The Usefulness of a Structured Diary Approach in Studying Marital Relationships

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The importance of studying everyday spousal experiences rests on the assumption that the marital relationship is critical to one’s psychological and physical well-being. Although married persons generally have numerous psychological and social advantages over unmarried persons, much of this may be limited to happily married persons (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986). There is evidence that unhappily married persons are worse off than unmarried people in terms of physical health (Kaplan & DeLongis, 1983) and psychological well-being (Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983). Renne (1970, p. 59) even proposed that an “unhappy marriage is a disability, analogous to minority race, economic deprivation, or physical illness.”

Rusbult (1987, p. 209) has stated that “one of the most important goals in the study of close relationships is to gain an understanding of the manner in which people react to periodic declines in their involvements. No close relationship, no matter how ideal for both partners, maintains uniformly high satisfaction; no close relationship is without its ‘ups and downs.’” She points out that although much is known about how satisfactory close relationships develop, little is known about the manner in which individuals react to these inevitable periodic declines in their relationships. A key difference between marital relationships that either end in divorce, or perhaps worse, in which the partners are chronically dissatisfied with one another, and those that have relatively high satisfaction over time, may lie with the couple’s ability both to recover quickly from the periodic deteriorations...
experienced and to cope with problems that arise in such a way that they do not recur.

A barrier to understanding the role of these minor fluctuations in relationships is the difficulty in studying recurring, everyday marital events systematically. Because minor marital tensions are a recurrent feature of married life, it is hard to disentangle their causal relationships to attributions of blame (Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985), perceptions of power differentials (Whisman & Jacobson, in press), or a whole host of other factors that undoubtedly come into play in the process of coping with everyday marital stressors.

Much of the extant work on intimate relationships has relied on one of two methodologies (or sometimes a combination of the two). The first type of study uses a standard survey methodology (e.g., Honeycutt, Wilson, & Parker, 1982; Kitson & Sussman, 1982; Renne, 1970) that involves few assessments across time of what are thought to be relatively stable characteristics of the person and the relationship. Not surprisingly, the focus in these studies is typically on macro-level processes. The second type of methodology involves engaging the couple in an interaction, typically around some topic they have had difficulty resolving. This type of methodology has led to considerable advances in the understanding of microprocesses in marital relationships (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1986; Kahn, Coyne, & Margolin, 1985). However, neither of these methodologies is particularly well suited, by itself, to addressing the issue of fluctuations in relationship quality.

Often all that can be shown in conventional survey research is that chronic marital problems are associated with chronic problems in other domains (e.g., mood). An additional shortcoming with the use of standard survey methodology in studying marital relationships is that the findings are necessarily based on retrospective reports that may be systematically biased. Experimental work on marital interactions, on the other hand, has proven quite fruitful, but processes to be usefully studied in the laboratory must unfold over minutes or at most hours, not over days and weeks, as does so much of importance in marital relationships. Kirchler's research begins to fill in this gap in the literature on marital relationships by studying the everyday life experiences of couples in an ongoing manner. This method has the advantages of (a) examining processes over longer periods of time than is possible in the lab and (b) being less susceptible to retrospective biases inherent in survey research.
Structured diaries represent an ideal method of collecting data on these naturally occurring "ups and downs" in intimate relationships. Daily self-reports and spouse reports of behaviors and events have been used extensively in the assessment of behavioral marital therapy (Jacobson, 1979; Margolin & Weiss, 1978), and in predicting changes in marital satisfaction (Jacobson, Waldron, & Moore, 1980). Reis, Wheeler, and their colleagues (Reis, Wheeler, Kernis, Speigel, & Nezlek, 1985; Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1983) have used a daily diary approach to examine the effects of social interaction on psychological and physical well-being. And quite recently there has been a proliferation of research on common, everyday stressors, or "hassles," using the daily diary approach (Bolger, DeLongis, & Kessler, 1988; Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, in press a, in press b; DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988; Caspi, Bolger, & Eckenrode, 1987; Lewinsohn & Amenson, 1978; Rehm, 1978; Stone, 1987).

This method of asking people to complete ongoing questionnaires of accounts of their everyday life experiences has enabled researchers to assess both the effects of minor daily stress on health and mood (Bolger et al., in press a, in press b; DeLongis, Bolger, & Kessler, 1988) as well as naturally occurring interaction patterns (DeLongis, 1988; Reis et al., 1985) in a richer and perhaps more accurate way than conventional data collection strategies. Collecting data, as Kirchler (this issue) stated, when the phenomena are moving, although extremely challenging, may afford a more complete understanding of individuals’ lives.

