longitudinal study, it is done with a particular cohort. The cohort for this study was raised in the depression and married after World War II. There will always be cultural and historical differences between generations potentially affecting research comparisons.

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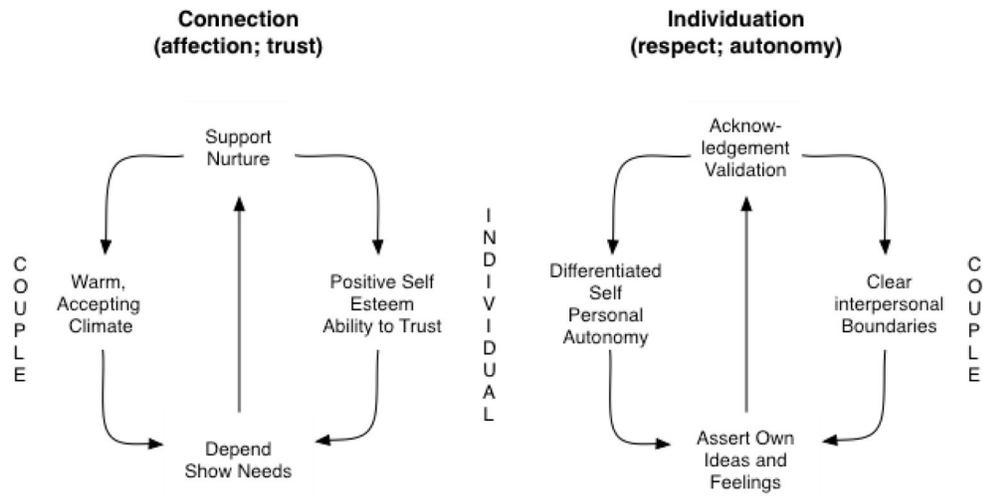


Figure 1.
Connection and Individuation Processes

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TABLE 1

Global Coding Scheme Scales

WARMTH AND SUPPORT

The couple has an atmosphere of openness, comfortableness, optimism & warmth.

Couple's mood is Very Cold ...to...Very Warm.

Couple's mood is Very Rejecting...to...Very Supportive.

Quality of laughter was warm and responsive. (not at all...to...very much).

DEPRESSION

The couple has an atmosphere of depression, sadness, hopelessness.

Couple's mood is Very Sad...to...Very Cheerful.

HUMOR

Couple's use of joking and humor (none/almost none...to...very often).

Amount of laughter (none or almost none...to...very often).

CLEAR INTERPERSONAL BOUNDARIES

In general mates take responsibility for their own actions, feeling, and thoughts, and do not take responsibility for the actions, feelings or thoughts of the other.

The couple has an atmosphere of overly close, stuck, over-concerned with each other (-).

Is the couple's image of themselves is congruent with reality? Do they see themselves as they really are? Very Congruent...to...Very Incongruent.

COMFORT WITH DIFFERENCES AND DISAGREEMENT

Couple seems comfortable with differences or disagreements.

Couple seems to avoid differences and disagreements (-).

OVERT CONFLICT

Overt conflict in the marriage is: Severe, impairs group functioning...to...Little or none.

COVERT CONFLICT

Covert conflict in the marriage is: Severe, impairs group functioning...to...Little or none.

How openly were feelings expressed? Very directly or openly...to...very indirectly or covertly.

Rate couple as to clarity (not intensity) of disclosure of feelings and thoughts. Very Vague & Unclear ... to ... Very Clear.

PROBLEM-SOLVING EFFICIENCY

Couple's efficiency at problem solving (being able to discuss items and arrive at a mutual decision on the right answers). Very Efficient...to...Very Inefficient.

MARITAL FUNCTIONING

Very Non-Functional...to...Very Functional