CHAPTER 30

Couples and Stress: How Demands Outside a Relationship Affect Intimacy within the Relationship

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom on intimate processes within couples has tended to ignore the way those processes can be facilitated or constrained by circumstances outside the relationship. The goal of this chapter is to review developments over the last 15 years that have addressed this oversight by directly linking intimate processes within couples to the quality of their external demands and supports. Toward this end, the chapter is organized into four sections. The first section defines some of the common terms in this area of research, and describes historical and contemporary models that have guided most research on stress and relationships. The next section describes research over the past two decades that has addressed two pressing questions: (1) What are the mechanisms through which stress outside a relationship affects outcomes within it? (2) What are the characteristics and circumstances of couples that are more or less susceptible to the effects of stress? The third section offers several recommendations for the next generation of research on stress and relationships. A final conclusion offers a historical perspective, and draws out some implications of this work for government policies directed at relationships and families.

Key Words: couples, stress, marriage, intimacy, relationship maintenance, spillover, crossover

Imagine the suburb of an industrial town where several types of manufacturing dominate the local economy. Side-by-side in that suburb there might be two homes, each containing a family comprising a husband who works at one of the local factories, a wife who works part time outside the home, and their two young children. Given their similar circumstances, we might expect, all else being equal, similar trajectories for these two marriages. Imagine, then, that in response to a depressed economy, one of the factories in town shuts down. The husband in one of our families loses his job as a result; the husband in the family next door, having the good fortune to work at a different factory, is unaffected. Would we now expect the outcomes of these two marriages to diverge?

Many would guess that the outcomes of these two families would indeed diverge, such that the family coping with the sudden loss of a job and consequent decline in income should be at higher risk for experiencing negative outcomes such as depression, marital distress, and divorce than the family that did not have to cope with these challenges. Considerable research has accumulated to confirm this intuition. Spouses who lose their jobs are in fact at higher risk for experiencing declines in their marital satisfaction and increases in their risk of divorce (Charles & Stephens, 2004). Couples facing financial strain tend to report lower relationship satisfaction as well (Conger & Conger, 2008; Hartie & Lucas, 2010), and divorce rates are several times higher in low-income neighborhoods compared with more affluent neighborhoods (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Challenges in other domains have been associated with negative relationship outcomes in similar ways. Couples coping...
The goal of the first section defines some foundational models that describe research over the mechanisms through which stress affects outcomes within it: (2) What are the characteristics and circumstances of couples that are more or less susceptible to the effects of stress? The third section, Future Directions, offers several recommendations for the next generation of research on stress and relationships. A final Conclusion offers a historical perspective, and draws out some implications of this work for government policies directed at relationships and families.

Foundational Principles

In this section, we review some of the definitions and theoretical frameworks that have informed research on the effects of stress on couples and their intimate relationships. First, we describe the most prevalent ways that research has distinguished between different kinds and sources of stress that couples experience. Second, we review the classic and contemporary models that have guided most research on stress in relationships. Finally, we describe two specific phenomena—stress spillover and stress crossover—that are commonly addressed in research on the effects of stress on intimate processes.

Defining Stress

Across the nearly 70 years that research has examined the effects of stress on intimate relationships, stress has meant different things to different scholars. In his classic work on psychological stress, Lazarus (1966) defined stress relatively narrowly as a response that "occurs when an individual perceives that the demands of an external situation are beyond his or her perceived ability to cope with them" (p. 9). This perspective emphasized stress reactions that result from the experience of specific stressors or events and experiences exogenous to individuals that require some sort of coping, presumably leaving them with less attention and energy to devote to their relationships and other activities.

By the time Bradbury and Karney (2010) reviewed research on stress in relationships nearly 45 years later, the focus of this literature had broadened

The sudden loss of a job and income should be at higher risk of experiencing declines in the quality and longevity of their relationships. The reverse also seems to be true: Couples whose lives are free from major stressors, or couples favored by good luck, have a greater chance of experiencing fulfilling relationships. Thus, lay wisdom and scientific research converge on the conclusion that intimate relationships can be greatly affected by events occurring entirely outside the control of couples (for reviews, see Randall & Bodenmann, 2009; Story & Bradbury, 2004). Misfortune can wither even a strong relationship, whereas a good life provides space in which intimacy can thrive.

Yet, if the couple struggling with the sudden closure of the local factory sought out advice for the difficulties they face, they would likely encounter a very different message. Were they to seek out a self-help book on marriage, for example, they would probably learn that the success or failure of their relationship is a function of their own ability to communicate effectively (e.g., Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). They might be given rules for speaking and listening. They might even be offered tips on how to provide support for each other in difficult times. What they would be unlikely to find is a book that acknowledged why following this advice might be difficult for couples who are struggling with demands outside themselves. Conventional wisdom on intimate processes within couples has tended to ignore the way those processes can be facilitated or constrained by circumstances outside the relationship (Berscheid, 1999; Karney & Bradbury, 2005).

For many years, research on intimacy has been similarly disconnected from research on stress in families. An extensive literature in clinical and social psychology has examined processes of relationship maintenance within couples, while a parallel line of research within sociology and demography has examined how the lives of families are affected by circumstances outside the home, such as employment, income, and neighborhoods. But for most of the history of research on relationships, these two lines of research have rarely intersected, or even acknowledged that an intersection is possible.

The goal of this chapter is to review developments over the past 15 years that have begun to bridge this gap between literatures by proposing and researching new models that directly link intimate processes within couples to the quality of
from stress in particular to context more generally, where context was defined very broadly to include "everything that affects relationships outside of the partners and the interactions between them" (p. 447). Expanding the scope of this work from stress to context had two notable implications for research. First, considering the context of relationships drew attention to a much broader range of external variables that may affect how couples and families develop. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological models described these sources of influence with a set of concentric rings (see Figure 30.1), beginning with the environment most proximal to the couple (e.g., living situation, neighborhood security) and expanding to increasingly distal sources of influence (e.g., the culture within which the relationship is embedded and the historical era within which it is occurring).

Second, implicit in the broader definition of context is the idea that the contexts of relationships vary widely, such that some couples are faced with multiple ongoing challenges, whereas others may face few challenges and may be able to draw on multiple sources of support. Given that contextual variables are typically measured on unidimensional scales, the samples addressed in research on the effects of context on relationships generally include couples at both ends of this continuum, but most research in this area continues to emphasize the challenges that relationships face when couples try to cope with external demands on their time and resources. This chapter shares that emphasis.

Even within the relatively narrow boundaries of research on stress, there are clear distinctions between types of stress that couples experience. Among the most prominent is the distinction between acute and chronic stressors. Acute stressors are specific events with a relatively identifiable onset and at least the possibility of an endpoint, such as an illness, moving to a new home, mourning the death of a loved one, or experiencing a period of unemployment. Because the experience of acute stress is time limited, the negative effects associated with acute stressors should be time limited as well (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Indeed, that seems to be the case in relationships. Daily diary studies and longer term longitudinal research with couples indicate that the way couples evaluate their relationships covaries with fluctuations in their experience of acute stress. During periods characterized by greater than normal acute stress, couples tend to rate their relationships as less satisfying, but when the stress abates, so does the effect of that stress, and the same relationships are rated as more satisfying again (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wellington, 1989; Neff & Karney, 2004).

