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Adaptation in Lasting Marriages

by Richard A. Mackey & Bernard A. O'Brien

Abstract

This paper is based on research that explored how 120 spouses from a sample of 60 white, African American, and Mexican American marriages adapted over the life span of their relationships which included the early years prior to children, the child-rearing years, and the empty-nest years. Important dimensions of these relationships – conflict and its management, sexuality, intimacy, decision-making and satisfaction – were explored in semi-structured interviews with each spouse. Understanding how spouses adapt over the life span of their relationships has important implications for prevention programs and for practice.

UNDERSTANDING HOW A PRIMARY relationship, such as marriage, evolves is important to human service practitioners. As practice shifts to a strengths perspective, it is useful to study how couples who have stayed together for many years have adapted in their relationships. Such an understanding also has implications for planning programs to prevent marital breakdown. Finally, understanding adaptation in lasting marriages may be helpful in working with couples in time-limited modes since the experiences of successful couples may offer clues for direction in brief intervention.

A multi-dimensional semi-structured interview format was used to examine interactive themes in the quality of relationships over the years. We explored retrospectively how husbands and wives, who had been married over twenty years, adapted to each other from the early years of marriage, through the parenting years, and into the post-parenting or empty-nest years. The goal was to assess relational themes that included: conflict and its management, sexual relations, psychological intimacy, decision-making and overall marital satisfaction. The focus was on the influence of gender in a sample of white, African American, and Mexican American couples.

A life span/developmental perspective (Dilworth-Anderson & Burton, 1996) fit with the goal of understanding how spouses adapted in important dimensions of their relationships. In adopting this perspective, the focus of the investigation was on patterns of behavior from the point of view of each spouse. The following research questions outlined the exploration of how spouses adapted in their relationships over the years:

1. What was the nature of conflict in these relation-

- ships during the early years of marriage, through the child-rearing, and into recent years?

2. How did each spouse cope with relational conflict over the years?

3. How did spouses experience the quality of sexual relations over the years?

4. What were their perceptions of psychological intimacy between spouses over the years?

5. How did they make decisions over the years?

6. How satisfied were they with their relationships over the years?

Researchers who have examined the quality of marriage have hypothesized a curvilinear or “u-shaped” pattern in relationships from early marriage through the child rearing years and into the empty-nest years (Hicks & Platt, 1970; O’Neil, Fishman & Kinsella-Shaw, 1987; Moore, 1980; Rollins & Feldman, 1970; Rollins & Cannon, 1974; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). Studies have found that specific dimensions of marital relationships, such as satisfaction, begin at a high level, regress to a lower level during the child-rearing years, and rebound to a high level again after children have been reared. Generally, the changes involved in rearing children and the accompanying stresses have been hypothesized as the reasons for that regression.

In a study on the curvilinear hypothesis, Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) assessed satisfaction, problem solving, and sexual enjoyment in the marriages of 169 Harvard graduates who had been married for at least twenty years. Their findings supported a “u-shaped” pattern in relationships over the years. Marital quality reached a low level during the child-rearing years and rebounded in later years. Wives

reported that the most difficult times for their marriages were during the children's adolescence. In recent years, managing relational conflict, including the handling of differences, was problematic primarily because many wives were not happy with their husbands' avoidance of discussing relational differences. This resulted in diminished satisfaction among wives with their marriages. Many of the Vaillant findings were similar to other studies that have focused on changes in marital relationships over time.

The majority of research on how marriages develop over the years, including the above studies, have focused on white middle-class samples. In a meta-analysis of longitudinal research on marriage published over the past several decades, Karney and Bradbury (1995) found that 75% of the samples were white and middle class. Diversity in race and social class are important variables to consider in attempting to understand how marriages develop. Unfortunately, most of the research designed to enhance understanding does not include the effect on marital processes of these critical factors. Therefore, the present study purposively recruited couples who were racially, educationally, and occupationally diverse.

Existing studies have tended to focus on a single or a few dimensions of relationships that have been measured with standardized instruments, such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). Such approaches, as valuable as they are, may present a skewed picture of adaptation over time. The use of a life-span theoretical frame in the approach reported in this paper allowed for the exploration of several dimensions of relationships from the perspectives of individual spouses.

