Why marriages last

A discussion of the literature

Robyn Parker

Australian Institute of Family Studies

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About the author

Robyn Parker is a Senior Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, overseeing the Positive Family Relationships strand of the Institute's *Family and Marriage* program. She has recently completed a national survey of relationship education service activities, funded by the Department of Family and Community Services and conducted in partnership with the Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work at the University of South Australia. Her current activities centre on the design and implementation of the Institute's major exploration of fertility decision-making, being developed in collaboration with the Office for the Status of Women.

Abstract

In the field of marriage and relationships research there has tended to be a preoccupation with relationship breakdown and dissolution, obscuring the body of literature that explores the reasons why many marriages are enduring, satisfying and happy. Drawing on this literature, this paper discusses some of what is known about why many marriages last for very long periods and considers how knowledge of the ways in which marriages can be made to last can help young couples create and maintain their own enduring and rewarding marriages.

The paper is not intended to provide a critical analysis of the literature on long-lasting marriages. Rather, it aims to draw attention to the body of literature available on how enduring and rewarding marriages can be created and maintained.

This paper is intended as a counterpoint to Research Paper No. 20 *Towards Understanding the Reasons for Divorce* (Wolcott and Hughes), published by the Institute in 1999, which analysed the reasons why many marriages end in divorce.

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Why marriages last: A discussion of the literature

Introduction

Marriage[1] was once part of the natural progression into adulthood, a means of achieving independence and an identity distinct from one's parents and kin. Most people married, even though it seems they often felt that they did not really know what they were getting into (Parker 2000).

More recently, marriage is often described as simply one of a number of lifestyle options, competing with advanced education, career achievement and less formal relationship structures (Mackay 1997). Census data (ABS 2000) show marriage is becoming less common, occurs later in the life course and is likely to follow a period of cohabitation. Until the recent past the stages in couple and family formation (entering first committed relationship, marriage, first child, ownership of first home) were marked by lengthy periods of adjustment. However, these events now occur in a compressed time frame where partnering, marriage and home ownership occur in quick succession, and home ownership often precedes both formal marriage and the birth of the first child (Winter and Stone 1999).

While there is grave concern among some social researchers worldwide that the institution of marriage is under threat, data on the marriage intentions of young Australians show that marriage at some stage in their life is desired or intended by the majority (McCabe and Cummins 1998). While the overall indications are that the majority of adults will form a committed long-term relationship, probably marriage, at some point in their lives, people are marrying and having their first child at a later age (ABS 2000). Greater financial and social independence for women, levels of participation in the labour force that have increased for women but declined for men, and the legacy of a generation experiencing their own and their peer's parental divorce, have all contributed to the observed declines in both marriage and fertility rates.

In addition to the downward trends in marriage and fertility rates, the number of divorces taking place throughout most western countries is also of concern. Hundreds of studies have been undertaken to identify the factors that cause, predict, or contribute to dissatisfaction and instability in marriages and relationships. Early age at marriage, violence in the family of origin, and particular patterns of negative interaction and attribution are among the factors that are repeatedly shown to be important to marriage and relationship outcomes.

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1   Since the studies cited in this paper were primarily of married couples and the sampling procedures used in those studies constrain generalisability, the terms "marriage" and "spouse" tend to be used rather than the more general terms "relationship" and "partner", which includes de facto relationships.

However, many marriages remain intact for very long periods. Gathering data on lasting marriages would ideally be conducted over the life of the relationship – collecting information during courtship and throughout the life of the marriage – but there are few such studies (Kelly and Conley 1987, for example). Researchers are turning to other methods of data collection to enhance their understanding of the keys to creating and sustaining lasting and rewarding relationships.

This paper aims to draw attention to the body of literature available on how enduring and rewarding marriages can be created and maintained.

Problems with marital and relationship research

Marital "quality", a catch-all phrase that refers to satisfaction, adjustment and happiness, was the focus of intense research energy through the 1980s and 1990s. According to Glenn's (1990) summary of the research of the 1980s, that decade was marked by methodological improvements and increased conceptual clarity, but only "modest" advances were made in understanding "successful" marriages (p. 818). This is not surprising since many studies were of couples in therapy, or who were already separated or divorced.

Even through the 1990s when researchers explored a wide range of topics related to marital satisfaction, the accumulated research was considered not to have contributed towards an integrated understanding of marital relationships (Bradbury, Fincham and Beach 2000; Karney and Bradbury 1995). Notwithstanding the diversity of studies and the intrinsic value of the findings, these authors also comment that the research has often not been explicitly linked to, or tested hypotheses derived from, a particular theory.

Based on "snapshot" studies of couples at one point in time we know that a wide range of factors are reliably associated with marital stability and satisfaction. Cumulative evidence from Karney and Bradbury's (1995) meta-analysis of longitudinal studies suggests that there are also a number of factors that do not have direct effects on satisfaction but that are important because they indirectly enhance or erode satisfaction and/or stability via their influence on other marital or spousal variables. Of particular note in their review is the conclusion that, although variables may affect husbands and wives differently, and attributes of husbands and wives can affect their marriage differently, the accumulated evidence suggests that gender differences are often overstated (Karney and Bradbury 1995).

Until fairly recently, marriage and relationship research tended to focus on predicting marital or relationship *outcomes* rather than understanding marital developmental *processes* (Karney and Bradbury 1995). Hence there is an enormous body of work in which a wide range of predictors and consequences of marital satisfaction and/or quality have been examined. However, the bulk of that research has focused on the relationships of relatively young couples and has been concerned primarily with factors that distinguish between distressed and non-distressed couples at a certain point in time, usually within the first decade of the marriage (Gottman and Notarius 2000; Sharlin et al. 2000).

An additional criticism of current research is that prospective studies of relationship breakdown often focus on constructs such as conflict management behaviours and overlook the affective dimensions of relationships such as changes in love and romance, which are often reported as important precursors to divorce (Houston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith and George 2001). There is some Australian evidence to support this contention. In an Australian Institute of Family Studies study of 654 divorcees, 21 per cent reported that affective factors, incompatibility, and the sense of the couple drifting apart played a significant role in the break-up of their marriage (Wolcott and Hughes 1999).

With little specific focus on the affective dimension of relationships, researchers cannot be certain of the extent to which relationship distress or breakdown can be attributed to a gradual process of disillusionment, relational dynamics, the accumulation of negativity across time, or some combination of these. As Kitson (1992) points out, the thought of ending a relationship does not spontaneously spring into one's mind. The decision is the result of a process – an accumulation of hurt, disappointment and negative interactions that gradually outweighs the more positive aspects of being in the relationship.

A thorough discussion of the role of affective factors in marriage and relationship maintenance and/or dissolution is beyond the scope of this paper, but (although not addressed directly in much of the quantitative research) affective dimensions of relationships are evident in the stories told by both happily and unhappily married people, as will be seen in the studies described below.

Despite the relative paucity of theory in many of the concurrent studies of marriage, some researchers taking a longitudinal perspective have proposed explanatory frameworks of varying depth and focus that provide a means by which the longitudinal changes in marital relationships can be measured and explained. These frameworks, which take a process view of relationships, are generally tested in quantitative studies of a range of individual and couple characteristics. Two well-regarded theoretical frameworks are Karney and Bradbury's Vulnerability–Adaptation–Stress model of the trajectory of relationship satisfaction, and Gottman's Theory of Marital Dissolution, including the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". These theories are presented in the next section.

A final criticism of marital and relationship research pertains to the preoccupation with examining how relationships breakdown. An alternative approach has emerged in the family functioning literature in which the focus is on the strengths possessed within family units and structures (DeFrain 1999). The question of interest is: "How do families succeed?" A similar approach has been taken by the authors of the studies cited in this paper around the question "How do marriages succeed?".

Longitudinal theories of marriage

How does marital happiness or satisfaction change over time? The answer appears to depend on how the measures of marital satisfaction have been obtained. It is widely accepted among researchers that satisfaction follows a U-shaped trajectory: a pattern of early decline followed by a levelling out during the parenting years and an improvement when children leave home (Van Laningham, Johnson and Amato 2001). However, there is also evidence to suggest that marital satisfaction declines regardless of the presence or absence of children (Clements, Cordova, Markman and Laurenceau 1997). In addition, other patterns of change in marital happiness have been found, with continuous declines, continuous increases, and relatively little change across the life span having been reported.