![Diagram](Figure 30.1 The Couple in Context (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979).)

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To contrast, chronic stressors are demands associated with relatively stable aspects of a couple’s environment, such as financial strain, a disability, or an insecure neighborhood. Because the demands associated with chronic stressors are ongoing, their effects should be relatively stable as well. Over the first years of marriage, for example, couples facing higher levels of chronic stress report lower levels of relationships satisfaction whenever they are assessed, and they experience more difficulty maintaining their satisfaction as well (Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005).

Early and Contemporary Models of Stress and Relationships

The first scholar to articulate an explicit model linking external stress to the intimate realm was John  ____1____ events, for example, viewed a stressor as a challenge motivates effective coping and the mastering of resources, whereas viewing a stressor as a calamity motivates ineffective coping and withdrawal. Together, a stressor (A), the couple’s resources (B), and their interpretation of the event (C) combine to determine the nature of the crisis, represented in the model by the letter X. As the model makes clear, Hill did not believe that all crises were bad for relationships. A severe stressor might still promote effective coping, and thus a stronger relationship, in couples with adequate resources who interpret their stressors as challenges to be met together. When the demands of the stressor exceed the resources available, however, then the crisis can result in ineffective coping, strained interactions, and ultimately the end of the relationship.

In the more than 60 years since Hill published the ABC-X Model, successive waves of scholars have proposed their own models of stress and relationships. All can be considered elaborations and refinements of Hill’s groundbreaking work, and none contradicts any of Hill’s foundational premises. McCubbin and Patterson (1983), as a direct response to their own critique of the ABC-X Model, developed a revision with perhaps the closest ties to Hill’s original work. Their critique highlighted the fact that each of the constructs of the ABC-X Model is likely to evolve over time as the process of coping with stress unfolds, yet these developmental changes were nowhere reflected in the model itself. To address this limitation in Hill’s original ABC-X Model, McCubbin and Patterson proposed the Double ABC-X Model, in which each of the constructs in Hill’s original model was matched with an additional construct reflecting changes that occur over time (see Figure 30.2, right side). Thus, for example, the revised model acknowledges that the consequences of one stressful event (A) can result in additional stressful events (AA), such as when one partner’s car accident leads to missed appointments, additional financial strain, and increased burden on the other partner for transportation. This
phenomenon has been called *stress pileup* to recognize that the downstream consequences of a stressful event can be as stressful—or even more stressful—than the event itself. Besides the couple’s initial level of resources (B), the Double ABC-X Model also acknowledges the resources that couples can develop or summon in response to an event (BB). When one partner is laid off at work, for example, the other partner may not initially have marketable job skills or other sources of income. Over time, however, couples may explore and develop their options, seek out new opportunities in a new city, or connect with family and friends. In this way, they are developing resources that were not in place initially. Further, although the original model emphasized interpretations of the initial event (C), the Double ABC-X Model suggests that couples’ interpretations of their ongoing coping efforts (CC) should also affect the relationship. Given the same stressful event, for example, a wife who believes her husband is trying his best to support her is likely to adapt more effectively than a wife who believes her husband is unwilling or unable to help. Finally, the Double ABC-X Model considers not only the initial outcomes of a particular crisis (X) but also the ongoing process of adaptation within the couple (XX). This process ranges from coping that brings the couple closer to coping that drives partners apart.

Whereas the Double ABC-X Model added a developmental perspective to Hill’s original model, a more recent theoretical contribution to this area added a behavioral perspective. Karney and Bradbury’s (1995) *Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) Model* builds upon the ABC-X and Double ABC-X Models in several ways (see Figure 30.3). Like its predecessors, the VSA Model suggests that the impact of chronic and acute stress (S) on an intimate relationship will be moderated by the preexisting vulnerabilities (V) that partners bring to the relationship, where vulnerabilities include aspects of personal history (e.g., parental divorce), personality (e.g., high levels of negative affectivity), or psychopathology (e.g., depression, substance abuse). In other words, the same stressful event that results in the deterioration of a relationship between two partners who have many vulnerabilities may have no effect on a different couple lacking such vulnerabilities, or may even bring that couple closer together. What the VSA Model adds to this theoretical foundation is the explicit focus on adaptive processes (A) as mediators of the interactive effects of stress and vulnerability on relationship outcomes. Adaptive processes in this context refer to all of the ways that partners communicate with, think about, and respond to each other and their world. Following from Kelley et al. (1983), the VSA Model suggests that the external world and the characteristics of two individuals can only affect the relationship between those individuals through their direct effects on their adaptive processes. Couples under stress experience greater risk in their relationships because stress impedes partners’ ability to engage in the activities of successful intimacy, such as empathy, forgiveness, social support, and so on. Thus, the VSA Model draws explicit attention to a mechanism that had been implicit in prior models: The world outside the couple has direct implications for intimate processes *within* the couple, and this link.
The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (adapted from Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

**Figure 30.3** The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (adapted from Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

accounts for the effects of stress and context on relationship outcomes.

**Stress Spillover versus Stress Crossover**

Although all three of the models that we have just described were designed to explain the implications of stress for couples and families, none of them directly addresses the diverse ways that stress can affect a dyad. Yet considering stress as it affects couples raises the possibility that a specific stressor might affect only one partner directly (e.g., increased demands at work, a dispute with a close friend) or may affect both partners directly (e.g., a child’s illness, home damage from a natural disaster). Drawing this distinction turns out to have important implications for understanding how stress affects relationships.

The first possible consequence of a stressor that disproportionately affects one partner more than the other is stress spillover, that is, when the effects of stress in one domain of life spread to affect other domains. The classic example of stress spillover is work-family tension, as in the case when a working parent experiences stress at work, and then, depleted, is less able to interact effectively with family members at home. Research examining stress spillover relies on longitudinal designs to show that, across days or months, fluctuations in stress outside the home covary with fluctuations in how individuals experience their relationships within the home (e.g., Bolger et al., 1989; Repetti, 1989; Van Steenbergen, Kluwer, & Karney, 2011). Although stress spillover has been studied often in couples and families, it is a phenomenon that takes place within the individual. The spillover happens when one stressed individual moves between different life domains.

Where stress becomes uniquely dyadic is in the phenomenon known as stress crossover. Stress crossover occurs when the effects of a stressor affected one partner in a relationship are transmitted to the other partner, even if the other partner is not directly affected by the stressor itself. Work-family tension continues to provide the classic example here. When one partner returns depleted from a long day at work, the other partner, eager for closeness, may be disappointed or even distressed when closeness is not forthcoming (e.g., Lason & Almeida, 1999). That distress, a direct consequence of stress incurred by the other partner, is the evidence for stress crossover. As this example makes clear, stress spillover is typically a prerequisite for stress crossover, in that the primary mechanism through which stress is thought to make the jump from one partner to another is through its direct impact on the behavior of the partner directly affected by the stressor (see Figure 30.4).