Kirchler has employed the structured diary approach for the study of everyday experiences of couples, and, in particular, the relationships between (a) frequency and positivity of interaction, (b) balance of power, and (c) perceptions of the partner’s emotional and motivational state with relationship satisfaction. The important questions that he has addressed in his research are difficult ones to answer due to the complexity of the causal links among the variables. Take, for instance, the simple question, "Does more marital interaction lead to greater happiness?" First of all, marital interaction, being a self-selected variable, is made up of more than just marital contact. It also includes the need, or desire, for marital contact. So, for instance, one can ask if it is the contact per se, or the desire for contact, that is more closely related to marital happiness.

It makes sense to assume that additional contact, in the absence of a desire for such contact, would not lead to greater marital happiness.
Research (DeLongis, Silver, & Wortman, 1988) suggests that desire to discuss a particular topic with close others is determined by relationship quality and is an important determinant of the amount of interaction that will be engaged in, as well as of the effects of that interaction. White (1983) made a similar point, discussing the feedback loop from happiness to frequency of interaction to happiness. More interaction can lead to greater happiness, and greater happiness can lead to more interaction.

This difficulty with disentangling causal links applies to the finding that happy spouses were better able to understand their partner (describe the other's mood state, sources of mood, and current needs) than were unhappy spouses. There are a number of plausible explanations for an association such as this. First, couples that don't understand each other very well might be less happy as a result. Second, unhappy spouses might become less likely to understand each other because they put less effort into sending their own signals and receiving their partner's signals than happy spouses. Third, individuals who are poor at sending and/or receiving information vis-à-vis their spouses may be the kind of people who are destined to be unhappy in their marriage. Fourth, in terms of understanding why unhappy spouses may be less adept at understanding their partners, people who are unhappy in their relationships may not want to accept their partner's needs or messages, and hence may suffer communication problems.

The possibility of sorting out these alternative hypotheses is enhanced because the recent proliferation of studies using a structured diary approach has seen a concomitant advance in the data analytic techniques employed to analyze such data. Researchers have sought to take advantage of the richness of the data afforded by such intensive study of participants. The many assessments involved in research of this kind have the advantage of allowing a time-series approach to be taken. Such an approach helps to solve the problem of causal imputation by taking into account the ordering in time of information about relationships that, in conventional, cross-sectional designs, or when using conventional data analytic procedures, appear static. Because structured diaries involve many repeated assessments on the same persons, they provide the opportunity to study the effects of marital factors within couples over time, thereby allowing the researcher to rule out temporally stable characteristics of the individual, the couple, or of the situation as third-variable explanations (Bolger et al., 1988).
Studies using a structured diary methodology have typically called for once-per-day self-reports by participants over a period of several weeks. A few investigators have gone beyond self-report data by asking individuals to report not only on themselves, but also on the events experienced (Jacobson & Moore, 1981; Patterson, 1976; Stone & Neale, 1984) and the coping behaviors engaged in by their spouse (DeLongis, Bolger, & Kessler, 1988).

Kirchler has extended the typical once-per-day diary assessment in obtaining data from his couples at six-time points per day for a four-week period. The great advantage of this lies in the ability to examine the unfolding of processes within a day, rather than just across days. Much of the day-to-day marital tension that occurs, especially among well-functioning couples, is successfully resolved within a single day (Bolger et al., 1988). If we are to understand fully the effects of marital tension on mood we must assess people prior to the onset of the tension, at least once during the period of tension, and at least once after the tension has been resolved (and more if we want to see if it recurs).

One difficulty in assessing study participants repeatedly at such closely spaced intervals is that participants must remember at various points throughout their day to make diary entries. A few investigators (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) employ a system in which respondents carry a beeper with them at all times and are beeped at the appropriate times. Given that Kirchler lost approximately 30% of his time-points because respondents either (a) forgot entirely and never filled out a particular time-point or (b) forgot originally and then filled out an experience for a later time-point, the beeper system may be something that researchers who seek to obtain data from participants at multiple time-points within a day could benefit from.

We need to learn more about how couples maintain relationships, the benefits and costs that are incurred, and how couples adapt to naturally occurring fluctuations in their relationships. The wealth of knowledge gleaned using survey and observational methods needs to be supplemented by studies using daily diary assessments. These methods are ideally suited to studying the hassles and uplifts of married life, the ways in which couples cope with the minor stresses of day-to-day married life, and the resources, such as perceptions of power and control, that allow them to cope successfully. The richness of Kirchler's findings demonstrate the usefulness of such an approach.
NOTE

1. Although Kirchler refers to his study as one of marital relationship, only 6 of the 21 couples in his study were actually married. The rest were cohabitating.

REFERENCES