Interviews with individual spouses yielded rich accounts of relational experiences over the years. This retrospective data, even with limitations, offer a different understanding of relationships than those based on standardized measures at planned intervals. After more than twenty years of being together, distance allowed one to evaluate different time periods within the context of the marital life span as a whole. The research reported in this paper presents a different yet important view of how individuals experience one of the most meaningful relationships in their lives.

Methods

An interview format was developed after a review of the literature on marriages (Barry, 1970; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Kelly & Conley,

1987; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Rubin, 1983; Spanier & Fleeer, 1980); the semi-structured interview was pretested by the researchers. Collaborative researchers conducted additional pilot testing and provided feedback which led to further refinement of the interview guide. The guide was divided into four major sections: the relationship; social influences including economic and cultural factors; their parents' marriages; and respondents' experiences of relationships with their spouses over time which was subdivided into three time periods: the early years prior to children, the middle or child-rearing years, and recent years. The boundaries that marked these three periods of time were somewhat different depending on characteristics of the life span of individual marriages. For example, the study included only couples with children but did not control for numbers of children, spacing, or how soon after marriage the first child was born. Given our goal of exploring themes in relationships over time, the flexibility of our criteria was appropriate. The objective was to acquire in-depth information from the point of view of individual spouses in order to develop an understanding of how each spouse adapted to marriage over the life of their relationships.

An open-ended style of interviewing was followed to allow for freedom of expression (Kvale, 1983). Focal questions were used to elicit information from the perspectives of each respondent. Interviews were exploratory and discovery-oriented (Moon, Dillon, & Sprenkle, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) which allowed respondents to express their individual perceptions of their interactions with spouses within their own frame of reference. That approach, which adapted clinical interviewing skills to the needs of the research, explored the experiences of individuals within relationships as they remembered and reported them.

Interviewers, who were advanced doctoral students with extensive clinical experience, were trained in the use of the interview guide. They were respectful and accepting of the uniqueness of each respondent's perceptions. Their empathic interviewing skills were a valuable resource in collecting the data.

The interviews were held in the homes of respondents, which provided additional information about their lifestyles and environments. Prior to each interview, respondents were told about the purpose of the study, given an overview of the interview schedule, and were assured their identities would remain anonymous. Informed consent for audio taping and the research use of interviews were obtained. Each partner was interviewed separately; the length of each of the interviews

was approximately two hours.

Sample

The sample was chosen purposively to fit with the goal of developing an understanding of adaptation among a diverse group of couples in long-lasting relationships. Couples were recruited who met the following criteria:

1. married at least twenty years
2. youngest child at least eighteen years and/or out of high school
3. no current psychotherapy and history of extensive marriage counseling
4. racial, ethnic, educational and religious diversity.

Couples were recruited through business, professional, and trade union organizations as well as through churches, synagogues, and a variety of other community organizations. Most couples resided in the northeast part of the country with the exception of Mexican Americans who resided in the southwest.

Of the 120 respondents (60 wives and 60 husbands) who were interviewed, 57% were white, 23% were African American, and 20% were Mexican American. Forty-two percent were Catholic, 33% were Protestant, and 25% were Jewish. Thirty-five percent were college graduates and 65% were non-college graduates.

The average age of respondents was 59.32 years ($SD = 9.12$): 16% were in their forties, 64% in their fifties and sixties and 20% in their seventies. Couples had been married an average of 36.65 years ($SD = 8.24$): 27% of couples had been married over forty years; 42% between thirty and forty years; and 31% less than thirty but more than twenty years. Thirty-five percent of couples had one or two children; 47% had three or four; and 18% had five or more. By total family income, approximately 12% of couples earned less than \$25,000 and 19% over \$100,000. Thirty-two percent had family incomes between \$25,000 and \$49,999; 25% between \$50,000 and \$74,999; and 12% between \$75,000 and \$99,999.

Coding and Data Analysis

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding and to prepare the data for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Data were classified and analyzed using the "grounded theory" method (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Interview passages were coded for relational themes which were then developed into categories.

Initially, eight transcriptions were coded blindly and individually by a research team (two women, two men). Detailed notes were kept and categories were generated. A

relationship coding sheet was developed and used in subsequent coding of eight additional interviews. As new categories arose, previous interviews were recoded in keeping with the constant comparative process. Having both genders involved in that process added to the strength of the coding and contributed to the development of a shared conceptual analysis. Using this method, a scoring system was developed to identify themes that evolved from each section of the interviews. There were over ninety dichotomous categories in twenty-four topic areas for every spouse; rating scores were developed for each of the three periods: early years before children, middle or child-rearing years, and the recent or empty-nest years.