Support for the U-shaped curve tends to come from cross-sectional research (Karney and Bradbury 1997; Orbuch, House, Mero and Webster 1996), although contradictory results are to be found among such studies. Linear trends have been found via longitudinal analyses, but these studies may also be reflecting period effects (changes due simply to growing older; de Vaus 2001) rather than actual developmental changes. The issue is further complicated if satisfaction is reported retrospectively. Findings based on retrospective reports of satisfaction tend in general to be viewed with caution, although retrospective reports

actually may be more accurate because the distance afforded by time provides a more balanced perspective (Mackey and O'Brien 1995).

In spite of a large body of research, there are few studies following couples over periods of more than ten years, so researchers have yet to achieve a clear understanding of the trajectory of marital satisfaction in the longer term (Van Laningham et al. 2001). As with cross-sectional studies, the outcomes of longitudinal research have also been inconsistent.

Until recent years the inconsistency of findings could have been due in part to the inability of statistical techniques to deal adequately with the extent and rate of individual change (Karney and Bradbury 1997). The problem is that while two individuals may be similarly satisfied at a given point in time, their journey to that point may have been vastly different. As well as being likely to have commenced the relationship with different levels of satisfaction, any changes in satisfaction across a given period of time may have been rapid for one individual and slow for the other; the same event may trigger a rise in satisfaction for one and a decline for the other. In addition, Karney and Coombs (2000) noted that analysing mean patterns of change can conceal variability across individuals. Although satisfaction in their sample of wives showed an overall decline across a twenty-year period, for a substantial minority of women satisfaction remained constant or increased across assessment intervals.

It will take time for studies employing advanced techniques that do allow for analysis of variability across individual trajectories to generate sufficient data to allow firm conclusions about changes in relationship patterns over extended periods.
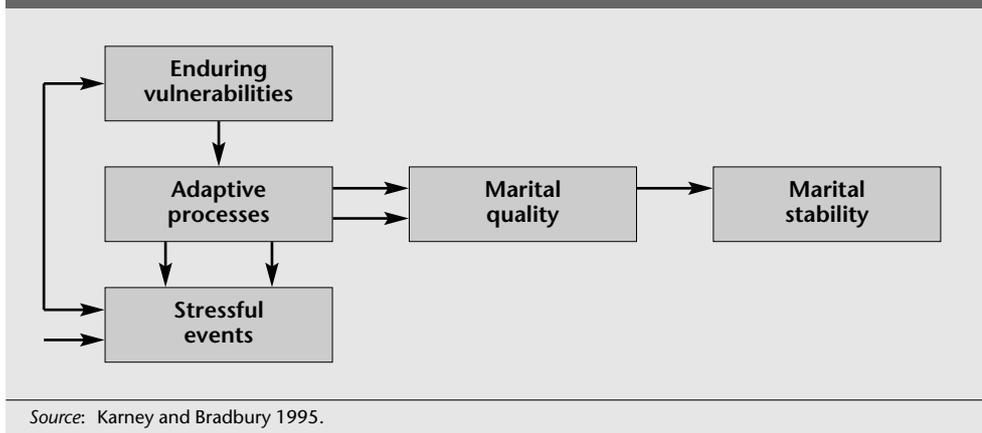
Karney and Bradbury's Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model

In a landmark paper, Karney and Bradbury (1995) advanced a theoretical framework to explain changes in marital quality and stability across time and across couples. Based on their review of over 100 longitudinal studies of marriages and an evaluation of the utility of four commonly-cited theoretical perspectives – social exchange theory (as applied by Levinger 1965), attachment theory (Bowlby 1969), crisis theory (as described by McCubbin and Patterson 1982), and behavioural theory – Karney and Bradbury identified some general themes that could provide the basis for understanding how and why marriages survive or break down.

Elements of the four theories highlight aspects of relationships that can provide the foundations for an integrated theoretical framework. For instance, social exchange theory suggests that the perception of a relationship is coloured by the rewards and costs associated with the relationship, the sort of relationship the individual thinks he or she deserves and their perception of the rewards and costs of being in a relationship with someone else. Attachment theory specifies certain characteristics of each partner that will contribute to the functioning of the relationship. Crisis theory suggests that events such as the transition to parenthood or the experience of unemployment will have an impact on marital quality. Behavioural theory points to the importance of couple interaction and how members of couples cope with relational issues, conflicts and transitions.

Based on their analyses of previous research, Karney and Bradbury identified three classes of variables that, when combined in a single framework, optimise what we can learn about the processes by which marital satisfaction and stability change over time. The three key elements of their theory are outlined below. The relationship of the elements to each other is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of marriage

Source: Karney and Bradbury 1995.

- *Enduring vulnerabilities:* the individual strengths and weaknesses each spouse brings to the relationship. These stable characteristics can include their personality, beliefs and attitudes about marriage, their family of origin and social background.

- *Stressful life events:* incidents, transitions, or circumstances encountered by the couple that can impinge on their relationship and create tension or stress.

- *Adaptive processes:* the ways in which a couple addresses conflict, how they communicate, how they support each other and the ways in which they think about marriage, their spouse and their spouse's behaviour.

According to Karney and Bradbury's model, the ways in which couples deal with the life events they encounter are the key contributors to the couple's perceptions of the quality of their marriage. The couple's adaptive processes are a product of the interaction between the individual spouse's enduring vulnerabilities and the type and severity of the life events they encounter. Thus satisfaction and stability may be relatively high for a couple who have few enduring vulnerabilities and poor adaptive processes if those qualities are tested infrequently. On the other hand, repeated or chronic exposure to stressful events may test even those marriages where the spouses are normally well equipped in terms of their individual capacities to cope and their particular patterns of interaction. As Halford (2000) points out, life events can have both negative and positive effects on a relationship depending on the strength of the couple's adaptive processes.

A couple's accrued experience in dealing with difficult or stressful circumstances will alter spouses' perceptions of the quality of their relationship and vice-versa: satisfaction with the marriage is likely to lead to more positive interactions and behaviours, while engaging in positive interactions and behaviour is likely to enhance marital satisfaction and perceptions of quality. Alternatively, unrealistic expectations or dysfunctional patterns of communication may increase the likelihood of relationship problems and declines in satisfaction over time (Olsen and Fowers 1986; Olsen and Larsen 1989; Sanders, Halford and Behrens 1999). Ultimately, repeated failures of adaptation will undermine the stability of the marriage, leading to increasing frequency of thoughts of divorce; successful adaptation will strengthen or maintain the relationship and reduce the chances of eventual dissolution of the marriage.

Karney and Bradbury's (1995) theory incorporates personality, family variables, and life events into an integrated framework that allows for the processes underlying marital change to be clearly revealed and examined. The following theory by John Gottman is more narrowly focused, drawing particular attention to the ways in which marital quality and stability can be eroded.

Gottman's cascade theory of marital dissolution

Gottman's (1993) process theory of a cascade towards marital dissatisfaction and dissolution incorporates both behavioural and social exchange theories. Gottman looked beyond the collection of factors blamed for the sharp increase in rates of marital failure (easier divorce laws, women's financial independence), noting that they do not offer explanations for why some marriages last and others are dissolved. In contrast to theories and advice offered by therapists who have generated their material based on their work with the couples they happen to see in their practice, Gottman's theory is based on scientific research with hundreds of couples over many years.

A core premise of the cascade theory involves conflict, long considered to have only a negative impact on a marriage. In the laboratory, couple interactions are studied intensively over about 20 hours, including a session during which the couple is videotaped discussing an issue that is creating tension between them. Physiological readings are taken (heart rate), behavioural responses coded (facial expressions, gestures, reactions), questionnaires completed and interviews conducted. The couples also rate their own and their spouse's emotions during the conversation (to gauge how well they read their spouse's emotions). Trained raters then code the recorded conversation for a range of emotions such as disgust, contempt, belligerence, and validation. These measures are then correlated with the questionnaire and interview data to uncover the "hidden emotional dynamics" of the relationship (Gottman 1994: 26).

