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Daily Life in Relationships

Niall Bolger

Shannon Kelleher

Most people's daily lives are played out in a range of social institutions, such as the home, work, place, church, and school. These institutions are interconnected, moreover, such that people's relationships in one institution can be affected by events in another. For example, many theorists have pointed to the strong connections between events in the workplace and those in the home (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Crouter, 1984; Kanter, 1977; Plotkowski, 1979). A focus on daily life in relationships therefore inevitably highlights the links between relationships and their broader social context.

In this chapter, we will illustrate the social context of relationships by describing a program of research that uses intensive diary methods to study relationships, stress, and psychological well-being. We hope to demonstrate that research that relies on more conventional survey research methods may miss important relationship processes such as the key role of conflict

in daily life and the precise mechanisms whereby problems in the workplace have repercussions on relationships at home, and vice versa. More generally, we will show that focusing on the daily level of analysis enriches the study of relationships by allowing investigators to translate key relationship concepts such as relationship quality into their referents in recurrent patterns of daily interaction.

Interest in the psychology of daily life has increased greatly over the past decade, and relationships researchers have been at the forefront of this work (Tennen, Suls, & Affleck, 1991; Wheeler & Reis, 1991). In fact, daily experience research on relationships was pioneered more than 15 years ago, in diary studies of everyday social interactions using the Rochester Interaction Record (Reis, Nezlck, & Wheeler, 1980; Wheeler & Nezlck, 1977). Adaptations of the basic approach have been used to study, among other things, initial relationship development (Duck & Micell, 1986), the role of conversation in everyday relationships (Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991), and the interactional characteristics of growing, stable, and disengaging relationships (Baxter & Wilmot, 1986).

Studies of daily life have also become more prominent in the literature on stress (Coyne & Downey, 1991). Daily stressors have been shown to have potent effects on psychological and physical well-being (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989; DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982; DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988; Eckenrode, 1984; Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981), and these findings have propelled the field to examine the daily manifestations of other stress-related variables. These include stress appraisals, coping, and, of central interest in this chapter, relationship variables such as social support and social conflict (Coyne & Downey, 1991).

Relationships, Stress, and Well-Being

It is a well-accepted finding that relationships matter for health and psychological well-being. Results of many studies, from large-scale epidemiological investigations to in-depth research on particular subgroups, show that deficiencies in social

relationships such as social isolation and lack of support are associated with increases in physical and mental health problems (Cohen, 1988; House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). Given that this basic phenomenon is well established, the focus of research has now shifted to understanding the processes whereby relationships influence physical and mental health.

A working assumption in the field is that the importance of relationships for health is due, in part, to their role in stressful experiences (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Stressful experiences are usually classified into three types: chronic, acute, and daily. Chronic stressors are those that are a constant feature of people's lives for long periods of time. Examples include living in poverty, being in an overly demanding job, being in a conflicted marriage. Acute stressors, also known as major life events, are more time-limited events such as becoming divorced or unemployed, failing an exam, and relocating. Clearly, the boundary between chronic and acute stressors is relative: Depending on their duration, certain "acute" problems such as unemployment could also be classified as chronic.

Although acute stressors received almost exclusive research attention in the early years of stress research, there is now an increasing awareness that chronic stressors, because of their unrelenting nature, may be even more important for health and psychological wellbeing (Coyne & Downey, 1991; Kessler, Price, & Wortman, 1985). Moreover, it appears that the effects of both acute and chronic stressors on mental health are mediated, in part, by daily stressors (Eckenrode, 1984; Kanner et al., 1981; Pearlin, 1983). Thus the stress of unemployment is likely to emerge in the day-by-day experience of being unable to pay bills and of receiving rejection letters from prospective employers. In the same way, the stress of being in a bad marriage is likely to emerge in recurrent daily tensions and conflicts over housework, child care, and spending.

Relationships and Stress in Daily Life

What is the role of personal relationships in these daily stress processes? It is reasonable to think that personal relationships

may act as sources of both daily stress and protection against stress. We already know from conventional survey research that conflicts in relationships can have a more potent effect on wellbeing than support in relationships (Fiore, Becker, & Coppel, 1983; Rook, 1984, 1987). Our recent research complements this work by showing that relationship conflicts are indeed potent sources of stress in daily life.