Once the Relationship Coding Sheet was developed, each interview was coded independently by two raters (one male and one female) who noted categories and themes as they emerged from the transcripts. One of the authors coded all 120 interviews to insure continuity in the operational definitions of variables and consistency of judgments from case to case. The raters then met to review their independent codes. The agreement between raters, determined by dividing the number of identical judgments by the total number of codes, was 87%. Cohen's kappa was used as a measure of inter-rater reliability for each of the variables and ranged from .79 to .94. These coefficients were more than adequate to support the reliability of the coding system. When discrepancies occurred, the raters discussed the differences and re-examined the original transcripts until a consensus was reached as to how a particular item was to be scored.

The coded data from the scoring sheets yielded frequencies which were analyzed using SPSS software. Chi-square analysis was used to examine the relationship between variables; the Alpha criteria was set at .05. Quantitative analysis offered direction to the qualitative analysis. The latter included the use of HyperResearch software (Hesse-Biber, Dupuis, & Kinder, 1992), which enabled the researchers to identify, catalogue, and organize specific interview passages on which categorical codes had been based. HyperResearch, a highly efficient and reliable tool in the qualitative analysis of data, allowed us to do a thorough content analysis of interview transcripts, which totaled over six thousand double-spaced pages.

Results

Change across the life span of these relationships in conflict and its management, sexuality, psychological intimacy, decision-making, and marital satisfaction was a

multidirectional process. A u-shaped pattern was found in some dimensions (the severity of marital conflict, psychological intimacy for wives, and satisfaction with marriage). The quality and frequency of sexual relations, which regressed during the child-rearing years, continued to regress in the empty-nest years. In other dimensions (mutuality in decision making and styles of managing conflict), progressive change over the years was reported. The relational patterns over the years between husbands and wives are shown in Figures 1-6. Based on chi-square analysis, the discussion highlights those relationships between variables that were statistically significant.

Conflict and Its Management

Respondents were asked to describe the kinds of conflict in their marriages over the years. Since at least some conflict was inevitable in relationships that had endured for more than twenty years, our task was to assess the severity of conflict. "Minor" conflict involved differences that did not disrupt positive connections between spouses. If a respondent reported that differences had a disruptive effect on relationships and resulted in emotional estrangement, diminished communication and in feelings of unhappiness, conflict was coded "major." An example of major conflict and avoidance of it follows:

I tried to talk to him about it, but I wouldn't get any answer. Then when we'd have a fight or something I'd just go in the other room. I'd never talk to him because he just wouldn't listen. So I held most of my stuff, any disagreements. We never really screamed or yelled because I just refused to fight. I'm not a fighter. And that's how we handled it. We didn't. We just let it ride.

Figure 1 shows the patterns of major conflict over the years. Major conflict was reported by 13% of wives and 12% of husbands prior to child-rearing. Those percentages rose to 33% of wives and 25% of husbands during the parenting years and then fell to 8% and 5% during the empty-nest years.

A higher percentage of African American respondents (18%) compared to whites and Mexican Americans (11%) reported major conflict in the early years. During the child-rearing years, the rate of major conflict among African Americans remained about the same but almost tripled among whites and Mexican Americans.

In addition to race, differences in reports of major conflict may have been fueled by two other culturally related factors: the non-traditional expectations of African American spouses about marital roles (equity and sharing of responsibilities) compared to the traditional expectations of white and Mexican American spouses [$X^2(2, N = 120) = 11.62, p = .003$], and the higher levels of involvement among African American men compared to other men in parenting during the infancy years of their children [$X^2(2, N = 120) = 8.27, p = .02$], a difference which continued into the latency and adolescent years. Compared to traditional marital roles in which women took care of the home and nurtured their families and men worked in order to provide for their families, non-traditional roles were ambiguous and required negotiation. Ambiguity and negotiation of roles, for which there were few models, may have been a significant factor leading to major conflict. As white and Mexican American husbands became involved in parenting, especially during their children's adolescence, higher rates of major conflict were reported as these couples struggled to adapt to different roles. By that time, African American couples may have resolved conflict that was associated with negotiating their non-traditional roles.