Based on his research, Gottman (1994: 28) concludes that a "lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship". The key lies in the balance between positive and negative behaviours. Couples whose positive interactions outnumber their negative interactions are known as "regulated": marital stability is stronger when the ratio of positive to negative behaviours is at least 5:1. Those marriages where negativity prevails are labelled "non-regulated" and are more likely than regulated ones to be unhappy marriages in which separation and/or divorce are or have been considered (Gottman 1993; Lindahl, Malik and Bradbury 1997).

Not all negative behaviours lead directly to marital distress and dissolution, but four behaviours in particular, known as the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", have been identified as critical in the process by which a marriage can move towards dissatisfaction and dissolution. *Criticism* tends to lead to *contempt*, which in turn leads to *defensiveness* and finally *stonewalling* (withdrawal).

Gottman's research has also found evidence for a process of change over time in spouses' perceptions of their relationship that results in a "distance and isolation" cascade. At some point their spouse's negativity becomes overwhelming, unexpected, and/or intense to the degree that the spouse reaches a level of desperation such that he or she will do anything to stop the behaviour. When this point is reached a perceptual shift occurs in which the feelings of love, respect and safety are replaced by feelings of hurt, sadness, being threatened, fear and anger. Once this perceptual shift has occurred it can be very difficult to view the marriage in any other light and the likelihood of maladaptive attributions that confirm a negative view of the reasons underlying other behaviours is increased.

In a more positive vein, related research suggests that long-married couples are better able to manage their emotions such that, on the whole, they experience less distress and greater marital satisfaction than do younger and middle-aged couples (reported in Carstenson, Graff, Levenson and Gottman 1996). This may be partly because they have learned to soften conflict with affection, and partly because, over time, some conflicts either resolve themselves by disappearing, or

they lose their power to threaten or arouse strong emotions. The need to resolve every issue may also diminish over time as spouses' priorities and behaviour change in light of approaching old age.

Applying the theories to marital quality and stability

The aspect of marriage that is pivotal to both Karney and Bradbury's and Gottman's theories is conflict management – how couples deal with their differences, how they argue and express themselves both verbally and non-verbally.

Karney and Bradbury's model is wider ranging than Gottman's, incorporating specific assertions about the role of individual characteristics and life events. The methods of investigating both theories stand in stark contrast to the literature that has explored the question of why marriages last. Both adopt quantitative approaches, making measurements largely from direct observation (Gottman) or from questionnaire responses (Karney and Bradbury), and although both are ostensibly concerned with investigating marital breakdown they can both provide rich sources of data to enhance our understanding of how marriages can be long lasting, happy and rewarding for both spouses.

The "strengths" approach has tended to be investigated using qualitative methods, although neither quantitative or qualitative methods is precluded for either approach. Despite the apparent common sense in doing so, relatively few studies have explicitly set out to uncover the "secrets" of lasting marital success by going directly to the source – long-married couples themselves.

Studies of lasting marriages

Not all long-term marriages are satisfying for both spouses and those who stay in an unhappy marriage do so for a variety of reasons. The data reported from the studies of long-term marriages outlined below underline the active nature of the process of creating and maintaining a satisfying marriage over long periods. The studies included in this paper were conducted across the early 1980s and the 1990s and involve predominantly qualitative analyses. Despite the fact that qualitative research is often criticised for being "soft" (Neuman 1997), it is the capacity to capture the meaning attached to aspects of human and social life that makes qualitative research appropriate and useful for exploring couple relationships.

Comment on methodology

In considering the studies described below, some methodological concerns should be kept in mind. For the most part the samples are fairly small and have been obtained by a range of non-random techniques that automatically constrain the generalisability of the data. Most, although not all, participants were white, well-educated members of the middle or upper classes. Although many participating couples had experienced some of the major life events that potentially test a couple relationship, the additional resources afforded them by their social and economic circumstances, rather than anything associated with the couple relationship per se, may have helped to cushion the marriage from stress.

Being retrospective, the data may be subject to a positive bias towards providing information that is consistent with the respondents' current situation. The rationale for this bias is that if a person is still in a marriage then the marriage must be happy and responses should convey that image. However, spouses in all studies cited in this paper described both negative and positive aspects of their

marriages and freely pointed out that their marriages had not always been happy. While caution should be exercised in interpreting retrospective data, it should be remembered that, for the researcher, the accuracy of the information may be less important than the meaning it holds for the respondent (Mackey and O'Brien 1995; Alford-Cooper 1998).

Married people: Staying together in the age of divorce

> "How have you managed to stay married for so long [almost 30 years]? Maybe if I knew I wouldn't be so leery of marriage myself." (Single woman, late 20s.)

> "Single people think all long-married people are cowards." (Divorced man, mid-30s.)

Klagsbrun's (1985) study of long-married couples had its origins in these two comments. One of the first researchers to "go to the source", she recruited and interviewed 87 middle class married couples. At the time they were interviewed in the early 1980s, marriages of 15 years or more were considered to be especially likely to last given they had "survived" the intense social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s.

Klagsbrun reports eight characteristics of long-married couples that emerged from the couples' descriptions of their marriages.

- *Ability to change and adapt to change* In the face of extraordinary social change these long-married couples retained a positive attitude. Rather than see such changes as destructive they were accommodated, viewed as something to be dealt with as a couple. Increasing access to education for women and their greater participation in the labour force were two changes that challenged established perceptions of the value both of established institutions such as marriage and of the roles men and women were expected to adopt.

- *Ability to live with the unchangeable* The happy long-married couples appeared to have been very pragmatic. They seemed not to expect a perfect marriage in which every disagreement had to be completely resolved – they could let some things be. Their attitude seemed to be one of "the glass being half full" – they looked to the positives in the marriage and concentrated on their strengths, channelling energy they might have put into settling disputes into finding ways to accommodate the differences and enjoying the relationship.

- *Assumption of permanence* Having a lasting marriage was important to the couple. Whatever its faults, they were committed to the marriage and were prepared to compromise for the sake of the relationship – not for their family or for their Church. These couples accepted that at various times their commitment to the marriage and the balance of give and take in their relationship would waver, but they believed that over time that balance would even out. They shared a firm belief in the value of marriage as an institution that remained solid in the face of whatever difficulties and upheaval they had encountered. In this sense their marriage was a refuge.

- *Trust* The core of these marriages was trust. Whatever trials and tribulations they experienced their trust in each other remained strong and provided them with a sense of safety and security – a marker of happy, lasting marriages. It was the basis for the development of both psychological and sexual intimacy and the anchor of their fidelity.

- *Balance of dependencies (power)* Even in the more traditional marriages the spouses acknowledged their emotional dependence on each other. Furthermore, they learned that the balance of dependence was not static, that

at various times one would be more dependent than the other or one would need more nurturing than the other. Their need for each other and dependence on their spouse was not viewed as a weakness of the marriage but a strength – because they saw themselves as mutually dependent. Despite the deep attachment evident between spouses, Klagsbrun reported that spouses didn't feel that their individual identities had been damaged or subsumed by their spouses; each appeared capable of surviving outside of the couple – but they preferred not to.

- *Enjoyment of each other* In the happier long-term marriages the couples enjoyed each other's company, would talk, argue and listen. They tended to have similar values. The emotional and physical connection between spouses was often apparent to Klagsbrun as she interviewed them. Couples would not agree on everything nor did they necessarily share the same interests, but they worked out compromises to accommodate their differences, and pursuing individual activities helped some couples to remain interesting to each other. The key was in achieving a balance between time together and time apart. Finding such a balance contributed to the sense of intimacy and satisfaction with the marriage.

- *Cherished, shared history* Long-married couples valued their shared experiences. Their history gave them a perspective on the present, allowing them to view events that had the potential to damage the marriage in light of both what they had already overcome and their accumulated positive experiences. This was not simply nostalgia. Their joint history was a significant part of their individual histories, "an entity" that reminded them of their capacity to survive in the past and helped to prevent hasty decision-making in the face of difficulties in the present.

