

Mood Reactivity to Marital Conflict: The Influence of Marital Dissatisfaction and Depression

MARK A. WHISMAN

LAUREN M. WEINSTOCK

University of Colorado at Boulder

LISA A. UEBELACKER

Brown University

In a sample of married couples, approximately half of which included a wife with major depression, we evaluated whether mood reactivity (i.e., pre- to post-interaction changes in mood) to marital conflict resolution interactions was associated with marital dissatisfaction, depression, or both. In support of the marital discord model of depression, results indicated that greater marital dissatisfaction was associated with greater increases in depressed mood for both wives and husbands; depressed wives also reported greater increases in depressed mood than nondepressed wives. In comparison, husbands of depressed wives did not differ in their mood reactivity from husbands of nondepressed wives, which failed to support Coyne's (1976b) interpersonal theory of depression. Results suggest that the mood-reactivity paradigm may provide an important framework for evaluating partners' experiences of changes in moods following intimate interactions.

The association between marital dissatisfaction and depression has been well documented (for a review, see Whisman, 2001). Specifically, self-report measures of marital dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms are significantly correlated for both men and women in community samples (e.g., O'Leary, Christian, & Mendell, 1994). Furthermore, compared to spouses with no current depression, marital dissatisfaction is greater among individuals with major depression, as evidenced in both epidemiological (e.g., Weissman, 1987; Whisman, 1999) and treatment-seeking samples (e.g., Vega et al., 1993).

The observed association between marital dissatisfaction and depression has led some theorists to conclude that "the marital relationship may play a

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Address correspondence to Mark A. Whisman, University of Colorado at Boulder, Department of Psychology, 345 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0345; e-mail: whisman@colorado.edu.

powerful role in the development and maintenance of depression as well as having potential utility in promoting recovery and maintenance of gains" (Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990, p. 53). There are several strategies that investigators have used to evaluate whether the marital relationship is associated with the development and maintenance of depression. Early studies on the temporal association between marital functioning and depression relied primarily upon retrospective methods (e.g., Paykel et al., 1969). Other investigators have specifically attempted to determine whether marital dissatisfaction antedated the onset of depression by directly asking depressed individuals about the temporal association between the two (e.g., Birtchnell & Kennard, 1983). More recently, investigators evaluating the temporal association between marital dissatisfaction and changes in depression severity have used prospective longitudinal studies (e.g., Beach & O'Leary, 1993; Dehle & Weiss, 1998; Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997). In addition, there is evidence from longitudinal studies that marital dissatisfaction may precede, and therefore potentially be causally related to, the onset of major depression (Whisman & Bruce, 1999).

Although informative regarding the temporal association between marital functioning and depression, there are difficulties involved in interpreting the findings from existing studies. First and foremost, there is often considerable time between assessments of marital dissatisfaction and depression. For example, Fincham et al. (1997) evaluated these two variables on two occasions separated by a period of 18 months. As such, this design may underestimate the impact that marital functioning has on depression, because it does not address the impact of intervening relationship experiences between assessments. For example, it is likely that marital satisfaction will decrease over time for some couples, which would increase their likelihood of depression.

A stronger test of the association between marital functioning and depression would be to measure them in closer proximity and under a controlled setting, in which intervening experiences could be minimized. One such strategy would be to evaluate the impact of a maritally relevant event on spouses' moods in a laboratory setting. According to the marital discord model of depression, one mediator between marital discord and depression is negative interaction (Beach et al., 1990), and there is a sizable body of research that has evaluated the interaction patterns of couples with a depressed spouse (e.g., Biglan et al., 1985; Johnson & Jacob, 1997, 2000; Kowalik & Gotlib, 1987; Nelson & Beach, 1990; Schmaling & Jacobson, 1990). Thus, evaluating mood reactions to marital interaction may prove fruitful in studying marital functioning and depression.

In studying mood reactions in married dyads, investigators have generally pursued one of two strategies. First, investigators have coded spouses' affect using behavioral observation coding (e.g., Gottman, 1994). Second, investigators have had spouses report on their own moods. For example, spouses have retrospectively rated the mood that they experienced during an interaction (Geist & Gilbert, 1996) or have watched a video of their interaction and

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