What are the Marital Problems of Happy Couples? A Multi-Method, Two-Sample Investigation

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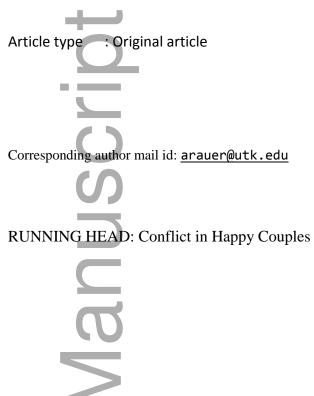
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RUNNING HEAD: Conflict in Happy Couples

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Abstract

How couples handle marital conflict may depend on what issues they are facing, as some issues may be more difficult to resolve than others. What is unclear, however, is what issues happy couples face and how these issues may be different for couples depending on their developmental stage. To explore this possibility, the current study used both self-reports and observations drawn from two separate samples of happily-married couples – one early in middle adulthood (N = 57 couples; average marital duration = 9 years) and one in older adulthood (N = 64 couples; average marital duration = 42 years). Results indicated that all issues were relatively minor, but early middle-aged couples reported more significant problems than did older couples. As to determining the most salient topic for happy couples, it depended on the spouses' gender, developmental stage, and how salience was assessed (i.e., highest rated issue vs. most discussed

issue). Only moderate links were found between what happy couples said was their most serious concern and what they actually tried to resolve during observations of marital problem solving, but there were differences in how spouses behaved based on the proportion of their time discussing certain topics. Findings suggest that more attention should be devoted to understanding what marital issues happy couples discuss and why, as doing so may reveal how couples maintain their marital happiness.

Keywords: conflict topics, marriage, happy couples, middle adulthood, older adulthood, observations

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When problems arise in a marriage, the long-term success of that relationship depends, in part, on how spouses handle the issue (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). Recent work, however, suggests that what couples discuss may play a large role in how they discuss it, as some issues may be more difficult to resolve than others (e.g., conflicts about money, sex, personality; Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009; Rehman, Rellini, & Fallis, 2011; Williamson, Hanna, Lavner, Bradbury, & Karney, 2013). Such a possibility suggests that what was previously assumed to reflect a difference in problem-solving skills between happy couples and their unhappy counterparts might also reflect that unhappy couples face a different – and potentially harder – set of issues (Sanford, 2003). Given that scholars have noted this skill-based assumption undergirds much of the recent relationship education efforts (Jackson et al., 2016), understanding what issues happy couples find salient in their marriage and how that may influence their behaviors and outcomes is warranted.

One challenge, however, in uncovering the nuances of couples' conflicts was noted by Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman (1993) in their pioneering study on long-term marriages, namely that most of the literature had focused to date on relatively young couples and on marriages that dissolved rather than those that persisted. Twenty-five years later, scholars continue to lament the lack of progress in these areas (Papp, 2017; Rauer, Williams, & Jensen, 2017). These omissions are particularly concerning for the study of conflict topics for two key reasons. First, the problems that couples face likely change as they develop both as individuals and as a couple (Reese-Weber, Kahn, & Nemecek, 2015). For example, whereas issues of trust

and jealousy often plague younger, less established couples (Feiring, Markus, & Simon, 2018; Kurdek, 1994), older couples must deal with marital problems related to each other's health (Cano, Johansen, Leonard, & Hanawalt, 2005). Second, understanding the problems facing couples whose marriages have endured for decades may yield important, and heretofore, mostly overlooked, insights into what issues may be easier to live with in a marriage than others. Thus, using two separate samples of couples who reported high levels of marital satisfaction (hereafter referred to as happy couples) – one early in middle adulthood (late 30s) and one in older adulthood (early 70s), we examined what were the most salient marital issues identified by happy couples, how were these issues related to the problems they attempted to resolve in a lab-based discussion, and how did these decisions about what topics to discuss predict their behaviors during the interaction.

What Do Couples Have Conflict About and Does it Matter?

Scholars have long recognized that some issues may be more difficult for couples to discuss than others (Fincham & Beach, 1999), but how these "hot topics" affect interactions and outcomes has only recently been considered (Papp, 2017; Papp et al., 2009; Sanford, 2003; Williamson et al., 2013). As to what constitutes a hot topic, both spouses and independent observers evaluate money, sex, jealousy, in-laws, commitment, and childrearing as especially difficult to resolve (Papp, 2018; Sanford, 2003; Williamson et al., 2013). Several other areas, however, have also been identified as difficult in conflict discussions, ranging from how couples spend time together to the division of chores, suggesting a wide variety of conflict topics.

Do the diverse topics that couples focus on during marital conflict translate into different behaviors and outcomes? It appears so, as difficult conflict topics tend to elicit more negative than positive behaviors from couples during problem-solving discussions (Papp et al., 2009; Papp, 2017; Rehman et al., 2011). For example, in a lab-based problem-solving discussion, Williamson and colleagues (2013) observed that both spouses displayed more negativity when discussing each other's personalities compared to other conflict topics, even after controlling for relationship satisfaction and self-rated problem difficulty for the chosen conflict topic. They also found evidence of gender differences, with wives acting more negatively when discussing friends, and husbands behaving less positively when discussing children. Furthermore, Rehman and colleagues (2011) found that whether the conflict topic involved sex or not moderated the links between spouses' conflict behaviors and marital outcomes, such that negativity during a

discussion about sex predicted lowered relationship satisfaction for both spouses, but spousal negative behaviors during a non-sexual conflict discussion were not associated with satisfaction.