In a large-scale daily diary study of married couples, we found strong evidence that relationships are the major source of daily stress (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). Subjects in the study were 166 married couples, and both husbands and wives in each couple kept a structured daily diary each day for 6 weeks. Each diary was in fact a short questionnaire that subjects completed at bedtime, a task that took no more than several minutes to complete. In the diary, subjects reported their negative moods and the occurrence of 21 categories of daily stressors such as conflicts at home and at work, transportation problems, financial problems, and work overload. As expected, these daily stressors were strongly associated with concurrent daily mood: On high-stress days, subjects tended to be more angry, anxious, and depressed than they were on low-stress days. The surprising finding was that interpersonal conflicts at home and at work uniquely accounted for over 80% of the explained variance in these daily negative affects. All the remaining events (such as work overloads, transportation problems) uniquely accounted for less than 5% of the explained variance in mood. This suggests that the main sources of stress in daily life are interpersonal conflicts.

We noted above that relationships, in addition to acting as a source of stress, may also help protect against the effects of stress. We will discuss the process separately for chronic, acute, and daily stressors. A major source of chronic stress for many people is managing the joint demands of work and family life (Eckenrode & Gore, 1989; Plotnikowski, 1979). One important way in which this is manifested is through a process that family researchers call "crossover" (Crouter, 1984), whereby stressors in the work domain spill over to affect the spouse at home.

Crossover is usually represented as the deleterious effect of stress experienced by an individual in the workplace on the individual's spouse at home. Examples of such effects include cases where work stressors lead to increases in avoidable domestic conflicts. We found, for example, that on days when men had an argument at work, they were more likely to argue with their spouse at home later that day (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). Crossover effects, however, can also represent instances of how one partner selflessly protects the other from the daily manifestation of chronic stress. For example, we found evidence that on days when husbands experienced work overload, their wives reported an increase in housework workload that day (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). This process was mediated in the following way: After a difficult day at work, husbands would withdraw from home activities that evening (a process also identified by Repetti, 1989, 1992). In response, wives "took up the slack" and reported more home stressors. In contrast, no equivalent compensation process occurred when wives had a stressful day at work. This process is a concrete example of how relationships help protect against the effects of chronic stress in daily life. It may also provide insight into why men derive more benefits from marriage than women do (Mirovsky & Ross, 1986).

If relationships protect against the daily manifestation of chronic stress, do they also protect against the daily manifestation of acute stress? To examine this question, we used a diary design to study premedical students' coping with the MCAT, a daylong examination taken by most medical school applicants (Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991). For 35 days surrounding the examination, students reported their daily experiences and their emotional distress. The specific focus of the study was whether a lack of social involvement would predict increases in anxiety as the examination approached. Although everyone's anxiety increased substantially as the examination approached, socially isolated persons showed the largest increases.

The daily reports revealed that this increase in anxiety occurred much sooner for the socially isolated people, such that they were not only more anxious under stress, but they were

anxious for a longer period of time. For example, socially isolated persons showed substantial increases in anxiety by 6 days before the examination, whereas socially integrated persons showed marked increases only 2 days before the examination. Thus this study not only replicates the finding that social relationships can protect against the deleterious effects of stress, but it also prompts more focused questions about temporal issues such as why the effects emerge earlier in socially isolated persons than in socially integrated ones.

The finding that relationships affected the dynamics of adaptation to a major event is echoed in the results of a diary study of everyday stressful events (Caspi, Bolger, & Eckenrode, 1987). One goal of this study was to assess the effect of social support on adaptation to daily stressors in a population of low-income mothers. In doing so, Caspi et al. separated the effects of support on the initial impact of daily stressors from the effects of support on the speed of recovery from stressors. They found that support did not buffer the initial (same-day) effects of stressful events on mood but it buffered the later-day effects such that only the low-support group showed enduring effects of stressors on mood.

From this brief survey, it should be clear that relationship processes are heavily involved in the experience of stress in daily life. Next we will argue that relationship processes may be key mediators of the effect of other variables on adaptation in daily life. We will use, for illustrative purposes, the case of personality.