- *Luck* Even with all these characteristics, couples were aware that holding their marriage together had also involved a little luck. Luck can play a role in protecting a marriage from the unpredictable, in that the couple relationship is not tested as often or as severely as it might have been, but the couples Klagsbrun interviewed had experienced their share of problems, and sometimes more. It may have been luck that brought spouses together in the first place, or that provided the opportunity to overcome difficult backgrounds or circumstances. However, Klagsbrun's impression of those who thought of themselves as lucky was that their marital success was as much due to their positive outlook and making the best of things as it was to sheer chance.

The happier couples Klagsbrun interviewed had remained together both "because of" the emotional benefits they gained through their marriage, and "in spite of" the stresses and strains they may have experienced (p. 279). There is also an air of intentionality underlying the eight qualities of long-married couples described above, a sense that those couples whose marriages had lasted realised that responsibility for the outcome of the marriage was at least to some degree in their own hands. Their marriages survive and flourish because for them remaining in the marriage was the happiest choice they could make (p xvi).

'Til death do us part: How couples stay together

Using criteria and methods similar to Klagsbrun, but accessing a much larger sample, Lauer and Lauer (1986) studied 351 couples who had been married at least 15 years. They obtained their data via questionnaires, interviews and personal accounts of the ups and downs couples had experienced. Both spouses were happy in 300 marriages, 32 couples were mixed (one happy, one not), and both spouses were unhappy in 19 marriages. As is often the case in these kinds of studies, the couples tended to be in the middle to upper socio-economic strata.

Couples identified several characteristics that, as well as being important to the marriage overall, were equally valued by husbands and wives. The following were reported by the spouses *independently* as the "top seven" reasons for their marital success:

- spouse as best friend;

- liking spouse as a person;

- marriage as a long term commitment;

- marriage as a sacred institution;

- agreement on aims and goals;

- spouses becoming more interesting to each other;

- wanting the relationship to succeed.

The outstanding feature of this list is that it was identical for both husbands and wives. Such a high degree of consensus attests to the critical role those attributes play in creating a marriage that will last. Clearly a deep and abiding friendship is a key characteristic of these long-term marriages.

The second key feature of long-term marriages related to commitment. Both happily and unhappily married spouses shared a strong belief in marriage as an institution and as a long-term commitment. The difference between them was that the happier couples were committed both to the marriage and their spouse; for these couples, their connectedness and intimacy were a product or consequence of being married. Couples who were in mixed or unhappy marriages were committed to the marriage for its own sake, but not to their spouse; for these couples, the marriage was endured out of their sense of duty – to their children and family, or their faith, their community, or to society. Lauer and Lauer (1986: 181) quote one husband who summed it up this way:

> "Commitment means a willingness to be unhappy for a while . . . You're not going to be happy with each other all the time. That's when commitment is really important."

Happily married couples also felt that sharing important fundamental aims, goals and values helped them to create and maintain their relationship, but where there were differences of opinion the lack of consensus was not interpreted as damaging to the relationship. There was a recognition that making efforts to achieve and maintain an acceptable balance of separateness and togetherness was necessary for long-term satisfaction. Respondents drew attention also to other qualities in their spouse and their marital relationship such as caring, giving, integrity and humour, having similar opinions and philosophies, the expression of affection and their sex life, and taking pride in their spouse's achievements.

In contrast with what therapists believed at the time, couples thought that holding some things back during arguments was much wiser than "letting it all hang out". They did not expect that the relational dynamics in the marital relationship would always be evenly balanced, nor did they expect perpetual bliss. There was a recognition that the couple was more important than individual interests and pursuits, not in the sense of the romantic notion that "two become one" but that the sense of being "a couple" enriches them as individuals.

Lasting marriages: Men and women growing together

> "There is a growing together . . . like a tree around a boulder underneath the ground. The root eventually goes around it." (57 year old man, married 25 years; pxii)

Mackey and O'Brien (1995) interviewed 60 couples who married during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. They selected a sample of couples whose youngest child had completed high school that would provide a diverse sample representing major American religious, ethnic, racial and occupational groups. The interviews explored how their marriages had developed and progressed across the years, in particular the three broad phases of the early years, the childrearing years, and "empty-nest" years.

In broad terms spouses' satisfaction with their marriage was not related to their sex or their age, to how many years they had been married, or how many children they had. Social demographic characteristics had minor effects. Husbands tended to be more positive about the relationship than wives, although wives reported both positives and negatives. Satisfaction was higher for those with less education and for those in the higher and lower versus the middle income brackets.

Mackey and O'Brien identified five factors that appeared to be important to marital longevity.

• *Containment of conflict* Couples reported that most of their conflict occurred during the childrearing years. Failure to adequately resolve major difficulties arising during the parenting years undermined satisfaction, particularly if the cycle of negative interaction and defensiveness was allowed to go unchecked as they approached the third (retirement/empty nest) phase of the marriage. For most couples the husbands and wives differed in the way they dealt with conflict, men typically being more avoidant than women, although couples reported that changes towards more open and direct ways of dealing with conflict helped to improve satisfaction – as long as there was seen to be movement on the part of both husbands and wives.

• *Mutuality of decision-making* The degree of mutual decision-making increased over the life of the marriage, especially as the children went through adolescence. During the early years of the marriage the role of decision-maker was often split according to gender roles: men made most of the major decisions except where the home or children were concerned, however there was a general trend towards joint decision-making as couples moved towards the third phase of the marriage, when children began to leave the home. In particular, decision-making with respect to friends, major financial outlays and leisure activities increasingly involved exchange and reciprocity. Couples who reported higher levels of joint decision-making also reported significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction.

• *Quality of communication* The period of their children's adolescence was highlighted as the time when couple communication was fraught with challenges. Often though, it led to better communication patterns. Couples reported that over time they became more open and expressive with each other, characteristics associated with higher levels of satisfaction. Expressive communication, or at least some combination of the expressive and instrumental ("showing" rather than "telling") modes, was associated with greater satisfaction in the third phase of marriage. Couples who maintained primarily instrumental patterns of relating into their later years tended to be less satisfied with their relationship.

• *Relational values of trust, respect, understanding and equity* Respondents indicated that in the early years of the marriage, the respect, trust and understanding they received from their spouses was vital to marital satisfaction. In the empty-nest years, however, the *reciprocity* of these values was the key to satisfaction. As time-dependent values, mutual trust and understanding were significantly related to satisfaction only in the post-

parenting years, having been built up gradually in the early years. Couples recognised that at times their marriage was unfair to one spouse (usually the wife during the child-rearing years), but as long as the spouses felt some sense of equity, erosion of marital satisfaction was prevented.

- *Sexual and psychological intimacy* Mackey and O'Brien viewed intimacy as a composite of mutual understanding, acceptance, trust, and respect based on being open and honest about one's feelings and reflected both physically and psychologically. Of the two, the psychological intimacy that grew during the post-parenting years contributed more to the overall levels of satisfaction in the later years than physical intimacy. Satisfactory marriages were usually described as psychologically intimate, but for dissatisfied spouses that intimacy was absent. Intimacy grew over time, often becoming deeper as couples overcame difficulties and worked through the low points in their marriage. Life events provided couples with opportunities for reinforcement of existing feelings or propelled them towards developing stronger feelings of connectedness.

The themes of adaptability, resilience and commitment recurred throughout the interviews. Satisfied couples adapted to change and drew on the marriage as well as the resources and support around them to help them cope. Commitment was seen as the glue that held them together . . . the "assuring sense of being together, no matter what" (Mackey and O'Brien 1995: 144). While some of their values and attitudes underwent significant changes over the years, their views of marriage as a permanent commitment of love and fidelity held fast.

For keeps: Marriages that last a lifetime

In a larger study than the others described above, Alford-Cooper (1998) collected data on 576 couples whose marriages were intact after 50 years or more. Concentrating on a single geographic region, Long Island, New York, Alford-Cooper gathered information spanning key stages in the couples' lives, from their early courtship through marriage, parenting and growing old. From questionnaires, information pertaining to a range of marital dimensions was gathered, including the factors they thought contributed to their marital longevity, and a subset of 60 couples were also interviewed extensively.