Together, these studies provide compelling evidence linking conflict topics with spousal behaviors and outcomes, yet this work often does not account for two potential methodological issues. First, standard marital problem-solving tasks ask couples to discuss the conflict topic of most importance in their marriage, but many spouses do not agree on what their most serious issues are (Biesen & Doss, 2013). Such differences matter, as husbands tend to be more demanding during problem-solving discussions when their wives evaluate the conflict topic as important (Vogel & Karney, 2002). These gender differences may diminish later in life, as Levenson and colleagues (1993) found older spouses did not differ in how they evaluated ten conflict topics. Second, couples may not discuss their most important issue in a laboratory setting. Comparing the conflict topics rated as most serious with the topics that couples actually discussed, Cano et al. (2005) found many couples avoided "hot" topics that may have been more sensitive and distressing. For example, most couples listed sex and affection as their two most frequent arguments, yet videotaped problem-solving discussions revealed couples most often discussed household tasks and family finances. Further, some couples switched conflict topics during the task because they already resolved their first topic or abandoned it, suggesting that examining the proportion of time they spend on each topic may be important to consider. However, the extent to which such differences between what couples say matters and what they actually discuss in research settings exist and elicit different problem-solving behaviors remains unknown. Most likely, the effects of pursuing different strategies (e.g., confronting vs. avoiding the most serious conflict topic) depend on both the overall state of the marriage and spouses' developmental stage. Thus, the current study sought to examine not only what husbands and wives reported were their most serious marital issues, but also which issues couples chose to discuss in a lab-based setting, and how these were related.

What Sources of Marital Conflict Do Happy, Older Couples Likely Face?

Focusing on conflict in happily married couples may seem counterintuitive, but the inevitability of conflict means that even the happiest couples face challenges in their marriages (Rauer et al., 2017). As to the nature of these challenges, Levenson and colleagues (1993) found that satisfied couples ranked the following five conflict topics as most concerning (recreation, communication, children, money, and in-laws ranked in that order), compared to those ranked as

most concerning by dissatisfied couples (communication, money, children, recreation, and sex). Not surprisingly, satisfied couples reported less disagreement on all conflict topics than did unsatisfied couples. These differences, however, were more pronounced for middle-aged couples than for older couples, suggesting that conflict may vary based on couples' developmental stage.

Although many couples may have fewer marital disagreements over time, others find that older couples are not inured to the challenges of married life, suggesting potential individual differences. For example, Papp (2017) found that empty-nest couples were not only struggling with perpetual problems, such as money and personal habits, but were often encountering new issues as well, namely leisure and friends. Similarly, Levenson and colleagues (1993) found that recreation and communication were more important sources of conflict for older couples than they were for middle-aged couples, perhaps due to the increased amount of time that couples spend together upon retirement (Levenson et al., 1993; Rauer & Jensen, 2016). In contrast, younger couples tend to report more disagreement regarding children than do older couples (Levenson et al., 1993; Papp, 2017), likely due to children no longer living at home for the latter. Finally, as health begins to decline more rapidly during the later years, it appears to become not only an individual issue, but a marital one as well (Cano et al., 2005; Rauer & Jensen, 2016). Together, these studies suggest that couples have to deal with a number of marital issues across the lifespan, though the issues themselves may differ across developmental stages.

As to how to reconcile these findings about the enduring nature of marital conflict with the oft-cited work highlighting the positivity that characterizes close relationships in later life (Carstensen, 1992; Luong, Charles, & Fingerman, 2011), several explanations emerge. First, Papp (2017) found that empty-nest couples approached newer conflict topics with greater positivity than they used when discussing older issues, for which they may have fallen into habits of increased negativity. Second, whether facing new or old issues, older couples may be better equipped to choose their battles wisely. Although conflict avoidance may be problematic earlier in marriage (Gottman, 1999), withdrawing from conflict later in life may represent an attempt to optimize positivity and minimize negativity in a close relationship (Carstensen, 1992; Rauer et al., 2017). This passive approach to conflict, whereby older adults wait to see if things improve on their own (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005), means that even if spouses perceive issues as problematic, they may choose not to discuss them (Cano et al., 2005) – either in a lab setting or even at home. Finally, any developmental differences that emerge could also be capturing that

happy older couples may represent a more select group, as younger couples who struggle with certain types of marital issues may end their relationships prior to older adulthood.

The Current Study

Together, available findings suggest that what happy couples report are their most serious problems and what they try to resolve in a lab-based discussion task might represent two separate issues, and that what they choose to spend more time discussing likely shapes their behaviors. Accordingly, the current study drew upon observational and self-report data from two separate samples of happily married couples – one early in middle adulthood and one in older adulthood – to answer the following three questions. First, what conflict topics were most salient to happily married couples in middle adulthood compared to those in older adulthood? To examine this question, we used both self-reports of conflict topics, where greater salience was operationalized by rating the topic as more concerning, and lab-based observations of problem-solving discussions, where greater salience was operationalized as spending a larger proportion of the discussion focused on that conflict topic. We also considered potential gender differences in spouses' ratings of the conflict topics. Second, are the two different indicators of conflict topic salience related, such that spouses' evaluations of the severity of their conflict topics are associated with their time spent discussing these topics in a problem-solving task? Finally, how does the proportion of time couples spend discussing different conflict topics relate to their behaviors during the discussion? More specifically, is a greater proportion of time spent discussing certain marital topics related to whether couples display more or less positive affect, negative affect, and problem-solving skills?