**Emerging Themes**

Establishing that stress outside of a couple spills over to affect processes within the relationship raises two questions. First, what are those processes and how exactly are they shaped by the demands and challenges that couples face? This is a question about mediation, and research on this issue has examined the direct links between contextual variables and specific processes of relationship maintenance. Second, what factors make couples more or less vulnerable to the effects of stress on their relationships? This is a question about moderation, and research on this issue has examined how the effects of stress vary across different individuals and different populations. We review research addressing each of these questions in turn.
Mediators of Stress Effects on Relationships

On examination, there is nothing intuitive about the suggestion that increases in stress should be generally associated with declines in relationship satisfaction. The mere fact that one partner in a relationship suffers an insult at work, or an especially long commute, does not by itself require that these experiences spill over to affect how that individual feels about the other partner or the relationship. Explaining the consistent observation that these experiences outside the home are in fact associated with evaluations of partners and relationship entails specifying the mechanisms through which external demands make their way into the intimate lives of couples. Recent theorizing about these issues has addressed this need by specifying two broad classes of mechanisms, each corresponding to one of two routes through which stress exerts its effects on relationships (Neff & Karney, 2004, 2009).

The first route is through the direct effects of stress on the way couples allocate and spend their time together. Challenges and demands outside the relationship take time to address and resolve. Given that a day cannot contain more than 24 hours, every hour spent addressing external stressors is an hour that is not spent on activities that might maintain or nourish the relationship, such as sharing thoughts and feelings, engaging in physical intimacy, or participating in pleasurable activities together. Couples experiencing little external stress may have time for these activities, and so, in the absence of problems that need resolution, may not suffer much, even if they lack conflict resolution skills. Stress, however, creates problems to resolve and choices that must be negotiated, forcing couples to address difficult situations that may tax their abilities to cope (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). A couple with difficulty discussing money, for example, may not discover this fact until financial strain requires them to make hard choices together. In this way, stressful periods reveal the vulnerabilities and limitations of a relationship.

When research has examined the effects of stress on time use in relationships, the primary outcomes examined have been time spent on household chores and time spent in shared leisure activities. With respect to both of these outcomes, the effects of stress are consistently negative. Specifically, the more time that spouses report doing demands outside the home, the less time they report contributing to household chores within the home (Pittman, Solheim, & Blanchard, 1996; South & Spitz, 1994) and sharing leisure activities together (Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & Crawford, 1989). For women in particular, elevations in stress predict less frequent sexual activity with their partner (Bodenmann, Ledermann, & Bradbury, 2007).

The consequence of less time spent on relationship maintenance and more time spent confronting difficult challenges is that partners under stress have a different pool of recent experiences on which to base their evaluations of their relationships, compared with partners who are not under stress. Neff and Karney (2004) demonstrated this in a longitudinal study that asked newlyweds to report on their experiences of acute stress and their ratings of specific marital problems every 6 months for the first 4 years of their marriage. Marital problems that could conceivably be direct results of external stress (e.g., finding more time to spend together) were excluded from the analysis, leaving behind specific domains relevant to partners' experience of intimacy (e.g., communication, showing affection, trust). Nevertheless, reports of external stress and reports
money, for example, may not only put financial strains require their partners to come together. In this way, stressful situations may have positive effects on partners, the primary outcome of shared leisure activities is time spent on household chores within the home (Edwards & Blanchard, 1996; South & Nel, 1996) and engaging in shared leisure activities together. For example, Suls, Huston, & Crawford, in particular, elevations in stress and conflict in sexual activity with their partners (Kanat & Bratton, 2007). The results of time spent on relationships demonstrate that partners under stress have negative experiences on which to base the outcome of their relationships, compared to those who are not under stress. Neff (1996) demonstrated this in a longitudinal study of newlywed couples. The effects of external stress and stressors at work (time spent togethery were significant predictors of relationship outcomes, showing affection, trust, and intimacy, of external stress and reports of marital problems covaried over time, such that, after periods of relatively high stress, spouses perceived more specific problems within their relationships and after periods of relatively low stress, the same spouses perceived fewer specific problems in their relationships. Furthermore, these perceptions of specific problems mediated the negative effects of stress on global ratings of marital satisfaction. When spouses were under stress, their specific experiences of the relationship changed for the worse, and their global evaluations of the relationship appeared to change as a result.

A broader literature confirms that relationships suffer when partners are unable to spend time together maintaining their household or pleasurable activities. One of the more sophisticated studies of this nature was the Time Use Longitudinal Study, which obtained detailed daily data from interviews with randomly selected individuals and their partners (M.A. Hill, 1988). A lack of shared leisure time, as assessed by the diaries, was one of the strongest predictors of whether or not a relationship was still intact 5 years later, second only to the duration of the relationship. Research on the effects of nonstandard work schedules on marital outcomes paints a similar picture (Presser, 2000). For spouses with children at home, working nights increases the risk of the marriage ending in divorce within 5 years. The effects are large: Fathers who work nights are twice as likely to divorce, and mothers who work nights are three times more likely to divorce, compared with parents who work days shifts.

Together, these studies suggest that stress is a problem because it requires coping efforts that displace other activities that nourish intimacy. If this were the only downside of stress, couples might be able to compensate for stress-induced constraints on their relationships by making sure that the time they do share together is maximally close and satisfying. Unfortunately, individuals under stress are poorly equipped to engage in those kinds of extra efforts. As many scholars have noted (Rusbult, Blisnerte, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998), the activities most central to maintaining closeness with another person (i.e., expressing empathy, adopting the partner's perspective, forgiving transgressions) are all highly effortful (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). For example, when a partner comes home late without offering an explanation, or makes an insensitive remark, an initial reaction to one's own hurt feelings is the desire to retaliate (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Suppressing that desire is an act of self-regulation, an active choice to place the long-term interests of the relationship above short-term self-interest. Indeed, the success of a long-term relationship appears to depend on partners' ability to engage in self-regulation regularly and fluidly over time, modulating their own behavior in light of circumstances (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

Independent of its concrete effects on the time that partners spend together, the experience of stress impedes partners' ability to engage in these self-regulation processes effectively. Research across a number of domains converges to show that the arousal associated with stress inhibits the performance of complicated tasks (Matthews, Davies, Westerman, & Stammers, 2000). Observational research on marriage in particular has demonstrated that higher levels of physiological arousal are associated with less effective problem solving and a greater tendency for spouses to reciprocate each other's negative behaviors (Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985). Studies of the effects of stress on information processing indicate that people under stress are less adept at transforming information. Instead, they rely on stereotypes (Bodenhausen, 1993), and focus disproportionately on whatever is most salient in their field of vision, neglecting peripheral details (Brown, 2003). Theories of ego depletion (e.g., Baumeister, 2002) extend these situational induced deficits to the arena of self-control, arguing that self-control is a limited resource that can become depleted through use, making future acts of self-control more difficult. Consistent with this view, prior research has revealed that academic stress, for example, produces regulatory failures in other domains where self-control previously was successful (e.g., emotional control; Oaten & Cheng, 2005).