An important aspect of marital conflict was the styles of husbands and wives in responding to conflict about differences. Spouses were asked: "How did you handle differences in your marriage?" If they described any behavior to deny or escape from face-to-face discussion, their style of managing conflict was coded as "avoidant." If they re-

Figure 1. Percentage of wives and husbands reporting major conflicts over the years.

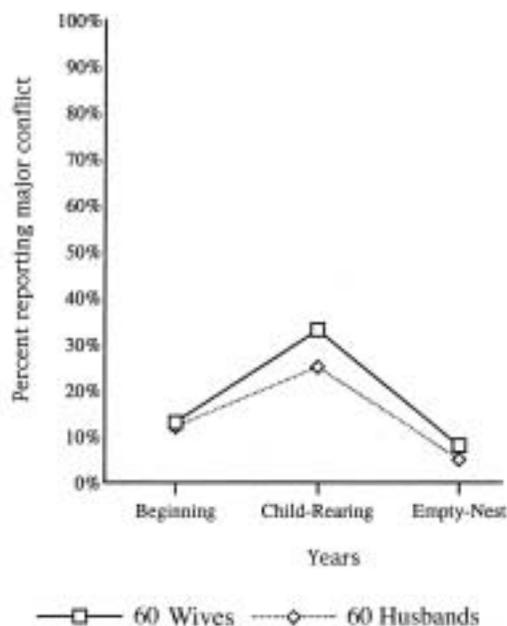
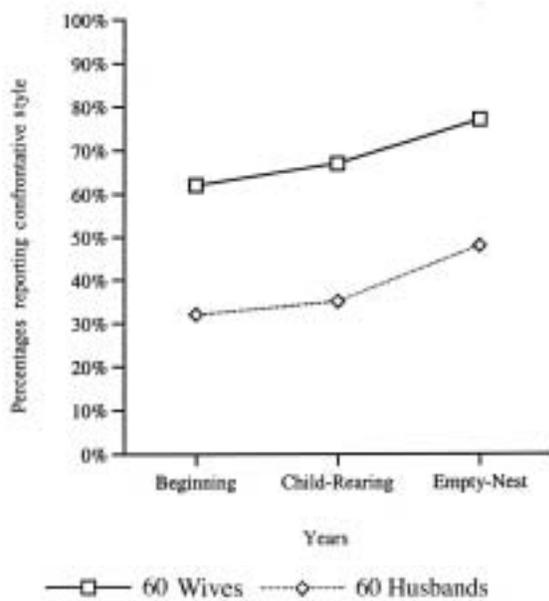


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents reporting confrontative styles of managing conflict over the years.



ported efforts to express their thoughts and feelings about differences directly to their spouses, their style was coded as “confrontive.” Responses that included both types of behavior were coded according to the predominant style described in their replies. The results are shown in Figure 2.

From early to recent years, there were statistically significant differences between husbands and wives in their reports of how conflict was managed by themselves and by their spouses. Wives were twice as likely as husbands to deal with conflict through face-to-face discussions (i.e. confrontation): 62% of wives were confrontive early in marriage which rose slightly to 67% during the child-rearing years and to 77% in recent years. Thirty-two percent of husbands remembered themselves as confrontive in the early years [$X^2(1, N=120) = 10.85, p = .001$], a percentage which remained constant throughout the child-rearing years when it increased slightly to 35% [$X^2(1, N = 120) = 12.04, p = .001$]. By the empty-nest years, 48% of husbands described themselves as confrontive in managing conflict [$X^2(1, N = 120) = 10.28, p = .001$].

African American respondents were different from others in how they perceived themselves managing conflict from the beginning years [$X^2(2, N = 120) = 6.62, p = .04$] through the child-rearing years [$X^2(2, N = 120) = 6.58, p = .04$]. Their marital relationships were characterized more by confrontive modes of dealing with conflict than were

those of white and Mexican American couples. An African-American man described how he and his spouse dealt with differences between them:

We’re confrontational. We don’t keep anything down. If something is there you let it out. Get it out in the open. And then it’ll be over with. African American spouses valued face-to-face modes of conflict management that appeared to fit with the non-traditional nature of their relational roles. By the empty-nest years, significant differences disappeared between African Americans and others in styles of managing conflict.