Method

Participants and Recruitment

The current study involved two separate samples of happy couples. The first sample included 59 married, early middle-aged different-sex couples recruited as part of a larger study examining marriage and children's development (Marriage and Child Development Study: referred to as MCDS in the remainder of the paper, see Rauer & Volling, 2013). On average, couples were in their mid to late 30s (husbands: M = 36.8, SD =4.6; wives: M = 35.4, SD = 4.5), primarily European American (54 husbands; 56 wives), highly educated (all spouses had at least some college education), and 57% of couples identified themselves as dual-earner. Husbands' modal income was $70,000 to $80,000 and wives' was $10,000 or less. Most couples had been

married an average of a decade (M = 8.7, SD = 3.4) and had multiple children (M = 2.3, SD = .7). Couples were recruited from birth records, newspaper advertisements, and bulletins at churches, day cares, and preschools. To participate, spouses had to have a child who was 2 years of age and have an older child in preschool or early-elementary school. Additionally, recruitment materials specified that spouses self-identify as happily married, and couples were asked to confirm this characterization at the time of visit scheduling. Suggesting that couples had correctly identified themselves, spouses evaluated how happy they were with their marriage using a single item rated on a 7-point scale from "perfectly unhappy" to "perfectly happy." Both spouses, on average, reported being very happy (husbands: M = 5.5, SD = 1.1; wives: M = 5.5, SD = 1.1). Complete data were available from 57 couples, as two couples were excluded due to incomplete data (e.g., recording errors).

The second sample included 64 older, different-sex married couples recruited as part of a larger study examining later-life marriages (the Marriage and Retirement study: referred to as MARS throughout remainder of study, see Rauer, Sabey, & Jensen, 2014). On average, couples were in their early 70s (husbands: M = 71.4, SD =7.4; wives: M = 69.5, SD = 7.0), primarily European American (61 husbands; 60 wives), well-educated (60 husbands and 54 wives attended some college), and retired (47 couples had neither spouse working for pay). Couples were financially stable, based on their household income (M = $85,875, SD = $64,074) and wealth (M = $1,082,547, SD = $1,277,611). Most couples had been married four decades (M = 42.4, SD = 15.0) and had multiple children (M = 2.6, SD = 1.3). Couples were recruited through newspaper advertisements, churches, and community organizations. To participate, couples had to be married, fully or partially retired (i.e., working less than 40 hours a week), and able to drive to the research center. To note, although the MARS couples did not have to specifically identify themselves as happily married in order to participate in the study, as the MCDS couples did, the MARS couples did complete the same marital happiness item and had similarly high scores on the 7-point scale from "perfectly unhappy" to "perfectly happy." Both spouses reported being very happy (husbands: M = 6.2, SD = 0.8; wives: M = 6.0, SD = 1.1).

A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the two samples on key demographic characteristics. There were no differences between the samples in husbands' education or how many children the couples had, but spouses in the MARS sample were, as expected, older (husbands: t(119) = -30.42, p < .001; wives: t(117) = -31.18, p < .001) and had

been married longer (t(120) = -17.55, p < .001). Additionally, wives in the MCDS reported more education than did the MARS wives, t(120) = 2.84, p = .005. Finally, although there were no differences in marital happiness based on the single-item for wives, the MARS husbands were somewhat happier with their marriages than were the MCDS husbands, t(101) = -3.54, p = .001, though, again, husbands and wives in both samples reported overall high levels of marital happiness.

Procedures

For MCDS, couples participated in two on-campus laboratory visits spaced a month apart that each lasted 2-3 hours. The first visit, the focus here, involved multiple marital interactions (including the marital problem-solving task) and the second visit focused on family interactions. Consistent with the approved local Institutional Review Board procedures, couples began the first visit by completing consent forms. At the end of the first visit, each spouse received a packet of questionnaires that assessed individual, marital, and family functioning. After returning these questionnaires at the second visit, couples were compensated $50 for their participation.

For MARS, couples participated in a single on-campus laboratory visit that lasted 2-3 hours. Consistent with the approved local Institutional Review Board procedures, couples began the visit by completing consent forms. During the visit, couples participated in multiple marital communication tasks (including the marital problem-solving task). At the end of the visit, each spouse received a packet of questionnaires that assessed individual and marital functioning. After returning the questionnaires via pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelopes, couples were paid $75.

Measures

Self-rated conflict topic severity. Prior to completing the problem-solving task in both studies, an experimenter provided each spouse with a list of common Areas of Disagreement (adapted from Gottman, 1999) and asked them to rate the extent to which certain issues were a problem in their marriage using a 6-point Likert scale from 0 (not an issue) to 5 (major problem). The first 22 areas on these lists overlapped across MCDS and MARS (e.g., be more organized). For MCDS, the list included a question about children. For MARS, the list had three questions about wanting to take more trips together, wanting to have a healthier lifestyle, and wanting the spouse to take better care of himself/herself. Due to conceptual overlap in the conflict topics used across MCDS and MARS and our goal to compare topics across age groups, we collapsed the

lists into a smaller set of 12 categories (11 for each sample) that overlapped with previous literature (Cano et al., 2005; Levenson et al., 1993; Papp, 2018; Williamson et al., 2013).

To capture self-rated conflict topic severity, we then averaged participants' ratings within each of the twelve categories (see Table 1). The first category, communication, referred to a desire to talk and be heard more. Closeness referred to a desire for a different balance of independence, appreciation, time and support in the marriage. The third category, intimacy, referred to a desire for more physical intimacy. Household captured issues related to the division of labor. The fifth category, money, tapped into issues related to finances and saving money. Religion captured the desire to go to religious services more together. The seventh category, jealousy, referred to a desire for fewer issues with jealousy. Relatives tapped into issues with in-laws. The ninth category, friends, dealt with a desire for having more mutual friends. Leisure referenced a desire for more joint leisure or shared activities. The last category for MCDS couples, children, focused on a desire to have more children. The last category for MARS couples, health, focused on a desire for couples to be healthier overall.

Marital problem-solving task. In both studies, couples participated in a 15-minute, taped marital problem-solving discussion that was later coded using the Interactional Dimensions Coding System (ICDS; Kline et al., 2004). Couples were jointly asked to identify an issue from their completed Areas of Disagreement form that they wanted to work on, outline each side of the disagreement, and then to come up with a mutually agreeable solution to the problem. Couples were instructed that if they came to an agreeable solution for their highest priority area before the time was up, they should pick a second topic that was important to them and proceed as they had with the discussion of their first topic, and to continue to discuss ranked topics until the 15 minutes was completed. To note, the experimenter in MCDS helped the couples identify the top three conflict topics from their lists prior to the problem-solving discussion based on their self-reported ratings, whereas the couples in MARS were not provided this additional guidance.

