

# The Early Marital Roots of Conjugal Distress and Divorce

Ted L. Huston,<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Niehuis, and Shanna E. Smith

Department of Human Ecology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas

## Abstract

This article summarizes research that challenges conventional wisdom about the early roots of marital distress and divorce. We abstract results from a 13-year study that focused on the extent to which long-term marital satisfaction and stability could be forecast from newlywed and early marital data. We explore the usefulness of three models—emergent distress, enduring dynamics, and disillusionment—designed to explain why some marriages thrive and others fail. The dominant paradigm, the emergent-distress model, sees newlyweds as homogeneously blissful and posits that distress develops as disagreements and negativity escalate, ultimately leading some couples to divorce. The results we summarize run counter to this model and suggest instead that (a) newlyweds differ considerably in the intensity of both their romance and the negativity of their behavior toward one another and, for those who remain married, these early dynamics persist over time; and (b) for couples who divorce, romance seems to deteriorate differently depending on how long the marriage lasts. Soon after their wedding, “early exiters” seem to lose hope of improving an unpromising relationship; “delayed-action divorcers” begin marriage on a particularly high note, yet quickly show signs of disillusionment. These delayed-action

divorcers reluctantly give up on the marriage long after the romance has faded.

## Keywords

marriage; love; longitudinal research; divorce; disillusionment

Courting partners are generally drawn toward marriage by romantic love, affection, and a sense of their prospective mate as a caring and understanding person. Yet many couples who enter marriage with a sense of optimism will some day find themselves divorced or in an unhappy union. Are there early signs that foreshadow whether a marriage will succeed or fail? Three developmental models look to different features of the first few years of marriage for clues.

The paradigm most frequently used by researchers and clinicians over the past 20 years—the *emergent-distress* model—focuses on the deleterious effects of increases in conflict and negative behavior. This model presumes that love draws premarital partners toward marriage; thus, newlyweds are deeply in love and highly affectionate. Yet, as Clements, Cordova, Markman, and Laurenceau (1997) argued, “the positive factors that draw people together are indicative of marital choice, but not marital success. Instead, how couples handle differences is the critical factor” (p. 352). As disagreements become more intense and pervasive, spouses eventually begin to perceive each other as disagreeable, or “contrary.” Ultimately, these changes lead couples

to marital distress, or even to divorce. The primary support for this model is rooted in research documenting the deleterious effects of negativity on marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For example, distressed married partners and those headed for divorce tend to use dysfunctional coping mechanisms, such as defensiveness, withdrawal, stonewalling, and contempt, during conflict (Gottman, 1994). Studies in this tradition, however, are typically carried out with couples who have already passed through the early years of marriage, leaving open the question of whether it is negativity that leads to distress or some other early marital process that gives rise to both distress and negativity.

Our own research has led us to elaborate on and explore the usefulness of two models that contrast with the emergent-distress model. The first of these, the *disillusionment* model, suggests that distress and divorce are rooted in the erosion of spouses’ feelings of love and the waning of their affection, as well as in the emergence of ambivalent feelings about their marriage. This model, like the emergent-distress model, assumes that courting couples are blissful, optimistic lovers who, in order to sustain their romance, draw attention to their desirable qualities and try to see the best in each other. After the wedding, however, spouses may be less motivated to impress each other; in addition, the growing intimacy of marriage makes it difficult for them to sustain idealized images. As a result, some spouses may become disappointed, and feel a sense of disillusionment.

The second model, the *enduring-dynamics* model, presumes that relationship patterns take form during courtship and persist into marriage (Huston, 1994). This model, unlike the disillusionment model, presumes that courtship patterns foreshadow

marital patterns—that the “good courtship” presages the “good marriage.” The model suggests that the path to the altar is not a journey fueled by idealization and romance; rather, couples marry with their eyes open to each other’s and the relationship’s strengths and weaknesses.

### ANALYZING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHANGES EARLY IN MARRIAGE FOR MARITAL SUCCESS

The three developmental models differ in the significance they attach to initial differences among newlyweds and to differences in how couples’ marriages change over the first couple of years. Our long-term study of 168 married couples has allowed us to capture both initial differences and changes in couples’ relationships early in marriage and to connect them to long-term marital outcomes (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). When couples were first married, we collected extensive data from each spouse about the couple’s courtship experiences; in addition, when the couples were newlyweds and then across the next 2 years of marriage, we asked the spouses about their feelings toward one another, their perceptions of each other’s personality, and the behavioral climate of their marriage. (Information on the six measures—*love*, *ambivalence*, *behavioral negativity*, *overt expressions of affection*, and perceptions of the *contrariness* and *responsiveness* of the partner’s personality—can be found in Huston et al., 2001.) We examined each of these aspects of the early years of the couples’ marriages in connection with the long-term fate of the relationships.