During interviews, Alford-Cooper gathered the couples' life stories – how they met and married, how they dealt with difficulties and obstacles, how their relationships had survived. She also asked the interviewees their views on the younger generation and the advice they would give to young marrying couples.

Over half (56 per cent) of the spouses described themselves as very happily married and a further 37 per cent reported being happily married. Almost all (99 per cent) reported that when they married they thought it would last, but they had no other specific expectations of marriage. Love had kept many couples together, but unhappy couples had remained bonded through their children. Significantly, although 21 per cent of all spouses had at some time contemplated the failure of the marriage, divorce simply "wasn't an option" (p. 134), either because of their deeply held beliefs that divorce was unacceptable, or because they had no resources or support networks on which to rely. For many spouses, little or no support for a decision to divorce was likely to be found among their own family. Some reported incidents where they had returned to their parents' home only to be immediately sent back to their spouse.

When the 576 couples were asked which of eight relationship characteristics had helped them stay together, three groups of characteristics emerged. The first comprised the three most frequently endorsed characteristics: trust (82 per cent), loving relationship (81 per cent), and willingness to compromise (80 per cent).

The second group comprised mutual respect (72 per cent), need for each other (70 per cent), and compatibility (66 per cent). The third group comprised children (57 per cent), and good communication (53 per cent). When asked to add any other characteristics, spouses most often added sense of humour. They also tended to have similar attitudes towards marriage, with high levels of agreement about the sanctity of marriage and the need for fidelity and commitment.

While financial pressures prevented some women and men from leaving the marriage, for many their interdependence and sense of shared history deflected them from taking the necessary steps towards divorce. One of the components of the bond that helped to keep some couples together was their willingness to give more than they received. How much each spouse was giving or taking at any point in time was seen to be flexible and couples acknowledged that rarely was the balance equal. But where this willingness was missing, or too one-sided, there was little to bind the couple beyond obligation and lack of viable alternatives. Such relationships also tended not to be characterised by love and respect, compromise or good communication, attributes that, when combined with an acceptance of the nature of the relationship, keep the couple from proceeding towards divorce.

When asked how they would advise young couples on how to make their marriage a long and happy one, respondents highlighted five key approaches.

• There must be a similarity of values, backgrounds and interests as a way to prevent or ameliorate discord, especially in relation to children and parenting.

• A successful marriage will be characterised by love, regard and mutual respect that go beyond sexual desire and contribute to an intimacy that can only be developed over time.

• Don't look for, or try to create, the perfect spouse. Take the time to get to really know your spouse's character before marrying them – and then make a serious commitment to the development of a long-term marriage.

• Communicate openly and honestly but tactfully, even and especially during those times when communicating is most difficult.

• Show a willingness to compromise, to negotiate and to share responsibilities, realising that you won't always be giving and taking in equal measures but that over time it will balance out.

Together through thick and thin: A multinational picture of long-term marriages

Sharlin, Kaslow and Hammerschmidt (2000) conducted a unique study of non-clinical couples from eight countries (United States, Canada, Israel, Chile, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, and South Africa) who had been married (or living together in the case of Sweden) for at least 20 years. Apart from making cross-cultural comparisons, the researchers had a number of aims reflecting their family therapy orientation. These were: to identify which attributes of lasting marriages contribute to their capacity to weather the inevitable marital storms; to examine how various socio-demographic variables (such as ethnicity, religion, culture, and socio-economic status) influence couples; and to inform practitioners of ways in which marriages can be supported and improved.

The total of 610 couples married (or living together) for between 20 and 46 years was obtained largely via the authors' networking. Almost all couples were over the age of 45 years and were approaching either the empty-nest years or retirement. The authors acknowledge the limitations of their study due to their sample being largely middle to upper-middle class, although the findings suggest that long-term satisfying marriages are not dependent on wealth.

Unlike the other studies discussed in this paper, participants were not interviewed. Rather, they completed an extensive battery of questionnaires covering each person's family background, relationship history, parents and marital relationships, ratings of marital adjustment, problem solving, communication, reasons for staying married, and ingredients for marital satisfaction. Early in their analyses the researchers determined that there was no need to structure comparisons according to sample characteristics since the differences in the samples across countries were small and unimportant.

At least some aspects of creating and maintaining lasting and satisfactory marriages appear to be independent of culture or geography. Love, mutuality and sharing emerged as bases of the respondents' long-term marital satisfaction, and a number of qualities such as mutuality of trust, respect, support and give and take, sharing of values, beliefs (including religion), interests, philosophies, fun and humour, all arose consistently across cultures.

Motives for staying together at the time of their interview clearly revolved around commitment to the marital partnership and love for their spouse, whereas when times were tough staying together for the children and honouring the commitment to the lifelong partnership were prime motivators.

In a further comparison of three of the motives (the reason for selecting these three in particular is not explained) it emerges that children play a role in warding off divorce when couples are *unhappy,* while lifestyle and love are less important. At the other end of the spectrum, *extremely happy* couples stay together out of their love for their partner; lifestyle and love are important for *very happy* couples; and children, lifestyle and love are salient motivators for *happy* couples.

An unassailable belief in and commitment to the institution of marriage and to their spouse was especially apparent with respect to why couples stayed together during difficult times, and in the majority of cases this commitment was underpinned by their religious affiliation and beliefs. In referring to very difficult times in their relationship, most couples, whether currently happy or unhappy, reported that honouring their commitment to a lifelong partnership and their sense of responsibility towards their children were the prime reasons for seeing the marriage or relationship through the stressful periods. Satisfied couples also cited the motivating power of their love for their spouse or partner, but for dissatisfied couples forces external to the couple such as children and religious beliefs exerted greater influence on their decision to remain in the marriage.

That the rankings of ingredients for relationship satisfaction and the motives for staying together during difficult times were very similar across nations contributes further to the notion of the universal nature of the attributes of lasting marriages. In addition, satisfaction with the marriage was predicted in all countries only by various couple relationship quality variables (such as closeness, communication, affection expression etc), whereas overall life satisfaction was predicted by dimensions such as employment, length of marriage, health, and economic status, as well as closeness.

Even though respondents' marriages had been maintained for very long periods, couples were not unaware of some deficiencies in their relationship. Couples' rankings of the *desired* ingredients of their relationship were quite different from those they regarded as currently extant in their relationship. Components of relationship dynamics reflecting the original declaration of love, and the behaviours that contribute to intimacy were endorsed as ideal relationship characteristics that were to some extent deficient in their relationship: patience and understanding, mutual sexual fulfilment, and sensitivity and consideration for spouse's needs.

Marital perspectives study

Standard interview methods were used in most of the studies described above to obtain both quantitative and qualitative information. In the *Marital Perspectives Study* conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Parker 2000), focus groups were used to explore aspects of marriage as it was perceived by a group of individuals who had been married, remarried or in a de facto relationship for relatively long periods. The sample was drawn from Victorian participants in the Australian Family Life Course Study conducted by the Institute in 1996. Discussions focused on the meanings respondents attached to marriage, what changes they had seen both in their own marriage and in marriage in general, and how marriages can be nurtured and supported. Each focus group discussion was recorded, transcribed and analysed for recurring themes.

Those who participated (12 men, aged between 28 and 73 years; and 18 women, aged between 33 and 71 years) tended to be fairly well educated individuals from the middle or high economic strata, in satisfying relationships of relatively long duration (26.5 years men, 20.6 years women).

The meaning of marriage

Among the range of responses to the issue of the meaning of marriage companionship and commitment were prominent. Two strong themes emerged from further discussion of this issue – sense of couple identity and spouse attributes. The first theme of "couple-ness" comprised joint activities, goals and decision-making, sharing and teamwork. In the second theme, three characteristics of a "good" spouse were highlighted – tolerance, support and communication. Belief in marriage as an institution, its symbolism and its place in their lives and in society ran deep for most respondents. The majority of those who were married had not questioned or analysed their decision, seeing it as part of the traditional passage through life.