To capture what spouses discussed during the videotaped marital problem-solving task, coders in both studies watched the tapes to record which topics were discussed and for how long. Topics were later condensed into the 12 categories (see Table 1). Two additional couple-level variables were derived from the interaction: (a) the number of topics discussed during the task, and (b) the proportion of time spent discussing a topic, which was computed by dividing the amount of time each category topic was discussed by the total amount of time each couple spent

in the marital problem-solving task. To note, all of the MCDS couples completed the full 15 minutes of the task, whereas MARS couples averaged only 9 minutes (SD = 4) due to several couples terminating early as they felt they had successfully resolved all of their marital issues.

Marital behaviors. To assess spouses' behaviors during the problem-solving task, two separate coding teams later coded three dimensions from the ICDS (Kline et al., 2004) for each spouse (positive affect, negative affect, and problem-solving skills). Positive affect referred to the degree to which each spouse responded positively towards the other, including their facial expressions, body positioning, and emotional tone or quality of voice. Examples included smiling, using an affectionate tone, and having a relaxed body that was comfortably oriented toward the partner. Negative affect referred to the degree to which each spouse responded negatively towards the other, again including their facial expressions, body positioning, and emotional tone of voice. Examples included frowning, using an impatient or irritated tone, and having a tense body that was oriented away from the partner. Finally, problem-solving skills referred to an individual's ability to both define a problem and work toward a mutually satisfactory solution for the problem. Ratings were assigned based not on whether or not the problem was actually solved, but rather on the individual's ability to try to solve the problem. Examples of problem-solving cues included describing the problem positively or neutrally without resorting to blaming the partner, contributing to the problem discussion effectively and keeping the conversation on task, and making a commitment to take action towards the problem.

For the MCDS, coders used a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely uncharacteristic) to 9 (extremely characteristic). For the MARS, coders evaluated the same behaviors using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely uncharacteristic) to 7 (extremely characteristic). In both studies, ratings across three, 5-minute intervals were averaged to create a single score for each dimension, with higher scores indicating the spouse showed more of that behavior (i.e., greater positive affect). For MCDS, a team of undergraduate student coders were trained by the first author on a subsample of tapes until interobserver agreement was 80% or higher. Reliability was calculated via intraclass correlation on 20% of the taped interactions, and intraclass correlations were acceptable across all dimensions (rs = .79-.90). For MARS, two graduate student coders were trained by the first author on a subsample of tapes until interobserver agreement was 80% or higher. Reliability was calculated via intraclass correlation on 20% of the taped interactions, and intraclass correlations were excellent across all dimensions (rs = .97-1.0).

Results

What Marital Issues do Happy Couples Report and Which Ones Do They Discuss?

   Self-reported problem severity. To address our first aim, the top of Table 2 presents the self-rated problem severity ranked from most highly rated to least, on average, for both samples. Looking first at MCDS, it is important to note that even the most serious issues were, on average, considered to be a minor problem (~2) by both husbands and wives. For husbands, their top five issues were, in order, intimacy, leisure, household, money, and relatives. For wives, their top five issues were, in order, leisure, intimacy, household, communication, and closeness. Though the top five issues differed between spouses, paired samples t-tests revealed only one significant gender difference, whereby husbands evaluated intimacy as a more serious problem than did their wives, $t(55) = 2.965$, $p = .004$. Given the multiple comparisons, we conducted Bonferonni corrections to maintain an α of .05 ($\alpha/10 = .005$), but this difference in how spouses viewed intimacy remained significant. Underscoring the overall similarity between spouses, both husbands and wives in MCDS listed jealousy as their least problematic issue, with a desire for more children and religion also evaluated as not as problematic as other conflict topics.

   Looking next at self-reported problem severity in MARS (see Table 2), it is again noteworthy that both spouses reported their most serious issue to be a small problem (~1). For husbands, their top five issues were, in order, intimacy, health, friends, household, and communication. For wives, their top five issues were, in order, health, communication, household, leisure, and intimacy. Despite the differences in the ordering of spouses' most highly rated issues, paired t-tests revealed that there were no gender differences in older spouses' self-rated problem severity across the 11 conflict topics. Furthermore, both spouses listed jealousy as their least problematic issue, with religion considered only slightly more problematic.

   Proportion of time discussed. Next, the bottom of Table 2 presents the proportions that each topic category was discussed for both samples, ranked from the highest proportion to the least, on average. Looking first at MCDS, couples' top five most discussed issues were, in order, household, closeness, leisure, communication, and money. Even the most discussed issue (household) only represented 17% of the interaction. Helping to contextualize these findings is that couples tended to discuss multiple marital issues during their interaction, averaging 3.93 topics (SD = 1.88; Range = 1-9). Only four of the early middle-aged couples (6.9%) discussed a single issue for the duration of their problem solving interaction. To note, the proportions do not

add up to 1.0, as couples spent some of the discussions not discussing a marital issue ("off-topic"). For the MCDS couples, this represented about 25% of the interaction.

Looking next at MARS, couples' top five most discussed issues were, in order, household, communication, health, leisure, and friends (see bottom of Table 2). Again, the most discussed issue (household) only accounted for 15% of the interaction. Couples in MARS were also found to discuss multiple issues during the problem-solving task, with an average of 3.25 issues discussed (SD = 1.72; Range = 1-10). Furthermore, only eight of the older couples (12.5%) discussed a single issue for the duration of their problem-solving interaction. Finally, on average, the MARS couples spent about 39% of their problem-solving discussion off-topic.

Do the Marital Issues that Happy Couples Report Differ across Samples?