During the follow-up, which took place a little more than 13 years after the couples were wed,

we ascertained whether they were still married and, if so, their marital satisfaction. We used these data to create a more finely differentiated categorization scheme for classifying marital outcomes than has customarily been used. Researchers interested in predicting marital success typically group couples in one of two ways: They either (a) compare couples who remain married with those who divorce, and thus assume that unhappy couples are more similar to happy couples than they are to those who divorce, or (b) lump couples who are either unhappy or divorced into a single group, which is then compared with happy couples. This tactic ignores the possibility that spouses who stay in unhappy marriages differ from those who divorce. Thus, at a minimum, researchers should separate couples into three groups: happy, unhappy, and divorced. However, because couples who divorce early may do so for different reasons than those who divorce late (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), couples should be differentiated, when possible, in terms of the timing of their divorce. These considerations led us to classify our couples into four groups:

- Happily married (both partners were happy)
- Unhappily married (at least one partner was not happy)
- Early exiters (married 2–6 years before divorcing)
- Delayed-action divorcers (married at least 7 years before divorcing)

A handful of couples who divorced within 2 years of their wedding were not included in these longitudinal analyses (see Huston, 1994; Huston et al., 2001). For the remaining couples who divorced, we used a cutoff point of 7 years to distinguish between early exiters and delayed-action divorcers because data collected by the U.S. Bureau of the Census suggest that the

median length of marriage for couples who eventually divorce is 7.2 years.

### THE ENDURING DYNAMICS OF STABLE MARRIAGES

The emergent-distress and the disillusionment models both posit that newlywed couples start out their marriage as affectionate lovers who live together in harmony. Proponents of these models picture newlyweds as a homogeneous group, and thus believe that newlywed patterns provide few clues as to couples’ future marital fates. Our results, however, provide two pieces of evidence to counter these views: First, couples differed considerably, even as newlyweds, in how enamored they were with each other and how well they got along; furthermore, these newlywed differences were rooted in couples’ premarital relationships (Huston, 1994). Second, the characteristics that initially differentiated the couples who remained married for 13 years remained stable over the first 2 years of marriage, and foreshadowed later marital happiness (Huston et al., 2001). Specifically, couples who were later happily married were more in love and viewed each other as more responsive early in marriage than did those who were later unhappily married, whereas conversely, those who were later unhappily married were more ambivalent and behaved more negatively toward each other during the first 2 years of marriage. Contrary to both the emergent-distress and the disillusionment models, the two groups did not become increasingly differentiated over time, with one exception: Over the first 2 years of marriage, spouses who would later be classified as happy began to see their partner as having a less contrary nature than they did when

they were first married, whereas spouses in the other categories did not change their views of their partner's contrariness.

These findings, consistent with the enduring-dynamics model, show that happy and unhappy couples are distinguishable as newlyweds, that these initial differences persist, and that these early patterns predict the long-term status of the relationship. The enduring-dynamics model, then, explains the early relationship roots of marital unhappiness among stably married couples. The disillusionment model, as we argue in the next section, fares better when we trace the early marital roots of divorce.

### DISILLUSIONMENT AND DIVORCE

The disillusionment and emergent-distress models both focus on the importance of change early in marriage, with the former concentrating on the loss of romance and illusion, and the latter on increases in negative behavior. Our findings suggest that disillusionment—not the emergence of distress—foreshadows divorce (Huston et al., 2001). Couples who showed sharper than average declines in affection and love over the first 2 years of marriage, and those who came to see each other as much less responsive, were more apt to divorce. Moreover, those headed for divorce began to experience stronger feelings of ambivalence about their marital union than those who stayed married. The pattern of change in the character of the romantic bond differed slightly, however, depending on whether couples divorced early or later.