Weaving together these various strands of research leads to the prediction that when partners' cognitive and regulatory resources are divided among several effortful acts, they are likely to find it more difficult to engage in effective functioning within the relationship. This effect of stress on the process of intimacy is independent of the effect of stress on the time spent on intimacy, and so this is a second route through which external stress affects relationships (see Figure 30.5).

An early demonstration of the effects of stress on relationship processes was Repetti's (1989) research examining the covariance between daily stress at work and marital interactions within the home. To address this issue, she administered daily diaries to a
A sample of air traffic controllers, an ideal population for this purpose because the fluctuating demands they experience at work can be quantified precisely and objectively (i.e., by examining the volume of traffic at the airport each day). Across 3 consecutive days, the controllers and their spouses were asked to report on their behaviors at home at the end of each workday. Analyses indicated that on days when their workload was higher than normal, the controllers were more likely to be withdrawn and distant at home, an apparent strategy for decompressing after a demanding day (Repetti, Wang, & Saxbe, 2009). Since this initial demonstration, other studies have confirmed that stress arising from different sources outside the relationship is associated with the way partners treat each other within the relationship. In dual-earner couples, for example, both spouses report being more distracted and less responsive toward their partner at the end of more stressful days, compared with less stressful days (Schulz, Cowan, Pape Cowan, & Brennan, 2004; Stoy & Repetti, 2006). Similarly, couples are more likely to report arguing with each other at the end of days when they had experienced interpersonal problems with coworkers or supervisors (Bolger et al., 1989; Repetti & Wood, 1997). Conger and colleagues (Conger & Conger, 2008; Conger, Rether, & Elder, 1999; Cutrona et al., 2003) have gone a step farther, identifying this impaired ability to communicate effectively as a mediator of the effects of financial strain on marital outcomes. Compared with couples that are more financially secure, couples experiencing greater financial strain have more difficulty discussing their marital problems positively, and this accounts for their deteriorating marital satisfaction over time (see also Falconer & Epstein, 2010). Experimental evidence, although rare, supports the view that the links between stress and marital behavior are causal; that is, the experience of stress directly impairs the ability of couples to behave in ways known to maintain relationships. In one of the only examples of such evidence (Bodenmann & Shantirath, 2004), couples were observed interacting with each other in problem-solving discussions before and after they engaged in a stress induction task. Direct within-couple comparisons of the interactions showed that, when under stress, the quality of couples’ marital communication decreased by 40 percent.

The impairments associated with stress extend to relationship cognitions as well. For the past several decades, research on cognitive strategies of relationship maintenance has identified ways that information processing contributes to the stability of relationship satisfaction over time (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Karney, McNeely, & Frie, 2001; Murray & Holmes, 1993). A common thread within this literature is that maintaining global satisfaction in light of the vicissitudes and occasional disappointments of long-term relationship requires integrating negative experiences within a generally positive view of the relationship. Couples that are able to do this, either by excusing a partner’s inconsiderate behavior (Karney & Bradbury, 2000) or by minimizing the importance of that behavior (Neff & Karney, 2003), generally experience more satisfying relationships over time. But this type of cognitive strategy takes effort, and research suggests that the experience of stress renders couples less capable of exerting this effort.

Multiwave longitudinal studies provide the clearest evidence for this point. Research on the early years of marriage, for example, has examined how fluctuations in the stress that spouses experience predict changes in how they interpret each other’s negative or inconsiderate behaviors (Neff & Karney,
The experience of stress couples to behave in relationships. In one of the studies (Bodenmann & Neff, 2003), observed interactions between partners in a stress induction task. Comparisons of the interactions under stress, the quality of interaction decreased by 40%

research, with stress extend to not just physiological, but also cognitive processes. For the past several decades, research has focused on the effects of stress on cognitive processes, particularly those that involve the stability of the mind (e.g., Bradbury & McNulty, 2001).

A common thread in maintaining global stability and occasional changes in long-term relationships is the experience of internal processes within a relationship. Couples may not have direct access or conscious control over these processes, but they can influence the behavior of their partners and the overall relationship. Bradbury and Neff (2003) found that increased stress is associated with greater instability in relationships, whereas a lack of stress is associated with greater stability. These findings provide clear evidence that research on the early stages of stress in relationships is important to understand how stress and couple's behavior interact. Each other's behaviors (Neff & Karney, 2001). Across eight biannual assessments spanning 4 years of marriage, couples were most likely to report adaptive attributions (e.g., dismissing each other's transgressions and giving each other the "benefit of the doubt") during intervals when they had been experiencing less stress than normal. However, when the same spouses were experiencing higher levels of stress than normal, they were more likely to report maladaptive attributions, viewing the partner as more blameworthy and responsible for the same events and marital events they had forgiven when their circumstances were less demanding. Notably, these findings held even after controlling for any increases in relationship problems experienced during stressful periods, suggesting that the effects of stress on maladaptive attributions are independent of stress on the concrete problems that spouses are grappling with (the first route in Figure 30.5). Consistent with the two-route model, both direct effects of stress independently mediated the indirect effects of stress on changes in marital satisfaction over time.

Making attributions is a conscious process, but stress research suggests that the effects of stress can be observed in relationship processes to which partners may not have direct access or conscious control. In a pair of longitudinal studies of young married couples, Neff and Karney (2009) asked spouses to complete nightly diaries in which they reported on their evaluations of specific aspects of their marriage (e.g., communication, division of housework, sex), as well as their global satisfaction with the relationship (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your marriage today?"). Each night for seven consecutive nights. The covariance between spouses' global and specific ratings has been treated as an index of reactivity in past research, such that a stronger covariance indicates higher global evaluations of the marriage that are responsive to daily experiences within the relationship, whereas a weaker covariance indicates that global evaluations are more robust to the vicissitudes of couples' daily lives (McNulty & Karney, 2001). Analyses from two independent samples of young couples revealed that this index is sensitive to the degree of stress couples are experiencing outside their relationship. In particular, when stress is higher than normal, spouses' global ratings of their marriage are more responsive to fluctuations in their daily experiences of the marriage, but under lower than normal stress, the same spouses appear better able to maintain their global evaluations of the marriage regardless of their daily experiences.

Together, the results of within-subjects analyses of couples data support the idea that external stress impedes adaptive processes in intimate relationships. In light of the more concrete effects of stress described earlier, these results suggest a poignant irony: Stress interferes with the abilities that allow couples to interact effectively and maintain closeness during the very times when those abilities are most needed. Given this unfortunate combination, it is no wonder that the ripple effects of stress so often spread from events outside the home to events within the home, and from one partner to another.