To examine differences based on developmental stage for the ten topics that both samples reported on, we did a series of analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) comparing MCDS and MARS. These analyses controlled for husbands' marital happiness levels and used Bonferonni corrections. For self-reported problem severity for husbands, MCDS husbands evaluated closeness, $F(1, 101) = 4.35$, $p < .05$, intimacy, $F(1, 101) = 9.04$, $p < .01$, and leisure, $F(1, 101) = 20.64$, $p < .001$, as more problematic than did MARS husbands. There were no differences for communication, household, money, jealousy, relatives or friends, despite the MARS husbands reporting being happier with their marriages than the MCDS husbands.

To examine differences in self-reported problem severity for wives, we did a series of independent samples t-tests comparing MCDS and MARS. MCDS wives were found to evaluate closeness, $t(118) = 3.28$, $p = .001$, intimacy, $t(118) = 3.32$, $p = .001$, religion, $t(118) = 2.08$, $p = .039$, relatives, $t(118) = 2.11$, $p = .037$, and leisure, $t(118) = 5.36$, $p < .001$, as more problematic than did MARS wives. We again conducted a Bonferonni correction ($\alpha/10 = .005$) and found that there were no longer significant differences between MCDS and MARS wives in their self-reported problem severity for either religion or relatives, but differences remained for closeness, intimacy, and leisure. Similar to the findings for husbands, there were no differences for communication, money, jealousy, or friends.

Finally, we conducted a series of independent t-tests to examine potential differences in the proportion of time spent discussing conflict topics based on spouses' developmental stage. The only difference found was that MCDS couples spent more of their problem-solving task discussing closeness in comparison to MARS couples, $t(120) = 3.23$, $p = .002$, which remained

significant after conducting a Bonferroni correction (α/10 = .005). There were no significant differences in the proportion of time spent discussing any of the other nine issues. MARS couples, however, did spend significantly more time off-topic than did the MCDS couples, t(120) = -2.83, p = .005.

Are Self-Rated Problem Severity and the Proportion of Time Spent on Issues Linked?

In line with our second aim, correlational analyses examined the associations between spouses' self-ratings of the severity of their marital issues with observations of couples' actual proportion of time discussing these issues. Looking first at MCDS, we found that seven of the 11 conflict topics that husbands evaluated as more problematic were correlated with the proportion of time couples spent discussing these issues. Couples spent more time discussing communication (r = .30, p = .026), closeness (r = .27, p = .042), intimacy (r = .33, p = .013), money (r = .37, p = .005), religion (r = .48, p < .001), relatives (r = .39, p = .003), and friends (r = .43, p = .001) when husbands saw those topics as more concerning. Only five of the 11 topics that wives evaluated as more problematic were associated with the proportion of time spent discussing that topic, specifically household (r = .41, p = .002), religion (r = .48, p < .001), relatives (r = .34, p = .012), friends (r = .54, p < .001), and wanting more children (r = .65, p < .001). Although the topic that husbands evaluated as most problematic (intimacy) was linked to couples spending more time discussing this topic, the topic that wives evaluated as most problematic (leisure) was not associated with the proportion of time discussing this topic (r = -.00, p = .995).

Turning next to MARS, older husbands' evaluations of the severity of four of the 11 conflict topics were associated with couples' proportion of time spent discussing those topics, with significant links for intimacy (r = .37, p = .003), religion (r = .43, p < .001), jealousy (r = .26, p = .042), and friends (r = .43, p < .001). Five of the 11 conflict topics that wives evaluated as more serious were linked to how much time was spent discussing these issues during the marital problem solving session, specifically communication (r = .36, p = .003), household (r = .31, p = .012), religion (r = .43, p < .001), friends (r = .35, p = .004), and leisure (r = .33, p = .007). Again, the conflict topic that husbands evaluated as most problematic (intimacy) was significantly associated with how much time the couple spent discussing that issue, whereas wives' most problematic conflict topic (health) was not (r = .04, p = .728).

Do Happy Couples Behave Differently Depending on What Issues They are Discussing?

To address our third aim, we conducted linear regressions for each observed behavior (positive affect, negative affect, problem-solving skills) with the proportion of time spent on each of the eleven conflict topics as the predictors. In both samples, regressions were conducted separately for husbands and wives. For MCDS spouses, significant variance was not explained based on the conflict topics proportion variables for wives' positive affect, husbands' negative affect, or husbands' problem-solving skills. For MARS spouses, significant variance was not explained based on the proportion variables for either spouses' positive or negative affect.

For the MCDS spouses, the proportion of time spent discussing each of the eleven conflict topics explained significant variance in wives' negative affect ($R^2 = .48$, $F(11, 45) = 3.75$, $p = .001$), wives' problem solving ($R^2 = .54$, $F(11, 45) = 4.76$, $p < .001$), and husbands' positive affect ($R^2 = .34$, $F(11, 45) = 2.13$, $p = .038$), although after Bonferonni corrections ($\alpha/3 = .017$), this latter finding was no longer significant. Looking across the independent variables in Table 3, when couples spent a greater portion of the task discussing a desire for more children, wives displayed less negative affect. Wives, however, displayed more negative affect when couples spent more of their time discussing issues with relatives and friends. Finally, wives were observed to demonstrate better problem-solving skills when a greater proportion of time was spent discussing issues related to household, money, religion, and leisure.

For the MARS spouses, the proportion of time spent discussing the eleven conflict topics explained significant variance in wives' problem-solving skills ($R^2 = .48$, $F(11, 52) = 4.40$, $p < .001$) and husbands' problem-solving skills ($R^2 = .56$, $F(11, 52) = 6.00$, $p < .001$), and both of these findings were robust after Bonferonni corrections ($\alpha/3 = .017$). As seen in Table 3, both spouses demonstrated better problem solving when couples spent more of their interaction time discussing issues related to household, money, leisure, and health. Husbands also showed better problem-solving skills when couples spent more time discussing communication issues.