Expectations of marriage

A generational difference became apparent when discussion turned to what participants had expected of marriage. Respondents married over 30 years reported that they "fell" into marriage, not really thinking much about it since it was simply an accepted and expected event in one's life. On the other hand, younger respondents said they knew exactly what they were doing and for some of them marriage had so far unfolded as they expected.

The comments from older participants seem to relate to their marriage in a general sense, that overall they had little idea of what marriage held in store for them. However, they did note that their ideas about particular roles and behaviours within marriage were quite clear, and largely based on their parents' marriages. When the assumption that they could carry the roles they had observed in their parents' marriage into their own was shown to be faulty, respondents noted that they had realised that some adjustment and negotiation was required.

For some, building their own relationship had involved rejecting much of the role modelling they had observed in their parents' marriage. The power of poor modelling to shape younger generations relationship experience was obvious to respondents.

"The trouble with young couples today . . ."

Participants saw young couples as better informed about marriage than they themselves had been, because young couples have had the benefit of growing up in an environment where all aspects of relationships are openly discussed.

However, their education was perceived to be deficient because of the focus on sex education rather than preparation for relationships – marriage or otherwise.

Participants recognised that the social, cultural and economic environment was very different for young couples compared to the times in which they had married, and that following more than two decades of no-fault divorce many young people had become insecure about relationships in general and wary of marriage in particular. As Kitson (1992) comments, exposure to high divorce rates in combination with having little knowledge of what a "good" marriage looks like may result in what she calls a "defensive marriage" (p. 79), one in which couples *hope* the marriage lasts but, just in case it doesn't, they take out insurance against possible failure by building in some protective measures. Holding back from making a total commitment or entering into prenuptial agreements can be seen as ways of protecting aspects of oneself.

Participants noted that in spite of their insecurities about marriage, young couples tended to have extremely high expectations of marriage and of their partner. In contrast, when respondents (particularly if they were older) talked about entering their own marriages, they mentioned having hopes for the marriage. They had expectations relating to its permanence, the likelihood of children, and the roles they would play, but primarily they hoped the marriage would succeed. Their own view was that they and their spouse provide a "stable base" for each other, allowing individuals to have and retain their individual interests and resources secure in the knowledge that there is a safe place to return.

In addition to realising that young couples form relationships and families in a very different society from the one they knew as young adults, participants acknowledged the erosion of beliefs in the institution of marriage and the traditional pathways to adulthood. A consequence of these changes and the wariness with which young people view marriage is the perception that young couples find it difficult to make the deep commitment to marriage that would help them to get through the trying times that are almost inevitable. What participants had found is that weathering those storms strengthens the relationship, a view supported by research evidence (Waite and Gallagher 2000).

Reasons for their "successful" marriage

Several factors emerged as contributing to the longevity of participants' marriages. In addition to the emotional bonds of love and trust, participants saw a genuine friendship between spouses to have been necessary to the long-term maintenance of the relationship. They thought there had been an element of luck in finding a spouse with similar values and beliefs and who matched them in the ways in which they had grown and changed over the years. A number of factors encouraged couples to "hang in there" when they experienced marital difficulties, including: a sense of the role of marriage and children in a fulfilling life; the value of marriage as an institution; the presence of a network of support; and their commitment both to the spouse and to the marriage. Finally, whatever they had done to keep the marriage going had involved an active process of negotiation and compromise.

Supporting and building strong marriages

One of the key areas in which focus group participants saw the need for change was in the amount of time couples and families spent together. It had been important to participants to set aside some time for the couple in order to maintain and build on the marital bonds. In terms of promoting healthy attitudes towards marriage, participants commented on the need to reserve time for the couple. The necessity for both spouses in many couples to work in order

to survive or achieve an acceptable standard of living, often without the support of an extended family, means there is little breathing space for quality "couple time". In addition to providing that much-needed breathing space, they felt that children needed to see that the couple relationship is an important one, and that it is independent of the relationship between parents and children. Concentrating on helping couples balance their work and family commitments was seen as a way of promoting strong and stable marriages that would provide positive role models as well as better outcomes for children. According to participants, seeing strong marital relationships is necessary for young people to learn how to develop their own strong marital relationships.

Participants also saw the need to support young couples by helping them to be better prepared for marriage in terms of having realistic expectations of marriage and marriage partners. Few had experienced any form of marriage or relationship education. However, they referred to the need for programs aimed at young people in schools as well as those preparing for marriage that addressed aspects of marriage and relationships such as communication skills, and exploring the often overlooked "companionship basis" of a relationship.

The good marriage

The studies outlined above reveal a set of characteristics that define both the individual spouses and the marriages of those couples who participated. However, it can be tempting to interpret a set of characteristics or attributes as a "recipe" for a successful marriage, assuming that if one or more of the key "ingredients" is absent the marriage is doomed to either mediocrity or dissolution.

An alternative approach put forward by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1996) conceptualises happy and lasting marriages as the products of a series of processes. Such an approach carries a sense of the dynamism and complexity of marriage, rather than of attributes that each spouse may or may not possess.

Wallerstein extensively interviewed and observed 50 married couples who volunteered or were recruited via colleagues and associates. To be included in the study couples were required to have been married for nine years or longer, have at least one child, classify their marriage as very happy, and be willing to be interviewed both individually and together. On average, participants were aged 48 and had been married 21 years. At the time of their interviews the couples were healthy, well-educated, and middle to upper middle class, although many had come from backgrounds that were far from happy.

Based on her interviews with these couples, Wallerstein identified four (not mutually exclusive) types of marriage – romantic, rescue, companionate, and traditional.

- **Romantic marriages** give the lie to the notion that romance and passion necessarily have a short shelf-life. In these unions couples still talked in terms of their ongoing attraction to each other and the excitement in their relationship. The spouses' individual identities were defined by their relationship, and it is perhaps unsurprising that it is in these marriages that couples talked of being "completed" by their spouse. The idealisation of the partner that occurs during courtship seemed to be perpetuated by these couples throughout their marriage. In comparison, Wallerstein noted that many of the divorced couples she has encountered in her marital therapy practice seem never to have looked at their spouse through the rose-coloured glasses considered to be typical of new relationships. Her clinical observations are supported by recent research showing that couples who hold idealised views of their partner have more lasting, less conflicted, and more satisfying relationships (Murray, Holmes and Griffin 1996).

- *Rescue marriages* comprised a fifth of the couples Wallerstein interviewed. In these unions the childhood of one or both spouses was characterised by abandonment, cruelty, abuse, or parental mental illness, yet they had managed to construct a "successful" marriage. One of the reasons these marriages worked so well seems to be that the spouses identify very strongly with each other, in some cases because of their similar histories (for example, "we are both survivors", p. 108), or because the spouse's characteristics or behaviours were the opposite of those on which the respondent's early traumatic experiences were based. These marriages were not formed by couples who were simply running away from their past experiences; they are actively shaped by the spouses in ways that enable them to get beyond the past.

- *Companionate marriages* are characterised by equality in all facets of life. Such marriages in Wallerstein's sample tended to occur among couples who grew up through the turbulence of the 1960s. Careers are central to their lives, but they also share responsibilities across marital domains, striving to be fair about allocating household and family tasks. Wallerstein's observations led her to believe that companionate marriages are particularly vulnerable because they do not have the additional glue provided by the idealisation of the romantic marriage, the well-defined and accepted roles and domains of responsibility associated with the traditional marriage, or the strong identification between spouses in rescue marriages. This is not to say that companionate marriages cannot be as happy and successful as other marriages – this was, after all, a criterion for participation in the study. Wallerstein's point is that the competing forces of marriage, children and work can eat away at a marriage if the spouses do not have the energy, commitment or the high self-confidence required to sustain such a marriage over long periods.

- *Traditional marriages* were not restricted to only the older of the couples in the study – 25 per cent of couples married in the 1970s and early 1980s were described as having a traditional marriage. Wallerstein notes two kinds of traditional marriage. In the older form, the husband is provider and protector, the wife is the creator of a nurturing home, and together they construct a sanctuary in which to raise children. Comfort – taking care and being considerate of each other – was at the core of the older traditional marriages: the husband by directing his energies towards providing for his family economically, the wife by creating a comfortable haven for the husband and children. In more recent traditional marriages, women expect to experience both motherhood and a career – or at least be involved in the workforce to some degree – but not simultaneously, at least not while the children are young. Roles are less rigidly defined. Unlike older traditional marriages, children are less likely to be the reason for the marriage although they are central to them.