**Moderators of Stress Effects on Relationships**

Thus far, we have reviewed research identifying pathways through which stress affects relationships. But not every couple or partner is equally susceptible to these effects. Consider the families affected by the closure of the hypothetical factory in the example that opened this chapter. On average, we expect that the relationships of workers at the closed factory will suffer more than the relationships of workers at the factories that remained open. But among all of the relationships of workers at the closed factory, some will surely suffer more than others. As the pernicous effects of stress on relationships have been established, a long-standing goal of research in this area has been to identify situations or individual characteristics that render some couples more or less vulnerable to these effects. Much of this work has been explicitly guided by the ABC-X, Double ABC-X, and VSA Models, each of which suggests that couples should be more resilient to the extent that they possess greater resources for coping with stress effectively, and more vulnerable to the extent that they lack coping resources. From this perspective, coping resources can be enduring qualities internal to the partners, such as self-efficacy, secure attachment, or high self-esteem, or may be social or material goods available to the couple in their environment. Subsequent research has confirmed and elaborated on these predictions, identifying specific moderators that shape how couples react to the stress that befalls them.

**INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES**

Of the theoretical perspectives described in this chapter, the VSA Model contains the most direct statement that important moderators of the effects of stress are located within the individual partners. Echoing earlier stress-diathesis models (e.g., Monroe & Simons, 1991), the VSA Model...
proposes that some people possess enduring characteristics that render their relationships more vulnerable to the effects of stress, whereas others possess characteristics that make their relationships more resilient (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Any characteristics related to partner's cognitive and emotional resources could serve this moderating role. The model predicts, for example, that relationships in which one or both partners have a history of depression or substance abuse would deteriorate more quickly under stress, whereas relationships between partners who are securely attached would prove more resilient in the face of stress. Yet, to date, research on stress in relationships has rarely examined interactions with partners’ individual characteristics and personal history.

One individual difference that has been studied for its interactions with stress is personality, specifically the dimension of neuroticism or negative affectivity (Watson & Clark, 1984). Defined as a stable tendency to experience negative mood states, negative affectivity should be most relevant in people's lives when they have experienced stressful events that demand some sort of reaction. Indeed, Bolger and his colleagues have used daily-diary data to show that individuals scoring high in negative affectivity react more negatively to stressful experiences in their lives, and their negative moods last longer as well, compared with individuals scoring lower in negative affectivity (Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). This greater reactivity has direct implications for intimate relationships. For example, spouses higher in negative affectivity consistently report lower satisfaction across the first years of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1997) and, controlling their relationship satisfaction, are more likely to blame their partners for their transgressions (Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994), compared with spouses lower in negativity.

Together, such work suggests that partners' levels of negative affectivity should moderate the effects of stress on their relationships, and initial evidence is consistent with this view. In a longitudinal study of young married couples, Hellmuth and McNulty (2008) obtained self-reports of spouse's negative affectivity, marital satisfaction, and physically aggressive behaviors over time. To assess the chronic stressors to which couples were exposed, each spouse was interviewed about the ongoing challenges they faced in different domains of their lives, and their responses were coded by objective raters to avoid shared method variance between the stress ratings and the relationship ratings. As expected, spouses coping with higher levels of stress reported higher levels of physical aggression in the marriage, but this effect was significantly moderated by spouse's levels of negative affectivity. Deconstructing the interaction revealed that, for both spouses, stress predicted rates of physical aggression toward the partner more strongly for spouses scoring higher in negative affectivity than for spouses scoring lower. Put another way: Spouses who are dispositionally inclined toward negativity experience more spillover between demands outside the home and aggressive interactions within the home.

Attachment security is a related construct that has also been examined for its role in moderating reactions to stress (for a review, see Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Bowlby's original work suggested that a primary function of the attachment bond is to organize responses to threatening situations (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Secure attachment, from this perspective, is a model of the social world that facilitates connecting with others (in particular a primary caregiver) in ways that reduce the distress that arises in such situations. Insecure attachment, in contrast, is a model that interferes with this process, and so should be associated with individuals who have difficulty finding comfort in their relationships during times of stress. In this way, individuals' enduring models of attachment should moderate the effects of stress on their relationships in ways that are parallel to the effects of negative affectivity, such that securely attached individuals should draw closer to their partners in times of stress, whereas insecurely attached individuals should pull away (Simpson & Rholes, 1994).

Research has consistently supported these predictions, observing that couples respond differently to stressful circumstances depending on their enduring models of attachment. In laboratory settings, a number of studies have shown that, when anticipating a stressful experience like a speech or a difficult math test, securely attached individuals turn toward their partners, and thereby reduce their distress, whereas insecurely attached individuals are more likely to push their partners away or withdraw, thereby forgoing an opportunity to decrease their distress (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Orini, 2007). The same patterns hold true outside the laboratory. In an observational study of couples in airports preparing for the stress of a lengthy separation (Fraley & Shaver, 1998), securely attached couples sought to maintain contact for as long as possible, whereas insecurely attached couples were more likely to
of stress reported higher levels in the marriage, but this effect was only moderated by spouses' attachment security. Deconstructing the relationship for both spouses, stress was associated with aggression toward the partner for spouses scoring higher in insecure attachment, or spouses scoring lower in security. Women who are dispositionally more insecure experience more spillover in the home and aggressive behavior.

A related construct that has been shown to play a role in moderating responses to stress is attachment (see Simpson & Rhodes, 2005). Work suggested that a primary goal of attachment is to organize situations (Bowby, 1980). Secure attachment, from this perspective, allows individuals to maintain a relationship with the outside world that facilitates the maintenance of close relationships. In particular, the role that attachment plays in the distress that arises from the attachment, in contrast to the effects of stress on individuals who have differed in their relationships with their parents, is one way individuals' enduring attachment style may moderate the effects that stress has on relationships. The distress that arises from the attachment style can moderate the effects of stress on relationships. The distress that arises from the attachment style can moderate the effects of stress on relationships.

The VSA Model suggests that these different behavioral responses to stress should moderate the effects of stress on relationship outcomes, such that stress should be especially detrimental to the relationships of insecure individuals, but may actually improve the relationships of securely attached individuals. This moderated mediational model of attachment models and stress has not yet been tested directly, however.

ACUTE STRESS IN THE CONTEXT OF CHRONIC STRESS

Research identifying moderators of stress effects on relationships has focused on the examination of stresses and challenges that are especially damaging to relationships. One direction that follows directly from the ABC-X and Double ABC-X Models is research examining how acute and chronic stressors combine and interact to affect relationships. Hill's (1949) original model proposed that the impact of any acute stressor on family outcomes should be moderated by the relatively stable resources available to the couple. Those resources can be considered an element of the chronic conditions of the relationship, such that couples with high-paying jobs, flexible hours, or supportive network presumably have more resources, and couples faced with ongoing financial strain, health conditions, or social isolation have fewer resources. The Double ABC-X Model, by drawing attention to the potential of one stressor to lead to additional stressors, also suggests that the impact of any single stressor may depend on the other demands that couples are facing. In both models, the basic prediction is the same: The impact of acute stressors on relationships should be magnified in couples in impoverished or already stressful circumstances, and should be lessened in couples facing supportive circumstances or few other stressors.