Sexual Relations

Respondents were asked to discuss their sexual relationships over the years. The quality of sexual relations, as shown in Figure 3, was defined by the reported satisfaction with sex, which was associated generally with the frequency of sexual intercourse; that is, the more satisfied respondents were with sex, the more frequently they had intercourse. Responses were coded either “positive” or “negative” depending on the predominant descriptions of how spouses reported their thoughts and feelings about sex.

The quality of sexual relations declined during the child-rearing years and continued to decline into the empty-nest years, when 45% of both husbands and wives reported dissatisfaction with this aspect of their relation-

Figure 3. Percentages of wives and husbands reporting positive sexual relations over the years.

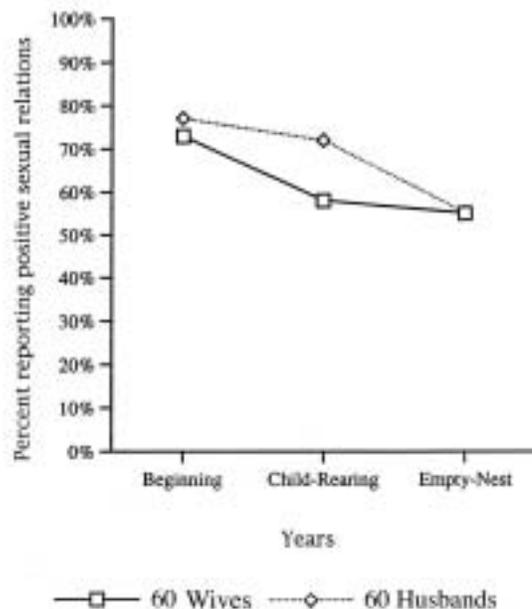
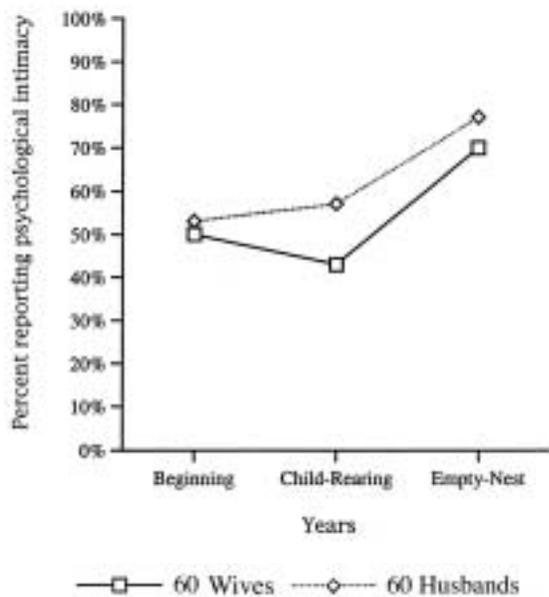


Figure 4. Percentages of wives and husbands reporting psychological intimacy over the years.



ships. However, the pattern over time in the quality of sexual relations was different for African American compared to Mexican American and white spouses. The reported level of sexual satisfaction, which was positive for all groups during the early years of marriage, did not decline among African Americans during the child-rearing years as it did for other respondents. During that phase, 82% of African Americans compared to 70% of Mexican Americans and 56% of whites were satisfied with sex [$X^2(2, N = 120) = 6.46, p = .04$]. By the empty-nest years, significant differences between ethnic groups disappeared although African Americans were not as positive as others about sex. That difference appeared to have been related to age and physical impairments. African American respondents were older than others and reported higher rates of difficulties with sexual relations because of health problems.

Two other measures of sexuality, the importance of sexual relations as assessed by each spouse and physical touching without sexual intercourse, remained relatively constant over the years. Roughly half of the respondents reported that physical touching was an important part of their relationships, a figure that did not change significantly throughout marriage. Mexican Americans reported significantly more physical touching throughout their marriages than did other respondents. Even as sexual relations continued to decline into the empty-nest years, over 75%

of spouses said that sex was important to the quality of their relationships.

Psychological Intimacy

As depicted in Figure 4, psychological intimacy, defined by reports of the comfort and openness of respondents in sharing their personal thoughts and feelings with their spouses, showed a curvilinear pattern for wives but not for husbands. If respondents described this dimension of their relationships along the line of this definition, intimacy was coded "positive"; if they described estrangement and a lack of personal closeness, intimacy was coded "negative."

