Marital Processes Linking Economic Hardship to Mental Health across the Middle Years: The Role of Neurotic Vulnerability

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Theoretical Background

• Life course stress process perspective
• Vulnerability-Stress Adaptation Model (VSAM) (Karney & Bradbury, 1995)

• *Enduring vulnerabilities and external stressors shape adaptive marital processes*
  – Enduring vulnerability = personal characteristics such as neuroticism
  – External stressor = life experience such as economic hardship
  – Adaptive process = trajectories of marital hostility
Theoretical Background

- Outcomes of maladaptive processes:
  - Declining marital quality
  - Poor mental health
  - Poor physical health

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the current study.
Neurotic Vulnerability

• *Neuroticism* is linked to mental health outcomes and marital behavior (Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008)

• Neurotic vulnerability
  • Component of personal-trait neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992)
  • Representing psychological vulnerability
  • Increased stress sensitivity, inability to manage stress

• Couple neurotic vulnerability
  • Product term of husbands’ and wives’ neurotic vulnerability
  • Individual vulnerability may be exacerbated by their partner’s vulnerability
Current Study

- M age = 39 and 34 for husbands and wives in 1989
- Using an SEM framework to examine:
  - Family economic hardship trajectories
    - 1989-1991
  - Neurotic vulnerability of each spouse
    - 1991
  - Couple-level marital hostility trajectories
  - Depressive symptoms of husbands and wives
    - 2001
Measures

• **Neurotic vulnerability** (NEO-PI personality inventory; Costa & McCrae, 1992)
  – 8 items; 5-point scale; $\alpha$ from .84 to .86
  – E.g., “I can handle myself pretty well in a crisis.”
  – Product term computed after centering and transforming to a positive scale to assess couple neurotic vulnerability

• **Family economic hardship**
  – Sum score from 27 items (Dohrenwend, Askenasy, Krasnoff, and Dohrenwend, 1978)
  – E.g., “borrowed money to help pay bills”
• **Marital hostility** (Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996)
  – 7-point scale; α ranging from .80 to .85
  – Partner reports; “e.g., got angry with you”

• **Depressive Symptoms** (SCL-90; Deorgatis & Melisaratos, 1983)
  – Assessed in 1991 and 2001
  – 9 items; 5-point scale; α ranging from .80 to .91
  – E.g., “feelings of worthlessness”
Analyses

- SEM in Mplus
- Univariate growth curves assessing:
  - Family economic hardship
  - Husbands’ and wives’ marital hostility (partner report)
    - Ultimately utilized a second-order growth curve capturing trajectories of couple-level hostility
- Comprehensive model incorporating growth curves
  - Explaining variation in depressive symptoms in 2001 after accounting for 1991
- Moderating role of couple neurotic vulnerability
Figure 2. A SEM assessing personal and couple vulnerability, family economic hardship, marital hostility, and husbands’ and wives’ depressive symptoms. 

Note: Only statistically significant paths are shown. Standardized coefficients are presented. The slope of economic hardship was significantly correlated with husband, wife, and couple vulnerability (r = -.38, -.34, and .24). These correlations are not shown in the figure.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Results

• Fit indices:
  – $\chi^2(\text{df}) = 190.79(72)$
  – CFI = .94
  – RMSEA = .07

• R-square statistics for depressive symptoms (2001)
  – 12.8% for husbands
  – 23.7% for wives

• Indirect effects
  – Change in economic hardship and depressive symptoms through change in marital quality
  – $a*b = .07$ (husbands) and $a*b = .07$ (wives)
Moderation Results

• Mean split to compare couples with “high” and “low” neurotic vulnerability
  – Associations between economic hardship, marital hostility, and depressive symptoms separately

• A lack of effects for couples with low neurotic vulnerability

• Amplified effects for couples with high neurotic vulnerability
Figure 3. A SEM assessing the moderating role of couple-level vulnerability on the hypothesized associations.
Notes. *p < .05. *p < .01. *p < .001. Standardized coefficients are presented for the high vulnerability couples with coefficients for the low vulnerability couples in parentheses.
Findings

• Contributors to change in husbands’ and wives’ depressive symptoms:
  – Hostile marital behavior trajectories
  – Neurotic vulnerability

• Marital hostility trajectories link stressful experiences to changes in depressive symptoms

• Moderation by couple-level neurotic vulnerability
Situating the Findings

• Comprehensive model over an extended period of time

• Unique characteristics of study sample
  – Enduring marriages
  – Couples in midlife
  – Under conditions of above average stressors
Implications

• The *mental health impact* of adverse marital changes

• The role of not only individual enduring vulnerabilities, but the *combination* or product of partners’ vulnerabilities (couple vulnerability)
Thank You

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