Relationship Processes Mediate the Effects of Personality in Daily Life

Earlier we reviewed evidence suggesting that the stressful aspects of daily life are, overwhelmingly, interpersonal conflicts in work and family relationships. If relationship conflicts are the proximal sources of daily distress, then it seems plausible that they are *mediators* of the effects of other, more distal variables such as personality and living conditions. Support for this notion

was found in a recent study of the effects of personality in daily life by Bolger and Schilling (1991).

Bolger and Schilling examined the mechanisms through which a major personality disposition, neuroticism, was expressed in day-to-day distress. They examined three potential mechanisms: Neuroticism might lead people to (a) become more exposed to daily stressors, (b) become more upset by the stressors to which they were exposed, or (c) become more distressed for reasons that have nothing to do with exposure or reactivity to daily stressors.

The authors found that exposure and reactivity to daily stressors did, in fact, account for a substantial amount of the effect of neuroticism on daily distress. What was particularly interesting about their results was that two of their nine categories of stressors, interpersonal conflicts with spouse and with other adults, accounted for 50% of what could be explained about the effect of neuroticism on daily distress.

It seems very likely that relationship conflicts mediate the effects of other variables in daily life. For example, environmental conditions such as neighborhood quality and degree of over-crowding affect psychological and physical well-being. In the study described earlier, Caspi et al. (1987) showed that these factors affected the initial impact and speed of recovery from daily stressors. Although the authors did not distinguish between different types of stressors, we suspect that interpersonal conflicts played a key role in mediating the effects of these environmental conditions.

Summary and Implications

The research reviewed above clearly shows that the effects of relationships on psychological well-being are mediated, in part, through recurrent patterns of support and conflict in daily life. This is true of the beneficial effects of relationships, which we illustrated with the example of wives' responses to husbands' work stress. It is also true of the powerful negative effects of relationships, which we illustrated with the example of daily

conflicts at home and at work. The research also shows that these daily conflicts are, in addition, channels for the expression of other factors such as personality traits. Finally, the research demonstrates that relationship effects cannot be understood without reference to larger social structures and contexts such as the workplace.

There are at least three implications of this work for future research. First and most obvious, relationships researchers should pay serious attention to the findings in the stress literature showing that daily stressors have deleterious psychological and physical effects. These findings imply that everyday life in relationships is at least as worthy of research attention as major events in relationships. For example, although divorce can be a major trauma for the partners involved (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978), it is important to contrast this trauma with the cumulative effect of spending days, months, and years in a failed relationship.

The second implication of the work reviewed above is that traditional relationship concepts become meaningful when translated into the language of daily experience research, that is, when they are defined as recurrent patterns of daily interaction. For example, the term *relationship quality* becomes more vivid, and perhaps more useful, when it is specified as a recurrent pattern of reciprocal support in a relationship. We believe that the clarity and precision of other concepts in the literature, such as commitment and loneliness, would be increased by their being specified in this way.

The third implication is that daily experience methods can be used to assess the external validity of relationship processes studied in the laboratory. For example, Levenson and Gottman have demonstrated that distressed couples are more likely than nondistressed couples to exhibit affective linkage—where the negative emotions of one partner predict those of the other—when discussing a relationship problem in the laboratory (Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985). This is a fascinating discovery, but as yet we do not know whether such effects exist in the interactions of couples outside the laboratory. By tracking the negative emotions of spouses using daily diaries, it would be possible to

ascertain whether couples in poor relationships exhibit greater emotional linkage and, if so, establish the contexts in which this occurs. It may well be that a contagion of stress between work and home is an important way in which some couples show greater affective linkage than others. Such concrete knowledge would facilitate interventions to limit distress in relationships.

Daily experience research is an orientation that continues to grow in both the stress and the relationships literatures. Clearly, we and others (Duck, 1986, 1991) see this as a good thing. The ultimate fruitfulness of the approach, however, will depend on investigations carried out in the years ahead. For now, we hope we have provided the reader with a flavor of work at this level of analysis, a level that we view as critical for understanding relationship processes, stress processes, and the interaction between the two.

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