Although the differences between spouses were not statistically significant, husbands reported a slight increase and wives a decline in psychological intimacy during the child-rearing years. During the empty-nest years, 77% of husbands and 70% of wives viewed their relationships as psychologically intimate. The enhanced quality of psychological intimacy contrasted with the decline in sexual relations during the empty-nest years.

Mutuality in Decision-Making

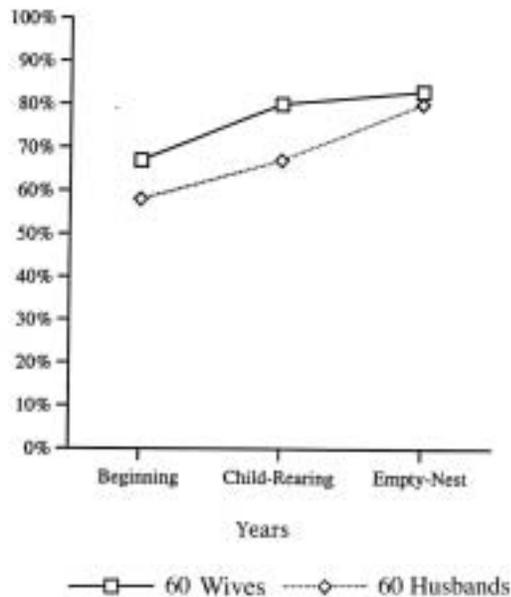
An aspect of relationships that contributed to the enhanced sense of intimacy during the empty-nest years may have been related to the reported increase in mutuality of decision-making that began during the child-rearing years. Respondents were asked how they went about making decisions over the years. If they responded by saying that they and their spouse made most major decisions mutually, this variable was coded "mutual"; if not, it was coded "separate." Husbands became more involved in parenting as children moved from latency into adolescence. Mutuality in decision making about the rearing of adolescents appeared to be a vehicle for reaching new levels of psychological intimacy in marital relationships despite the increase in conflict between spouses about parenting roles and behaviors.

Although not statistically significant, African Americans compared to others reported slightly higher levels of mutuality in decision making during the early and child-rearing years. That difference disappeared as children entered adolescence.

Marital Satisfaction

After exploring conflict and its management, quality of communication, mutuality in decision making, and the sense of sexual and psychological intimacy, we asked respondents to assess how satisfied they were, in general, with their relationships. If their responses were predomi-

Figure 5. Percentages of wives and husbands reporting mutual decision making over the years.



nantly positive, satisfaction was coded “positive”; if not, it was coded “negative.”

Patterns of overall satisfaction are displayed in Figure 6. Over the years, wives were less satisfied than husbands with their marriages. In the early years, 63% of wives and 78% of husbands remembered being satisfied with their relationships. Among wives, satisfaction fell to 50% during child-rearing years; 73% of husbands reported being satisfied during the child-rearing years, a significant difference between spouses [$X^2(1, N = 120) = 6.91, p = .01$]. By the empty-nest years, marital satisfaction rebounded to beyond pre-child rearing levels; then, 85% of wives and 87% of husbands talked in positive ways about their relationships. Patterns of overall marital satisfaction during the three phases of marriage did not differ substantially between ethnic groups.

The u-shaped pattern of marital satisfaction among wives was evident in the following vignette from an interview with a mother of two children:

The beginning and the end are the same. The middle was awful in my life. I don't think I would've had children. I wish I didn't have children . . . I wasn't ready for them.

This vignette was indicative of the decline in satisfac-

tion with marriages during the child-rearing years among half of the wives in this study. Primary responsibility for parenting added to other responsibilities for taking care of households, when many women had returned to employment outside the home, contributed to dissatisfaction with marital relationships during those years.