Delayed-action divorcees were highly affectionate and deeply in love as newlyweds, more so even than the couples who would be

happily married 13 years later. These delayed-action divorcees, however, became considerably less affectionate over the first 2 years of marriage compared with other couples. The abatement of their affection was mirrored by similar declines in their propensity to see each other as having a caring and responsive personality. Despite these declines, when delayed-action divorcees reached their second anniversary, they were still as affectionate and as much in love as those who stayed married over the entire course of the study. This configuration of findings suggests that we may well have captured these couples in the very early stages of disenchantment, particularly because their decline in affection was not accompanied by a heightening of ambivalence. Spouses may initially respond to declines in romance by seeking to recapture the initial excitement; if these efforts fail, however, they may eventually reevaluate their marriage and focus more on each other's shortcomings (cf. Kayser, 1993).

The relationships of the early exiters, like those of the delayed-action divorcees, began to unravel over the first 2 years of marriage; the two groups differed in that the early exiters' marriages were less promising at the outset, and the deterioration of their relationships progressed somewhat differently. The early exiters were not particularly enamored or affectionate with each other as newlyweds. Instead, their marriages initially resembled those of couples who would later become unhappily married. Although the changes in how early exiters interacted with their spouses—as reflected in affection and negativity—mirrored the relatively small changes seen in the happily and unhappily married groups, these early exiters nonetheless became more ambivalent about their relationship and fell quickly out of love. It almost seems that

early exiters may have entered marriage with the hope that their relationship would improve—that they would become more affectionate and less negative with time—and when these hoped-for improvements were not realized, their fragile bond deteriorated further.

### WHAT ABOUT EMERGENT DISTRESS?

The emergent-distress model takes as axiomatic the idea that problems surface early in marriage, erode satisfaction, and lead some couples to divorce. Our data provide little evidence for this view (Huston, 1994; Huston et al., 2001). First, advocates of the emergent-distress model argue that groups with different marital outcomes would show negligible differences as newlyweds; in reality, however, the newlyweds we studied varied considerably in both the intensity of their romance and the degree of negativity they displayed toward each other. Second, according to the tenets of emergent distress, couples who are headed toward marital distress and dissolution should become increasingly negative toward each other and should come to see one another as more contrary; thus, in our study, rises in negativity and perceptions of one's partner's contrariness (a) should have differentiated happy from not happy couples and (b) should have been more pronounced for the early exiters than for any other group. However, neither of these propositions was supported; unhappily married couples and early exiters did not increase in either negative behavior or perceived contrariness.

The results of our study suggest that researchers need to expand their theoretical vision beyond the emergent-distress model, with its focus on conflict and negativity.

Our research indicates that the positive elements of marriage, and their loss, are particularly worthy of further investigation. This point of view is supported by retrospective qualitative studies, which have emphasized the maintenance of these positive elements as important to marital well-being (e.g., Kayser, 1993). Partners in long-term happy marriages also attribute the success of their marriage to enduring feelings of attachment, pleasure, comfort, emotional closeness, being cared for, and friendship.

### SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

The research we have reviewed is the first systematic and prospective effort to examine the early roots of long-term marital distress and disruption. Our findings challenge a number of commonly accepted ideas about the roots of distress and divorce. First, contrary to the idea that newlywed couples are homogeneously blissful, our data indicate that dissatisfaction with the relationship may already exist at the outset of some marriages. Second, newlywed data predict marital happiness among couples who remain married. Third, couples who divorce evidence more dramatic changes in the affective character of their marriage over its first 2 years than do those who remain married. Finally, our data in-

dicate that the early roots of long-term distress and divorce are quite different.

We have only just begun to uncover the developmental processes occurring during early marriage that ultimately lead to marital delight, distress, and divorce. It is quite possible that the processes we observed early in marriage are linked to the later emergence of distress, so that early losses of love and other positive elements in a marriage may set the stage for later disappointment, distrust, and increase in conflict. To further delineate the developmental course of distress and dissolution, future research needs to (a) identify the courtship experiences that set the stage for enduring dynamics, disillusionment, or emergent distress; (b) recruit newlyweds, follow them regularly over an extended period of time, and relate changes in their relationship to long-term marital outcomes; (c) recognize that the early marital roots of marital unhappiness are apt to be different from the roots of divorce; and (d) pay greater attention to the positive elements of marriage and to the degree to which these elements are maintained over time.

### Recommended Reading

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### Note

1. Address correspondence to Ted L. Huston, Department of Human Ecology, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712; e-mail: huston@mail.utexas.edu.

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