Discussion

What conflict areas happy couples struggle with may illuminate why they consider themselves happily married, as not all marital issues are created equal (Sanford, 2003). Moreover, even within happy couples, there are likely significant variations in conflict topics based on couples' developmental stage. Consistent with this prediction, the results indicated that although all conflict topics were deemed relatively minor across both samples, the MCDS early middle-aged couples reported more serious problems than did the later-life MARS couples,

though to note, MARS husbands reported more marital happiness than did MCDS husbands. As to determining the most salient topic for happy couples, it depended on spouses' gender, couples' developmental stage, and whether salience was measured based on how spouses evaluated it or how long couples spent discussing the issue. Moreover, only moderate links were found between what couples said was their most pressing concern and what they actually tried to resolve during observations of marital problem solving. Couples appeared to choose their conflict topics wisely based on regression results suggesting links between the proportions of time spent discussing certain topics and spousal behaviors during the discussion. Findings suggest that more attention should be devoted to understanding what marital issues happy couples choose to tackle and why, because doing so may reveal insights into how these couples are able to maintain their happiness.

The Nature of Happy Couples' Marital Conflict: The Roles of Development and Gender

The finding that spouses in both samples evaluated their marital issues as relatively minor or small, on average, may help explain why these couples were happily married. Findings likely differ substantially from couples in distress, who not only spend more time discussing issues that are a serious source of conflict, but also engage in more intense negative and coercive exchanges that were not observed here. Whether this reduced magnitude in marital issue severity reflected the fact that many of the topics had already been successfully resolved in the history of the marriage or were never problematic to begin with is unclear and warrants further consideration. What our findings do reveal, however, is which topics currently pose a challenge for happy couples. Similar to prior work (Cano et al., 2005; Levenson et al., 1993; Papp, 2018; Williamson et al., 2013), both MCDS and MARS couples appeared to view intimacy, leisure, household, communication, and money as their most serious concerns. Both samples of couples also consistently rated jealousy, religion, and relatives as not being issues at all. Given that these three topics tend to be seen as more difficult to resolve (Sanford, 2003; Williamson et al., 2013), it is possible that couples with these problems will report less marital satisfaction than the couples included here. Furthermore, jealousy, religious differences, and problems with relatives tend to occur earlier in romantic relationships, and if they cannot be resolved, may lead to dissolution of the relationship (Feiring et al., 2018; Kurdek, 1994; Reese-Weber et al., 2015).

Although both the MCDS and the MARS couples represent a select group of couples in light of their high levels of marital happiness, it is notable that we did find group differences based on developmental stage. Overall, MARS couples, who, on average, had been together over

four decades, reported three of their conflict topics (closeness, intimacy, and leisure) to be less problematic than did MCDS couples, who had been together closer to a decade. Without longitudinal data on these couples, we cannot determine if this difference is due to the fact that MARS couples were able to successfully work through these issues earlier in their marriage, leaving them with fewer sources of conflict to resolve later in life, or if the MARS couples have been in high-quality, low-conflict marriages for the duration of their marriage (e.g., enduring dynamics; Proulx, Ermer, & Kanter, 2017). Given that the MARS husbands reported being somewhat happier than the MCDS husbands, the latter explanation does seem plausible, though we did control for husbands' marital happiness when comparing husbands' self-reported problem severity across samples. It is also possible that older adults' perceptions of more limited time due to their impending mortality may lead them not only to pick and choose their battles more carefully (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Cano et al., 2005), but it may also change their perspective on what even constitutes a marital issue. Perhaps this perspective enables older spouses to consider certain conflict topics as less troubling because they have other priorities, not to mention decades of experience knowing such issues are surmountable if they work together.

A necessary ingredient to working together to resolve marital issues, however, is that both spouses need to agree that the problem exists in the first place. Our findings provide mixed support of previous work with clinic-based samples suggesting that spouses often do not agree on what the most serious problems are in their marriage (Biesen & Doss, 2013). On the one hand, there were between-spouse differences in both samples in the ranking of their conflict topics, with both MCDS and MARS husbands listing intimacy as their top issue and wives in both samples listing other issues as most problematic (leisure for MCDS wives; health for MARS wives). Yet, paired samples t-tests revealed only one significant within-couple gender difference across both samples in the degree to which issues were considered problematic, such that MCDS husbands saw intimacy as more problematic than did their wives. It may be that in happy couples, not only do spouses tend to approach conflict more similarly (Rauer et al., 2017), but they agree more about what their problems are and how big of a concern these issues actually are – or are not, as was the case here for most of the marital conflict topics examined.

A Methodological Consideration for the Study of Marital Conflict

In a seminal review of observational research on couples, Heyman (2001) suggested that the standard couples' observational paradigm had sufficient external validity. His conclusion was

based on work comparing couples' behaviors while discussing a single topic of their choosing at home or in the laboratory setting. What remains unclear, however, is whether the decision to have couples discuss a single topic or to choose to discuss as many topics as they want is closer to how they approach marital conflict at home. Suggesting the latter may be the case, we found that couples in both samples tended to cover, on average, at least 3 marital issues during their 15 minute discussions. Our findings are consistent with Papp's (2017) daily diary study of empty nest couples, who also reported discussing multiple conflict topics. Couples may begin by discussing one topic, but it may bring to mind other areas in which they are struggling. However, Papp and colleagues (2009) recommended that relationship clinicians should help couples avoid letting tensions surrounding money spill over into other areas of the couple's relationship, though whether requiring couples to focus on a single topic helps them more effectively resolve that issue remains to be determined. Future work is needed to determine the extent to which spillover occurs naturally and how it elicits different behaviors from spouses. Spending more time discussing a more divisive topic could escalate negativity, whereas switching to a less heated conflict topic – or even a non-conflict topic – may be an effective approach to mitigating tension.