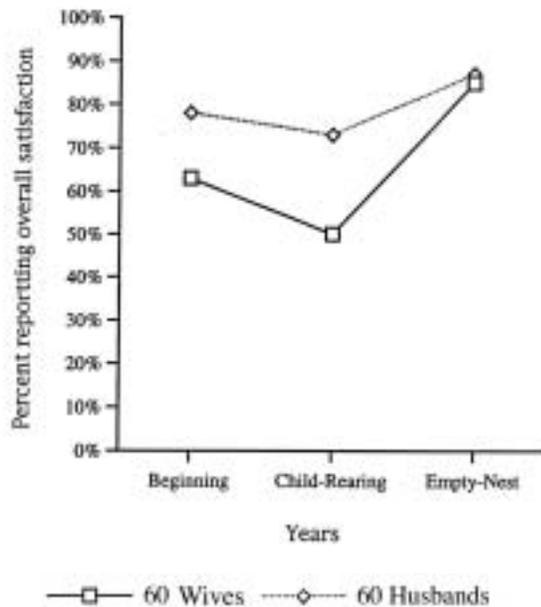
Discussion Implications for Practice

Themes in the patterns of marital relationships over time were explored in sixty culturally diverse marriages that had lasted for more than twenty years. The findings reported in this paper, which were elicited through in-depth, focal question interviews with each spouse, are useful in understanding adaptation in various dimensions of relationships over the years. They have several implications for practice:

First, the findings underscore the importance of doing a careful assessment of how spouses adapt in their relationships over the years. Relational shifts in dimensions of these marriages was a multidirectional process. While regression was reported in some dimensions during the child-rearing years (major conflict, overall marital satisfaction, and psychological intimacy for wives), other changes, which continued into the empty-nest years, were taking place in a progressive direction (mutuality in decision making and psychological intimacy for husbands and styles of managing conflict). The quality and frequency of sexual relations, which regressed during the child-rearing years, continued to regress during the empty-nest years. While diminished sexual functioning may have a negative effect on the relationships of older couples, practitioners need to recognize and focus on important balances that contribute to marital happiness. These balances include the deepening of psychological intimacy, increases in mutual decision making and improved skills in managing conflict and adapting to differences. Those strengths became very important to the well-being of spouses as couples lived out their lives together. The hypothesis of balances fits well with a strength approach to practice with couples.

Second, the data need to be assessed within the context of several historical and cultural factors. In practice, assessments need to adopt an approach to cultural dynamics that acknowledges the complexity of interacting factors that shape behavior, an observation evident in our data. Single-factor approaches fall short of helping one to understand, as fully as possible, the dynamic and complex nature of human behavior. For example, African American couples compared to others reported more major conflict

Figure 6. Percentages of wives and husbands reporting marital satisfaction over the years.



during the early years of relationships; in addition to race, African Americans differed significantly from others in their expectations and adoption of non-traditional marital roles, in which responsibilities for various tasks were shared by both spouses. Other couples integrated and accepted specific role behaviors that were ascribed by the prevailing values about gender in the post World War II era; that is, women stayed at home to take care of the house and to rear children and men worked outside of the home to provide for their families. When traditional models for marital roles based on gender did not fit with the aspirations of individual couples, as they did not with many African American couples, major conflict occurred as spouses attempted to work out mutually satisfying roles during the early years of marriage. In contrast to other couples, both spouses in most African American marriages worked because of economic necessity, which reinforced their expectations to share responsibilities for household tasks and the rearing of children. Adding to the mix of variables that shaped adaptation among African American couples was the threat of racism, especially to black men who put themselves at risk by being assertive in the world outside of the home. Compared to other husbands, more black men reported confrontive conflict management styles in adapting to differences with their spouses, which was another element in their non-traditional roles. The

home and the marriage may have been one of the few places where an African American man could safely assert himself. The interdependence of personal, racial, social, economic, and interpersonal factors require assessment when practitioners are attempting to understand what shapes marital role behaviors, such as those of African American couples in this study. The professional challenge is to weigh how various factors interact and contribute to observed behaviors in marriage.