All of the couples in this study evaluated their marriage as very happy. For them this meant not only that they felt respected and cherished *by* their spouse but that they respected and admired certain qualities *in* their spouse. The importance of this mutual respect is underscored by Wallerstein when she notes that loss of respect is a central element of divorcing couples' relationships. It would appear that as well as accepting themselves as worthy of being loved, spouses must hold a firm belief that their spouse is "worthy of being loved" (p. 328).

Wallerstein states that marriage is "always a work in progress" (p. 269). In this respect the happy couples she interviewed and observed differed from many unhappy couples she has seen in her practice: they had begun with a solid foundation and understood that the relationship required ongoing maintenance. Their views were realistic – building a marriage with anyone involves negotiating a lot of ups and downs and making compromises. Much of

their relationship was based on sharing: goals, a capacity to love, mutual attraction, valuing of and commitment to their children. They felt enhanced by their own marriages and lucky, rather than entitled, to have a spouse with whom they "fit" so well.

A framework for understanding why marriages last

Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1996) go beyond identifying the characteristics of lasting and happy marriages. From her observations of the happy couples in her study, Wallerstein has distilled a set of nine "tasks" of marriage – psychological challenges that must be addressed within the marriage from its inception and updated throughout. These challenges offer a view of creating and sustaining a lasting and happy marriage as *a process* in which couples can engage, rather than a set of characteristics that define them.

While being able to identify such characteristics is very useful, without due attention to processes by which those characteristics are developed, they can tend to suggest that having a long and happy marriage is an either/or proposition – if the required characteristics are absent the marriage may be perceived as likely to fail. (However, the authors of the studies above would be quick to point out that marriages also succeed despite the perceived absence of one or more of the attributes they have identified.) The "process" view also reinforces the notion that the marriage does not spring into being on the day of the wedding.

Task 1. Separating from the family of origin

This challenge requires developing an independent unit in which the primary relationship is with the spouse and the primary identity is as a husband or wife, not a son or daughter. Simultaneously redefining old boundaries and forging new ones is a difficult process, particularly at the outset of the marriage, and one that is likely to be re-visited at later stages of the marriage such as the birth of a child.

Task 2. Building togetherness and creating autonomy

The sense of "we-ness" is the key to a strong marriage. It involves creating a common view of the marriage while at the same time allowing room for each spouse to retain some sense of autonomy – not in the sense of retaining the lifestyle of an individual before marriage but in allowing each spouse their sense of self as an individual within the sphere of the marriage. Couples in three of the studies outlined above (Klagsbrun 1985; Lauer and Lauer 1986; Parker 2000) made specific references to finding, maintaining and adjusting the balance between individual and couple. A recurrent theme in these and other studies is that the marriage is seen as almost a separate entity in and of itself, the needs of which take precedence over the spouses' individual needs and something for which compromises and sacrifices are worthwhile. However, if compromise and sacrifice are integral to achieving a balance between togetherness and autonomy, there must be a shared sense of fairness that allows each spouse some degree of gratification.

Task 3. Becoming parents

While parenthood was a defining element of marriage for many of the couples in all the studies described in this paper it may not be as salient for many young couples approaching marriage or newly married. Adding the new role of parent brings both positive and negative changes to the marital relationship. The challenge from this time forward is to balance the needs of the couple

relationship with the needs of the child – *both* require nurturing. As participants in the Institute's Marital Perspectives Study noted, this is increasingly difficult in the current environment where working long hours is required to advance one's career or simply to put food on the table. In realising that each role feeds the other, couples in Wallerstein's study told how they managed to take time out from parenting to nourish the partner relationship, which they knew would, in turn, nourish the parent–child relationship. Awareness of the potential harm in neglecting the couple relationship, not only to the couple but to their children's views of marriage, was apparent in the discussions engaged in by participants in the Marital Perspectives Study.

Task 4. Coping with crises

Whether normative or non-normative, long-term or acute, crises affect each spouse differently and have the potential either to strengthen or erode the marriage. The couples Wallerstein interviewed (all of whom had experienced at least one personal or family tragedy) coped with the tragedies they experienced in ways that protected the core relationship. They kept the crisis in perspective, containing their fears as much as possible to the actual event rather than allowing it and their fear, anger and anxiety to intrude on and overwhelm either their marital relationship or other parts of their lives. They tried to be realistic about the crisis and gathered information to inform their responses, acknowledging and supporting (sometimes not until a crisis had passed) each other's individual ways of coping. Attributing blame either to themselves or their spouse was avoided and, just as importantly, they tried to prevent their spouse from self-blame. Where there were signs of an impending crisis (for example, increasing depression or substance use) they took action to prevent it or minimise the effects, not allowing a potentially difficult situation to get out of hand. And as with many couples in the other studies described in this paper, making it through crises together came to be seen as helping to further fortify the foundations of the marriage.

Task 5. Making a safe place for conflict

The marriages Wallerstein observed were not without conflict but the spouses indicated that, sooner or later, they had learned over time that conflict did not mean the marriage was over. The knowledge that expressing anger did not threaten the marriage per se created a space in which spouses felt safe enough to vent their anger within certain agreed parameters. Wallerstein had no evidence to lead her to assume these particular couples were highly skilled communicators; rather they had learned which conflicts to fight over and which to ignore or accept, and even when fighting they remained wary of how their behaviour was affecting their spouse. There were rules that may have been clearly articulated at some point in the relationship or that had evolved over time, that reflected the primacy of caring for the spouse even during conflict. One principal rule was that physical violence was completely unacceptable. There was also an awareness that attacking particular vulnerabilities was unacceptable. Conflict may be an inevitable part of being married, but couples in Wallerstein's and other studies stressed the need to be honest but tactful (for example, Alford-Cooper 1998; Lauer and Lauer 1986; Mackey and O'Brien 1995).

Task 6. Exploring sexual love and intimacy

Sex and intimacy, either separately or together, played a more or less central role in the marriages of Wallerstein's participants, although for some couples there was also an emphasis on simple touch and affection. Many couples had experienced problems in their sexual relationship at one time or another and

they spoke candidly of how they had helped each other overcome those difficulties, evidence of the great trust and goodwill in these relationships. For some couples sex was less important than the bonds of intimacy and friendship. In Mackey and O'Brien's study, psychological intimacy was more important than physical intimacy in their later years. That intimacy grew over time, based on mutual trust, love and understanding, and deepened through shared experiences and overcoming obstacles. In Wallerstein's study, couples reported that their sex life had suffered during times when their lives became more stressful, however they learned to adapt to the changes in levels of desire and activity experienced by one or both spouses and generally it did not become a source of conflict. While the frequency had diminished for most couples as they grew older, the excitement and enjoyment seemed not to have abated at all, especially for those couples whose marriages Wallerstein described as "romantic".

Task 7. Sharing laughter and keeping interests alive

The contribution of humour to a happy and lasting marriage is mentioned so often as to be almost considered a given (along with love, trust and respect). Humour provides an emotional connection that goes beyond simply trading jokes. In the everyday lighthearted repartee in which couples engage there is an intimacy that strengthens the bond between them. It is a part of their daily lives to which Wallerstein's happy couples attended, using humour to defuse conflict and hostility, salve wounded egos, or add a spark of playfulness.

These couples also expected and prepared for change on a range of levels. They shared some hobbies or pastimes and had others they enjoyed separately, both of which help to maintain their interest in each other. Added to their individual engagement in the world outside of their marriage, whether in the workplace, education or some other sphere of life, their separate and joint activities contribute to the sense of knowing and understanding another, and being themselves known and understood.