Indicating that perhaps couples are deliberate when choosing which conflict topic – or topics or completely non-conflict related topics, as it may be – to cover is that there was little overlap between what topics spouses said were most problematic and what topics couples discussed. There was some overlap for MCDS husbands, but self-reported problem severity was largely unrelated to the proportion of time couples spent discussing many of the issues. Instead, in line with previous observational work (Cano et al., 2005; Williamson et al., 2013), problems related to the household were most frequently discussed. Couples may choose to discuss household issues because this topic is not as difficult as others – as judged by both spouses and marital experts (Sanford, 2003; Williamson et al., 2013), yet successfully resolving household problems has clear benefits (Tang & Curran, 2012).

It also may be easier to generate concrete solutions to household issues that do not carry as much blame for either spouse, such as making a plan for how spouses can be more organized. Indeed, MARS husbands and wives in both samples displayed better problem solving when couples spent more time discussing household issues. In contrast, broaching the topic of intimacy is likely harder to resolve (Rehman et al., 2011), particularly if there is an underlying physical condition, as can be the case later in life. It is important to note, however, that both MCDS and

MARS couples were more likely to discuss intimacy if husbands felt it was more problematic. As men's sexuality is often tied to their feelings of masculinity and efficacy within the marriage (Lodge & Umberson, 2012), husbands may be more motivated to tackle these problems. In contrast, wives tend to blame themselves when husbands are unable to be intimate (Lodge & Umberson, 2012), perhaps making wives less likely to initiate the conversation. Lastly, that couples might be reticent to discuss intimacy in a videotaped laboratory task must also be considered, as couples may find such discussions lead to feelings of vulnerability and an increased potential for embarrassment or shame (Metts & Cupach, 1989). Whether the reticence due to potential issues with self-presentation was magnified in a laboratory setting or would be seen if couples were observed in a more naturalistic setting warrants further study.

Considering the Costs – or Lack Thereof – Of Not Discussing Your Most Serious Issue

Wives appeared to have similar reticence about discussing other topics as well. MCDS wives' top ranked problem was leisure, yet there was no link between their ratings of leisure and what proportion of time they spent discussing that issue. Wives may be missing an opportunity to discuss a less challenging issue (Sanford, 2003; Williamson et al., 2013) that can foster greater positivity (Williamson et al., 2013). It may be that when raising young children, setting aside time for leisure as a couple is not as easily managed as it is earlier or later in the life course (Belsky, 1990), making it more difficult to resolve. It did appear to be the case though, that for couples who spent a greater proportion of their discussion focusing on leisure, it was associated with better problem solving for MCDS wives and both MARS spouses. A developmental consideration may also explain why MARS wives avoided discussing their top-rated conflict topic of health. Health is critically important in older adulthood – or earlier for lower-income couples (Jackson et al., 2016), but discussing it can be hard for couples to navigate. Even the most well-intentioned spouses can undermine each other's feelings of competence (Rauer et al., 2014) or health behaviors when trying to promote each other's well-being (Henry, Rook, Stephens, & Franks, 2013; Khan, Stephens, Franks, Rook, & Salem, 2013). However, MARS spouses did display better problem solving when they spent more of their interaction time discussing health, suggesting that perhaps the spouses who feel comfortable tackling their top issues are the very ones most capable of resolving these concerns.

It is important to note, however, that even in our sample of happy couples, MCDS wives displayed more negative affect when couples spent a greater proportion of time discussing

relatives and friends. Similar to the aforementioned challenges of discussing intimacy, issues with friends and family may be harder to resolve, as these ties cannot always be easily avoided, particularly when children are involved, and thus spouses may have less control to change things for the better. Such difficulties are consistent with the literature highlighting the challenges of couples' social networks (Fingerman, Gilligan, VanderDrift, & Pitzer, 2012; Fiori et al., 2018), though it is promising that spending more of their time discussing these issues did not predict differential behaviors for the older MARS couples. Rather than avoiding more problematic marital issues altogether, as some have suggested older adults generally tend to do (Luong et al., 2011), older couples may strategically choose to spend more time discussing topics that more easily lend themselves to solutions. Indeed, although MARS couples spent significantly more of their marital problem-solving task not discussing any of their marital issues than did the MCDS couples, when the MARS couples did discuss certain issues at greater length (household, money, leisure, and health), it appeared to elicit more constructive problem solving on both of their parts. Identifying which problems fall within this category may be something accomplished only after a couple has spent decades together.

Considerations and Conclusions

Although our confidence in the results of this study is enhanced by a number of strengths in its design (e.g., multi-method data, two separate samples of happy couples), generalizability was limited across both samples (financially stable, heterosexual White sample), which could affect which conflict topics emerge as problematic. For example, Kurdek (1994) found that the nature of relationship issues varied across heterosexual and same-sex couples, with the latter more likely to report issues of distrust. Also, Jackson and colleagues (2016) found that lower-income couples tended to report unique issues that were unlikely to emerge here (e.g., living situations), suggesting an open-ended approach to generating conflict topics may be needed in future studies. Further, although our interpretation of the findings drew upon spouses' ratings of their conflict areas coupled with previous work on topic difficulty (Sanford, 2003; Williamson et al., 2013), future work may also want to ask couples to report at the end of the interaction why they chose to discuss the topic(s) they did. Such an inquiry could help illuminate if some couples deliberately chose to discuss less difficult topics. Additionally, although we were able to confirm that the couples were happily married using a single happiness item, utilizing validated measures with established cut-off values would have bolstered our characterization of these couples as

happy. Finally, the observations of what proportion of time couples spent discussing their marital issues only represents a snapshot of their current approach to conflict. The extent to which topic severity and proportion of time on these issues would change over time is unclear, suggesting a need for longitudinal research designs that follow couples over middle adulthood to late life. Examining conflict topics over time may reveal which issues eventually resolve themselves and which ones become perpetual problems and why. Moreover, although we were able to examine links between the overall proportion of time spent discussing each of the eleven conflict topics and macro-level codes of spouses' behavior, future work should employ a more micro-analytic coding approach to isolate spousal behaviors during discussions of each topic and compare them.