Third, the reports of husbands and wives about conflict management styles resonated with the findings of previous research on gender-related behaviors in relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1986; O'Neil et al., 1987; Surrey, 1984; Zube, 1982). Although husbands, mainly white and Mexican-American, became less avoidant in dealing with conflict during recent years than in earlier years, 52% of all husbands continued to avoid face-to-face discussions of marital conflict. Recent studies of adult male development (Levant, 1996) suggest that males have a difficult time adapting to changes in sex roles, a significant component of which is conflict management styles between husbands and wives. Yet, husbands were not avoidant with our interviewers in exploring their patterns of avoidant behaviors with their wives; many of them were aware and acknowledged that characteristic about themselves. The findings suggest that an efficacious approach to counseling may lie in supporting spouses to talk about that "reality" rather than in attempting to change behavior, such as avoidance. That is, to enable spouses to communicate about communication and to develop selective understanding of reason(s) for differences in behavior, such as being raised in a family that did not encourage or tolerate open discussion of feelings about interpersonal conflict. An outcome was often acceptance of behaviors that had been an irritant between spouses. As several husbands felt less pressure from their wives to change, they were able to modify their avoidant behavior. Concurrently, wives felt less guilt for being responsible for their husbands' avoidance, which resulted in increased satisfaction with these marriages in recent years.

Fourth, the data underscore the importance of acknowledging and supporting what appear to be adaptive strengths in working with couples, particularly older spouses who have been together for many years. A strengths perspective by practitioners in working with couples who are committed to making their relationships "work" in middle and old age is appropriate. Focusing on what is going right in relationships and satisfying to each spouse reinforces self esteem, which is important in itself and may free spouses to explore aspects of relationships

that are not going “right.” A principle in the strengths perspective is the respect for the resiliency and capacity of spouses to draw upon innate resources to adapt in relationships. Although the couples in this study had never sought professional help for their marriages, they did not appear to be that different from many couples whom we have treated, except that they had the capacity to call upon strengths without the benefit of professional help. In working with couples, that characteristic points to the utility of adopting a strengths perspective that validates and supports adaptive resources within relationships.

Fifth, the concept of balances, which is an important part of the strengths perspective, leads to the question of the interventive role in working with couples. The findings in our study along with those of other investigators provide practitioners with some valuable suggestions in working with couples, both in prevention programs and in marital therapy. Consistent with the data presented in this paper, Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998) reported that women initiated the majority of discussions of marital conflict in their laboratory setting. Based on research into physiological responses of men and women to conflict in marriage, Gottman and Levinson (1988) found that men react to stress by withdrawing emotionally so as to avoid negative affect. Women reacted differently to conflict. They were more likely than were men to initiate face-to-face discussions of relational conflict. These findings, too, are consistent with those reported in this paper.

In attempting to integrate our findings with those of other researchers, we have modified our approach toward helping couples improve their problem-solving skills. Instead of an active listening approach oriented to helping spouses hear each other with accuracy and empathy, we now emphasize the recognition and acceptance of gender differences and how those differences influence the perceptions of spouses about their individual needs, expectations, and roles in marital relationships. Mindful of legitimate gender differences in how spouses may respond to conflict, we focus on here-and-now issues and emphasize that couples communicate in a concrete and specific way. Rather than explore the history of conflict that has resulted in a psychological “sack” of hurt feelings, the emphasis is on constructive processes that do not escalate conflict. In other words, we try to utilize the strengths that spouses bring to the relationship in order to unleash and to support their natural capacities toward higher levels of adaptation.

A sixth and final implication relates to the research methodology, which fits well with the skills of social workers. The study demonstrates how clinical interviewing skills may be adapted for a research purpose. The use of

in-depth, focal question interviews conducted by empathic interviewers has the potential to elicit patterns in relationships that may remain obscure with other modes of data collection. Although this methodology has limitations — such as respondents not remembering events; memories becoming distorted with the passage of time; and respondents not being candid or presenting themselves in ways that are not congruent with how they think or feel — we were impressed with the candor of respondents in discussing sensitive issues, such as sexual dysfunctions and avoidant behaviors. Having been open about those issues suggests that spouses were likely to have been open about other aspects of their relationships. One of the primary

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factors in understanding the openness of respondents was the skill of interviewers in creating a safe environment within which personal matters could be explored. Acceptance and respect for the views of individual respondents was important in this process.

In conclusion, the research methodology parallels and to a considerable extent mirrors effective practice principles. Thoughts and feelings associated with success may have allowed other aspects of relationships, which were not so pleasant, to emerge during interviews. Perceived strengths may have supported an acceptance and acknowledgment of perceived weaknesses. Also, respondents may not have felt as vulnerable in discussing their relationship as a whole when the interviewer was a person who conveyed acceptance, respect, a desire to understand and to learn from a respondent. These values grounded in the social work profession were important resources for eliciting and exploring how spouses adapted in their marriages.

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