Research evaluating these hypotheses has examined how the association between changes in acute stress and changes in marital satisfaction (i.e., stress spillover) varies across couples that differ in levels of chronic stress (Karney et al., 2005). Chronic stress was assessed through interviews with each spouse about the ongoing demands and supports they experienced in different domains of their lives (e.g., work, health, personal and family relationships). Their responses were coded by trained raters and summed across domains to form an index of chronic strains faced by each spouse. Acute stress was measured by counting each spouse's responses to a stressful event checklist (Statson, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978). Across the first 5 years of marriage, fluctuations in this acute stress index covaried with changes in marital satisfaction for both spouses, such that spouses were less satisfied than normal after periods when they experienced greater acute stress than normal, the standard stress spillover effect. For wives, however, the degree of stress spillover they experienced was significantly moderated by their level of chronic stress. Among wives facing high levels of chronic stress, the experience of acute stress was especially likely to be associated with declines in their relationship satisfaction. Among wives in more supportive environments, however, there was no evidence of stress spillover, and in fact the relation between acute stress and changes in satisfaction was slightly positive. In other words, couples possessing the resources to cope with stress effectively not only may maintain their relationship in the face of stressful events but also may experience those relationships growing even stronger, consistent with Hill's (1949) original suggestion in the ABC-X Model.

One reason that the moderating effects of couples' circumstances is not acknowledged more often may be that research on relationships generally samples couples from a very narrow slice of socioeconomic status, such as college-educated, middle-class white people (Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). In samples in which there is not much variance in the circumstances of couples' lives, the potential for these chronic conditions to shape the way couples respond to stress can be easily overlooked. Yet research drawing from larger, more representative populations confirms that the chronic conditions of couples' lives do moderate associations between the more concrete stressors that couples experience and their satisfaction with their relationships (Rauer, Karney, & Gavran, 2008). This study drew upon a large, representative survey of Florida residents that included oversampling of low-income and nonwhite individuals, as well as a replication sample of more than 1,500 individuals randomly selected from Texas, New York, and California. In telephone surveys, respondents reported the acute stressors they had experienced in the past 6 months, as well as their income, level of education, experience of financial strain, and availability of support from friends and family. For respondents currently in an intimate relationship or marriage, each of these variables was associated with relationship satisfaction. Yet a cumulative risk analysis suggested
that the different sources of stress and support interacted: The association between acute stress and relationship satisfaction was significantly higher for partners dealing with other enduring sources of strain, and significantly lower for partners facing few other sources of strain.

**NOMINATIVE VERSUS NON-NOMINATIVE STRESS**

Thus far, our discussion of stress has presumed that stress is something uncontrollable and unpredictable and, as demonstrated by its average effects on relationships, something to be avoided at all costs. Indeed, much research on stress has focused on stressors that fit this description, such as illnesses, accidents, and financial challenges. Yet many stressors that couples face are neither uncontrollable, nor unpredictable, nor negative. On the contrary, couples frequently make choices that involve taking on or even embracing stress, such as accepting a promotion to a demanding new job, moving to a new city, or enrolling in a graduate program. These are normative stressors—demanding events or circumstances that are nonetheless common, frequently controllable, and generally predictable—in contrast to the non-normative stressors that have been the primary focus of much of the research in this area.

Although there has not been much research directly comparing the effects of normative and non-normative stressors on relationships, the models of stress that we have discussed make clear predictions about their relative effects. The ABC-X Model (R. Hill, 1949), for example, ascribes a large role to the way couples interpret the events that befall them, such that events perceived as tragedies are likely to be coped with less effectively than events perceived as challenges to be met and overcome. The distinction between normative and non-normative stress seems likely to overlap with the distinction between these kinds of perceptions, with normative stress more likely to be viewed as a challenge and non-normative stress more likely to be viewed as a tragedy. The Double ABC-X Model also makes predictions relevant to understanding this distinction. This model acknowledges that, in the face of a stressful event, couples can gather or develop coping resources that they did not possess at the outset. Normative stressors, to the extent that they can be anticipated, should facilitate the development of such resources. As a result, coping with normative stressors should be more effective, on average, than coping with non-normative stressors, and therefore should have a less negative effect on relationships.

Research on relationships has not compared the effects of normative and non-normative stressors directly, but research that has focused solely on normative stressors does seem to find much weaker effects on relationships than research on non-normative stressors. An early study examined the longitudinal implications of normative family transitions, such as a child moving to college, the last child leaving the home, or changes in marital satisfaction (Menaghan, 1983). On average, this study found that there were no long-term implications. Although these transitions have been described as stressful, they are also perceived as a natural and even welcome part of life and, perhaps as a result of coping with these transitions, did not alter the trajectory of marital satisfaction.

It is also likely, however, that not all normative stressors are equally stressful. For example, of all of the transitions a couple can experience, the transition to parenthood has been described as the most consequential (Cowan & Cowan, 1992), and as a result has been the most studied normative stressor in research on couples and families. Unlike some of the other family transitions that have been studied, extensive research on the transition to parenthood consistently finds that the birth of a first child is associated with declines in couples' satisfaction with their relationship (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). To the extent that having that first child imposes enormous stresses on new parents, this finding can be viewed as a classic stress spillover effect. Yet much of the research on the transition to parenthood suffers from some methodological limitations. Most notably, most of the research on this transition begins with samples of couples in their first pregnancy, a time that may be characterized by elevated satisfaction. The declines observed in research on such samples might be a return to baseline; without data from before couples were pregnant, the true implications of this transition cannot be determined.

Only recently have long-term longitudinal studies of newlywed couples before they became pregnant examined how becoming pregnant and having a child affects the trajectory of marital satisfaction (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008). In both of these studies, more satisfied couples are the ones more likely to become pregnant, but then those couples experience greater declines in their marital satisfaction after the child is born, compared with couples married the same length of time who do not experience this transition. As they confirm the results of decades of prior research on the
relationships has not compared normative and non-normative stressors does seem to find much less research than research on stressors. An early study examining the implications of normative family transitions in a child moving to college, the birth of a first child, or changes in marital status (1983). On average, this study found no long-term implications of these transitions have been described as also perceived as a natural and positive experience of life and, perhaps as a result, these transitions did not alter marital satisfaction.