In conclusion, the importance of marriage in the second half of the lifespan (Carstensen, 1992) coupled with the growing instability of later-life marriages (Brown & Lin, 2012) underscore the need to understand what conflict issues early middle-aged and older couples face and how they deal with them. Our findings indicate that there is considerable variability in the conflict topics that happy couples choose to discuss, often times even within the same couple during a single discussion. Although couples may experience and choose to discuss a number of issues, happy couples appear able to discuss even their most problematic issues constructively. It may be that happy couples' decision to focus on potentially more solvable problems contributes to their marital happiness, as it can engender a feeling of success when couples resolve their issues. Thus, for couples who are doing relatively well, more solution-focused clinical techniques, such as emphasizing what is going well in the relationship and maintaining a future-oriented perspective (Gingerich & Peterson, 2013), may be particularly effective. The inevitability of conflict means that all couples will struggle at some point in their relationship (Zeidner & Kloda, 2013), but being deliberate about what challenges a couple decides to face could be an important starting point to building relationship confidence and overcoming challenges.

<div align="center">References</div>

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Table 1.

Categories of conflict topics and original items for both samples

Conflict topic category	Original item(s)	MCDS	MARS
Communication	Like us to talk to each other more	X	X

Category	Item		
	Partner watch less television and talk to me more	X	X
	Partner doesn't listen when I'm upset	X	X
Closeness	Want more independence in marriage	X	X
	Want spouse to spend more time with me	X	X
	Don't feel supported in marriage	X	X
	Want to receive more appreciation for what I do	X	X
Intimacy	Like my partner to show more physical affection toward me	X	X
	Want us to make love more often	X	X
Household	Like us to be more organized	X	X
	Problems center on doing household chores	X	X
	Like to be consulted on important decisions	X	X
Money	Want more help with finances	X	X
	Like us to agree more about saving money	X	X
Religion	Like us to go to church, mosque, or synagogue together	X	X
Jealousy	Like to have fewer problems with my jealousy	X	X
	Like to have fewer problems with partner's jealousy	X	X
Relatives	Like spouse's relationship with our families to improve	X	X
	Like us to have fewer problems with in-laws	X	X
Friends	Like us to have more friends in common	X	X
Leisure	Like us to have more fun together	X	X
	Want us to go out on more dates together	X	X
	Like for us to take more trips together		X
Children	Would like to have another child	X	
Health	Would like us to have a healthier lifestyle		X
	Like my spouse to take better care of himself		X

Note: MCDS = item present in the sample of middle-aged couples participating in the Marriage and Child Development Study; MARS = item present in the sample of older couples participating in the Marriage and Retirement Study

Table 2.

Ranks and mean levels of *spouses'* self-rated problem severity and *couples'* proportion of time spent discussing conflict topics

	Self-rated conflict topic severity (0 – 5)							
	MCDS Husbands		MCDS Wives		MARS Husbands		MARS Wives	
Rank	Topic	M	Topic	M	Topic	M	Topic	M
1	Intimacy	1.77	Leisure	1.88	Intimacy	.88	Health	.97
2	Leisure	1.76	Intimacy	1.21	Health	.86	Communication	.89
3	Household	1.13	Household	1.13	Friends	.84	Household	.84
4	Money	.92	Communication	1.07	Household	.77	Leisure	.82
5	Relatives	.88	Closeness	.88	Communication	.71	Intimacy	.64
6	Communication	.88	Friends	.88	Leisure	.70	Friends	.64
7	Closeness	.80	Money	.80	Money	.57	Money	.54
8	Friends	.71	Relatives	.77	Relatives	.41	Closeness	.45
9	Children	.62	Religion	.55	Closeness	.34	Relatives	.41
10	Religion	.46	Children	.48	Religion	.31	Religion	.22
11	Jealousy	.19	Jealousy	.20	Jealousy	.13	Jealousy	.10

	Proportion of time spent discussing topics (0 – 1)			
	MCDS		MARS	
Rank	Topic	M	Topic	M
1	Household	.17	Household	.15
2	Closeness	.12	Communication	.10
3	Leisure	.10	Health	.10

4	Communication	.08		Leisure	.07
5	Money	.07		Friends	.04
6	Relatives	.07		Relatives	.04
7	Intimacy	.07		Money	.04
8	Friends	.02		Closeness	.03
9	Religion	.02		Intimacy	.03
10	Children	.02		Religion	.01
11	Jealousy	.01		Jealousy	.00

Table 3.

Regression results predicting observed spousal behaviors from the proportion of time spent discussing each conflict topic

Conflict Topic	MCDS	MARS
Communication	--	Husband problem-solving skills, B = .47, p < .001
Closeness	--	--
Intimacy	--	--
Household	Wife problem-solving skills, B = .43, p = .004	Wife problem-solving skills, B = .66, p < .001 Husband problem-solving skills, B = .70, p < .001
Money	Wife problem-solving skills, B = .43, p = .001	Wife problem-solving skills, B = .41, p < .001

		Husband problem-solving skills, B = .43, p < .001
Religion	Wife problem-solving skills, B = .40, p = .001	--
Jealousy	--	--
Relatives	Wife negative affect, B = .31, p = .029	--
Friends	Wife negative affect, B = .58, p = .028	--
Leisure	Wife problem-solving skills, B = .54, p < .001	Wife problem-solving skills, B = .32, p = .004 Husband problem-solving skills, B = .34, p = .001
Children	Wife negative affect, B = -.44, p = .001	--
Health	--	Wife problem-solving skills, B = .39, p = .001 Husband problem-solving skills, B = .39, p = .001