Task 8. Providing emotional nurturance

The marriages of the couples in Wallerstein's study, like those of the participants in the Marital Perspectives Study, provided a haven for each spouse, a place of comfort and affirmation. In the sanctuary of the marriage each spouse can find a space to feel and express the full range of emotions. These couples had learned over time to successfully read their spouse's moods, their body language, and had developed responses that provided relief, sympathy, encouragement or support. As participants in the Marital Perspectives Study noted, this "emotional refuelling" can be very difficult in a family where there are competing demands of two careers and children. The happy couples in Wallerstein's study devised ways of allowing each spouse the time and space to recharge, in the way that worked best for them individually and as a couple. Joint holidays or time alone, escape from the phone or the children, or help with work or school assignments are some solutions they found.

Nurturing of the spouse was not done with the expectation of it being returned in equal measure, for as individuals they would each have different emotional needs, nor was it seen as a competition in which each kept score. Similarly, in Alford-Cooper's study, couples talked about the need to be prepared to give more than receive. Each spouse recognised that looking after the emotional needs of their spouse was an integral part of making the marriage work for both of them.

Task 9. Preserving a double vision

"Double vision" refers to the two images of the marriage the couples held in their minds: that of images from the past and of the realities of the present. In several of the studies discussed in this paper, couples spoke of memories to which they returned regularly, images that reminded them of particular times or events from their shared history, that connects their past and present. They were often idealised images or memories but, as Wallerstein points out, being able to draw on these visions serves to soften disappointments and remain optimistic when the marriage is experiencing difficult times. Holding on to these rosy recollections did not mean couples were deluding themselves about the reality of their spouse and their marriage, but for some couples the bond provided by their shared past kept them from taking steps to end the marriage (Alford-Cooper 1998). Partners' views of their spouses remained cognisant of their flaws as well as their strengths, but the dual vision was crucial to maintaining the marriage.

Imparting the "wisdom"

In turning to long-married couples for guidance there is an assumption that it is possible to identify the characteristics and attributes that have allowed them to navigate successfully the various difficulties all couples will experience in the course of their marriage (Kaslow and Robison 1996). There is also an expectation that their "wisdom" can be transferred in some way to the current generation of married and marrying couples, and that young couples will be open to receiving it.

Older couples expressed concern about the difficulties young couples experience in forming committed and enduring relationships (Parker 2000) and pass on their experiences in the hope of being able to help young couples build strong relationships. Given that the current cohort of young married couples is experiencing a very different social and cultural milieu compared with that in which long-married couples began their married lives, one might question whether the task of transferring the "wisdom" of those who have created and maintained lasting marriages across generations will be straightforward. However, one could hardly question the need to try.

Helping young couples prepare for marriage is the focus of a large number of educative programs conducted by a wide range of providers. Approximately 30 per cent of couples marrying for the first time attend some form of marriage preparation program (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998). These programs are a proactive mechanism by which opportunities are created for couples to discuss relationship issues and to learn or improve their ability to communicate and resolve conflict effectively. Offering various levels of information, awareness raising and skills training, programs aim to promote couple resilience through the acquisition of relationship knowledge (Pattenden, cited in Bradley 2002).

However, spouses in the studies cited in this paper also commented on the need to help existing marriages, not only for their own sake but because of the need for young people to see how marriages can work. The high rate of marital breakdown since the introduction of no-fault divorce legislation in Australia in 1975 means that young couples are often trying to establish their own marriage without the benefit of observing a rewarding and enduring marriage *at close range*. Programs that aim to support existing marriages and relationships are less commonly attended, partly due to an "if it ain't broke don't fix it" attitude, a belief that to some extent reflects the assumption that a wedding is all that is required to create a marriage. It is clear from the research cited in this paper that a rewarding and lasting marriage requires ongoing and intentional maintenance.

It is likely that a lack of general awareness of the existence and availability of post-wedding programs also contributes to their lower profile compared to marriage and relationship preparation programs. Conducted at certain stages after the wedding, these are designed to support marriages and relationships that are still intact, and prevent problems from arising or getting out of hand. Given that post-wedding programs are aimed at couples who have experienced being married and can be targeted at critical points (such as the birth of the first child), they are uniquely placed to have immediate impact on the couple's relationship. They can be directed towards existing relational issues and dynamics rather than those that, before the wedding, may not be anticipated or may be discounted by the couple as unlikely to happen to them.

Providing opportunities to strengthen marriages such as those afforded couples via these programs makes intuitive sense. However, the difficulty with educative programs is the lack of research aimed at demonstrating their effectiveness in producing measurable improvements in the relationships of attending couples. While feedback from couples participating in both pre- and post-wedding programs is invariably positive, there is little objective data on which to base conclusions about the effectiveness of programs, or lack thereof. Establishing whether prevention and support programs can help to create and maintain healthy marriages is clearly an important area of future relationships research. If such programs are shown to be valuable, and attendance became widely accepted as a normal part of being in an ongoing committed relationship, benefits would accrue not only to those couples who attend but also to their children's future relationships. As a Marital Perspectives Study participant noted, "leading by example is the best way".

Discussion

The reports of the individuals and couples who participated in the studies discussed in this paper are reflected in the characteristics and processes that are the focus of the two theories of marital breakdown presented at the start of the paper. Karney and Bradbury's theory sets out how the behaviours and attributes each person brings to the marriage via their family-of-origin and life experiences, the crises encountered by couples and the couple's style of interaction are interrelated, and how they impact on satisfaction with the marriage and ultimately its outcome. Gottman's cascade theory and the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalyse" clearly demonstrate the power of verbal and non-verbal behaviour, particularly in conflict situations, to shape the experience of marriage. Both theories demonstrate how a marriage can move towards dissolution. When members of couples whose marriages have remained intact and satisfying for long periods talk about their marriage they too refer to their own and their spouse's personal characteristics and attributes in the context of the family and the social environment in which they were raised, and how as a couple they have dealt with the everyday hassles and unusual stressors encountered throughout the marriage.

The data generated by these predominantly qualitative studies of long-married couples provide two ways of conceptualising lasting marriages: as being defined by a set of characteristics or attributes of couples and their marriage, and as a number of processes in which couples engage throughout the life of the relationship.

In addition to the basic elements of love, trust and respect, characteristics common to lasting marriages include: commitment to the spouse and the relationship; willingness to adapt, change and compromise; sharing, friendship and liking; containment and resolution of conflict; mutuality, reciprocity and fairness; having children, and physical and psychological intimacy.

Bearing in mind that Wallerstein's sample was quite small, that four types of marriage were identified among Wallerstein's participants suggests that there is no single way to create a happy and lasting marriage. There is an illusion of simplicity in being able to distil from a multitude of data a set of characteristics by which long lasting, happy marriages can be described. Indeed, although lasting and happy marriages often appear to be uncomplicated and comfortable, most long-married happy couples would likely attest to the effort involved in creating and sustaining their marriage over such long periods.

If marriage is viewed in terms of a number of processes, such as those put forward by Wallerstein, a more dynamic picture is painted in which couples continually monitor and adjust their behaviour in order to maintain a balance between the core of the marriage – the couple relationship – and the various other roles each spouse fulfils: parent/grandparent, son/daughter, employee/employer, colleague, friend, neighbour, student, volunteer, club member, citizen. Some of these processes are most necessary at the beginning of the marriage (forging a couple identity separate from the families of origin for example), although there may be times when boundaries need to be re-defined as other aspects of the marriage and wider family context change (such as when spouses become parents). Other processes such as coping with crises, exploring sexual love and intimacy, sharing laughter and keeping interests alive, and emotional nurturance, require consistent attention.

Given the somewhat small and biased nature of some of the samples in the studies cited above, future exploration of marital characteristics and processes with sizeable numbers of couples from lower socioeconomic strata is clearly warranted.

Long and satisfying marriages are often more complex than those that might be called "survivor marriages" in which spouses are resigned to staying together (Klagsbrun 1985). Couples in enduring marriages report the same sorts of troubles and difficulties as other couples and point out aspects of their own marriages that are less than ideal (Sharlin et al. 2000). In a broad sense, the distinguishing feature of these relationships is the sense and primacy of "couple-ness": that both spouses are committed to nurturing and sustaining the marriage, and both have the goodwill necessary to learn and engage in the behaviours that keep alive the emotional connection that brought them together in the first place.

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