However, that not all normative events are stressful. For example, all of the care a couple can experience, the transition has been described as the most stressful (Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999; Burger et al., 1989). Partners within a couple are each likely to be experiencing their own stresses, frequently at the same time. Despite long-standing interest in stress and couples, researchers in this area have rarely examined how the unique experiences of each partner might combine to affect the relationship. It seems likely that the impact of stress on one partner should be moderated by stress that the other partner may be experiencing. For example, we might consider a dual-career married couple in which the wife comes home exhausted and distracted by an unusually demanding and unpleasant day at work. On average, exposure to an unhappy and emotionally distant spouse might give rise to its positive evaluations of the relationship by her husband, a case of stress crossover. But the degree to which this occurs may depend on the kind of day that the husband had at work. If he is also returning from a stressful and unpleasant day, he might be more reactive and less tolerant of his partner’s bad mood, and so experience more crossover from her stress. If he has an especially good day, however, he might have the emotional resources to understand and even respond constructively to his distressed spouse, thereby minimizing or even preventing stress crossover.

One study addressing these possibilities examined longitudinal data on each partner’s stress in newlyweds assessed every 6 months across the first 4 years of their marriage (Neff & Karney, 2007). Across that period, changes in each partner’s stress were associated with changes in their own marital satisfaction, a significant spillover effect for both spouses. Controlling for spillover, changes in wives’ stress also covaried with husbands’ satisfaction, a significant crossover effect from wives to husbands. Crossover was not observed from husbands to wives, however. The gender difference suggests that, on average, wives cope with their stressed out spouses better than husbands do. Yet wives’ susceptibility to the effects of their husbands’ stress was significantly moderated by their own level of stress. Only the wives whose own stress was relatively low emerged unscathed from periods of stress in their husbands. When wives were also under stress, they experienced crossover from their husbands, reporting lower satisfaction when their husbands’ reported higher levels of stress. The general picture that emerges points husbands as unhappy whenever their wives are under stress, regardless of the stress in husbands’ own lives, but wives as irritated by their husbands’ stress only when wives’ typical coping resources are taxed by their own stress. The even more general message is that a full understanding of the impact of stress on dyadic outcomes requires understanding the unique experiences by each partner, and how those stresses interact.

COMPETING ROLES

Thus far, the demands of work life and home life have been described as if there were an inherent tension between them. Some views of family stress have made this assumption explicit, suggesting that the different roles that partners fill in their lives (e.g., worker and family member) each drain energy and time from a finite pool (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In this view, periods when work is especially demanding necessarily leave fewer resources available to fulfill family roles, leading to conflict between the two domains and spillover and crossover of stress from work to home (Fronen, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). During the second half of the 20th century, as economic realities required more women to enter the workforce, and thus more couples to negotiate dual-income partnerships (Cherlin, 2004; Cooney, 2005), work-to-family conflict became a topic of particular interest to research on stress in relationships.

Yet as interest in work-to-family conflict expanded, so did the realization that involvement in work need not always be to the detriment of family life. Some scholars acknowledged that work can be energizing as well as draining (Barnett & Hyde, 2001), and some researchers began to demonstrate positive links between engagement in work outside
the home and satisfaction with relationships within the home (Heller & Watson, 2005; Van Steenbergen, Ellemers, & Mooltjart, 2007).

In determining whether life at work and life at home detract from or facilitate each other, a key moderator seems to be the compatibility of the multiple roles that each partner is trying to fulfill. Recent longitudinal research raised this possibility by comparing the associations between work stress and marital satisfaction for parents and nonparents in the early years of marriage (Van Steenbergen et al., 2011). Examining eight waves of data collected biannually for 4 years, these researchers estimated the covariance between fluctuating workloads and changes in marital satisfaction, and observed starkly different results for couples that did and did not have children. Among couples without children, increases in men's workloads were associated with significant increases in their own and their wives' marital satisfaction. The researchers speculated that demands at work enhanced the married lives of these couples because, in the early years of marriage, working hard is what both spouses want a husband to do. His hard work is fully compatible with his role as a husband, so the harder he worked, the happier both spouses became. The expected tension between work demands and marital satisfaction emerged only for couples who had children (Van Steenbergen et al., 2011). For these couples, husbands had an additional role to fill: They were expected to be workers, partners, and parents as well. Under these circumstances, husbands' time spent at work competed with the time they could spend sharing in child care duties. Perhaps as a result, among these couples, periods of husbands' higher workload covaried with declines in marital satisfaction for both spouses.

The associations between wives' workload and marital satisfaction were significantly different, but they also told a story of compatibility among multiple roles. For the childless couples, changes in wives' workloads were unrelated to changes in either spouses' marital satisfaction, perhaps because working outside the home is not part of the traditional definition of what it is to be a successful wife, or perhaps because wives seem to rise to the demands of their home lives, regardless of the demands they may be facing outside the home (e.g., Bolger et al., 1989; Neff & Karney, 2007). For the couples with children, in contrast, increases in wives' workloads were associated with increases in their own (but not their husbands') marital satisfaction. Given that working is not traditionally thought to be harmonious with motherhood, what accounts for this positive relation? The answer may lie in what husbands do when their wives are working harder than normal: They step up and contribute more to household chores (Roeters, Van der Lippe, & Kluyver, 2009). Thus, one way of making sense of these results is to suggest that, when husbands are working outside the home, they exaggerate the traditional inequities in how husbands and wives divide up child care and household maintenance, leading to lower satisfaction for both spouses. However, when wives are working outside the home, this forces husbands to redress some of these inequities, leading to greater satisfaction, at least for wives (Grote & Clark, 2001).

**SALIENT STRESSORS**

An assumption implicit in much research on stress spillover and stress crossover is that the effects of stress on the relationship are invisible to the partners themselves. Tesser and Beach (1998), in an insightful analysis, unpacked this assumption, noting that if partners attended to the fact that their moods and reactions were being affected by stress outside the home, they would be less inclined to allow those moods and reactions to color their feelings about their relationships. They suggested that at moderate levels of stress, partners experience the effects without recognizing their source, and this prevents them from accounting for stress when they evaluate their relationships. It follows from this perspective that when stress becomes severe enough to be noticed, recognizing stress should actually help partners to protect their feelings about their relationships from the effects of that stress. The difference here is the difference between a partner who comes home in a foul mood and a partner who comes home and says, “Honey, better keep your distance because I have had a terrible day and I am in a foul mood.” The latter partner is easier to deal with, and easier to forgive.

To test these ideas, Tesser and Beach (1998) reexamined data from three cross-sectional surveys that included data on stress and relationship satisfaction. As they predicted, at lower levels of stress, the association between stress and relationship satisfaction was linear and negative, such that higher stress was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. At moderate to severe levels of stress, however, the association between stress and satisfaction dropped substantially, consistent with the view that, as the stress became more salient, correcting for its effects on evaluations of the relationship became easier.
brotherhood, what accounts for this? The answer may lie in what their wives are doing. The step up and contribute more (Roeters, Van der Lippe, & Reus, 1997), one way of making sense to suggest that, when husbands, at home, they exaggerate the times in how husbands and wives have and household maintenance, satisfaction for both spouses. Husbands are working outside the home to redress some of those to greater satisfaction, at least (Clark, 2001).

Do Different Sources of Stress Affect Relationships in Different Ways?

Throughout this chapter, as in much of the research in this area, stress has been treated as a homogenous construct, as if the demands of work, health problems, financial strain, and interpersonal conflict all affect relationships in the same way. This seems unlikely to be true. In the previous section, we described some of the distinctions between types of stress (e.g., chronic vs. acute, normative vs. non-normative) that have been shown to moderate how stress affects relationships. One direction for future research is to focus more specifically on the content of stress, as opposed to the current practice of summing stress ratings or stress checklists across multiple domains. Research that has begun to ask these content-related questions suggests that this direction may be conceptually fruitful. For example, analyses of data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a nationally representative survey examining socioeconomic variables and health across time, compared the effects of a husband losing his job with the effects of a husband becoming physically disabled on the likelihood of a marriage ending in divorce (Charles & Stephens, 2004). Both events are undeniably stressful, so a simple reading of existing models would predict that both would render marriages more vulnerable. Actually, only job loss predicted divorce; disability did not. Moreover, even within the domain of job loss, only being fired predicted divorce; job displacement due to mass layoffs (similar to the hypothetical factory closing that started this chapter) did not. These provocative findings suggest that the content of a stressor matters a great deal, and that equally demanding events (i.e., being fired or being laid off) may have different implications for relationships. The original ABC-X Model (R. Hill, 1949), by drawing attention to how couples interpret the stressors that they encounter, continues to provide guidance here. Future research may need to examine how and why different types of stressors are more or less likely to be interpreted in ways that facilitate successful coping.

What Are the Implications of Self-Selection into Contexts?

Another implicit assumption of most research on stress in relationships is that stress is an exogenous variable, that is, that its effects come from outside the relationship and are mostly beyond the ability of the couple to control or predict. Yet for many couples, this assumption is clearly false. In a prescient analysis of the field, Berscheid (1998) observed that
some sources of stress are truly exogenous to relationships, but many others are not. Couples buy new houses that they can barely afford, they have additional children when they are already strapped for time, and they move to new cities where they lack existing networks of social support. In other words, couples have considerable leeway to make their lives harder or easier, which means that the paths of influence between stress and relationships must be bidirectional. To date, research on stress and intimate relationships has not come close to grappling with this issue. The closest scholars have come is with research on the transition to parenthood, the most recent of which has shown that marital satisfaction predicts selection into parenthood, even as parenthood itself predicts declines in marital satisfaction (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2008). But the broader issue of how and why couples choose to approach or avoid stress remains an open question.

**Can Stress Ever Be Good for Relationships?**

Thus far, almost all of the research described in this chapter indicates that stress, on average, is bad for relationships. Yet all of the models described earlier acknowledged that this need not always be the case. The ABC-X Model (R. Hill, 1949) and its descendants recognized that the outcome of successfully coping with stress can be a stronger relationship, and one that is more resilient to stress in the future (see also Simpson & Rholes, 1994). Indeed, there is evidence from numerous sources that people who have faced adversity and conquered it in the past are more resilient to the challenges they face in the present (Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010). With respect to relationships, a couple that has successfully maintained closeness through a serious stressor (e.g., the death of a child, a natural disaster, a period of financial instability) may be similarly confident in the face of new stressors. In terms of the classic theories, such a couple, drawing strength from their past experiences, may be more likely to interpret new stressors as challenges to be overcome than as catastrophes to be endured.

Yet there is also copious evidence that stressful experiences can leave lasting scars on individuals in terms of increased sensitivity and reactivity. For example, children exposed to impoverished environments early in life develop increased inflammatory responses that persist into adulthood (Miller et al., 2009). Early adversity can have consequences for later relationships as well: Young people who recover from childhood depression have higher rates of divorce as adults, even if their depression does not recur (Gottlib, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1998).

Thus, there is a critical question for research on stress in general and on stress in relationships in particular. Under what circumstances does stress lead to increased vulnerability and under what circumstances does it lead to greater resilience? Recent longitudinal research with couples suggests that part of the answer lies in the availability of personal, social, and concrete resources that couples can bring to bear on their initial stress (Neff & Broady, 2011). The more resources available to facilitate successful coping with an initial stressor, the fewer lasting consequences and the more likely the consequences will be resilience rather than increased vulnerability (see Meichenbaum, 1985). Future research should continue to elaborate on these issues within the context of intimate relationships.

**Conclusion**

When scientific research on intimate relationships began in the 1930s, no one was very interested in the effects of stress because most researchers assumed that the context of a relationship was irrelevant (Adams, 1946; Burgess & Cotrell, 1939; Terman, 1939). What mattered to those early researchers were individual differences, for they believed that the outcome of a relationship between two people was primarily the result of the qualities of those two people. This view dominated research on relationships until the behavioral and cognitive revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s, when clinicians and marital researchers responded to the rapid rise in divorce rates by drawing attention, not to who partners are, but rather to what couples do (Gottman, 1979; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). The focus on behavior was grounded in the hopeful notion that, if the behaviors associated with satisfying and lasting relationships could be identified, those behaviors could be taught, and relationships could thereby be improved.

In light of this history, the recent turn toward understanding intimate relationships in their many contexts has some radical and possibly unsettling implications. In stark contrast to the assumptions of prior generations of researchers, research on the effects of stress demonstrates that the development of intimate relationships is affected in significant ways by forces outside of the control, and sometimes outside of the awareness, of couples themselves. The prospect of teaching couples to interact more effectively seems less promising given evidence that couples who know perfectly well how
crisis, even if their depression does
Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1998).

A critical question for research on stress in relationships in part,
though circumstances does stress lead
to greater resilience? Recent work with couples suggests that part of
the availability of personal, social, and
what circumstances does stress bring about things that can bring to
different stressors that couples can bring to a stressor, the fewer lasting con-
note longer-term effects from marital therapy than those not faced
with such challenging circumstances (Jacobson, Schmaling, & Holzworth-Munro, 1987).

This is a crucial lesson for policy makers, but one
that has been difficult to learn. Over the past decade,
the federal government, seeking to address the dispropor-
tionately high divorce rate among lower income
populations, has devoted hundreds of millions of dollars toward marital education programs targeting
couples in lower-income communities (Dion, 2005).

These programs focus almost exclusively on teaching effective
communication skills (Ooms, 2005). To
date, the results of one evaluation indicate that, after
two-month follow-up, they have no effects at all on
whether couples stay together or break up (Wood, McConnell, Moore, & Clarkwest, 2010). Given
the stress that low-income couples are likely to be under, the failure of programs that focus primarily
on behavior might have been predicted in advance.

The research reviewed in this chapter suggests a
fundamentally different approach to improving
intimate relationships and marriages than the ones now
being implemented. Teaching couples more adaptive
to improve relationships if those relationships are taking place in a context
filled with many stressors. The lesson of research on stress is that intimate relationships, like gardens,
need supportive environments in which to thrive. The next generation of policies to improve
relationships within disadvantaged communities may need to
address these environments directly.

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