The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model Over 25 Years: A Developmental Systems Perspective

Presented at the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies International Conference

Amsterdam, September 2013

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Research Question

• We integrate tenets of a key model of intimate relationship functioning with a developmental systems perspective to reconsider conceptualization of “vulnerabilities.”

• How is intraindividual change over time (i.e., trajectories) in mental health (depression, self-esteem, and expressed anger) across the transition to adulthood associated with perceived life stress in young adulthood and intimate relationship outcomes in midlife?

• Data are from 920 Canadian adults surveyed seven times over 25 years.
Theoretical Framework: Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model of Marriage (VSA; Karney & Bradbury, 1995)

- **Enduring Vulnerabilities**: stable individual characteristics (e.g., personality)

- **Stressful Events**: emerge from challenges inherent in daily life (e.g., childrearing, unemployment)

- **Adaptive Processes**: couple interaction (e.g., problem solving ability, supportiveness)
Reconsidering Vulnerabilities

• The VSA model states “level of enduring vulnerabilities is expected to remain relatively stable” (Karney & Bradbury, 1995, p. 25)

• “A developmental perspective, however, suggests that predictor variables themselves may change over time and that these changes may be as important as the initial levels of variables for understanding marriage” (p. 27)
Theoretical Framework: The Developmental Systems Perspective

- Developmental Systems Perspective emphasizes **plasticity** (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009), or potential for change across the lifespan

- Also emphasizes **cascading effect** of one area of functioning on other domains later in the life course (Cox, Mills-Koonce, Propper, & Gariepy, 2010)

- Draws attention to mediating pathways in the VSA model

- Vulnerabilities may “have lingering effects in their own right” through “**supplemental pathways**” that lead directly to later life outcomes (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004, p. 631)
Theoretically Derived Analytical Model

Trajectories consist of initial value at age 18 and rate of change from 18 to 25
Significance

- Previous studies consist of daily diaries, span only a few years of marriage (early on), and/or cover only one or two developmental periods

- Our study covers transition to adulthood (18 to 25), young adulthood (age 32), and middle adulthood (age 43)

- We assess tenets of VSA model and Developmental Systems Perspective over considerable portion of lifespan

- We assess temporal associations among mental health, perceived life stress, and intimate relationship functioning, all under-represented in literature
Edmonton School-Work Transition Study
High School Sample 1985 – 2010

1985
N=983
Original sample

1985
N=894
Recontact sample

1986
N=665

1987
N=547

1989
N=504

1992
N=404

1999
N=509
n=215
n=294

Rejoined in 1999

2010
N=405
n=102
n=207
n=96

Rejoined in 2010
2010 Sample Characteristics (N = 405)

- 70% married, 6% cohabiting, 24% legally separated, divorced, or never married
  - Among not married/cohabiting, 34% in romantic relationships
  - Excluded 63 participants not in relationships
- Average relationship length: 15 years ($SD = 6.88$)
- 90% married once, 9% married twice, and 1% three or more marriages
- Most raising children (78%)
Measures

• **Depressive Symptoms**
  • “How often in the past few months have you felt depressed?”

• **Expressed Anger**
  • “How often in the past few months have you lost your temper?”

• **Self-Esteem**
  • “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.”

• **Perceived Life Stress**
  • “Describe your life” 1 = *not at all stressful* to 4 = *very stressful*
Measures

• **Adaptive Interaction**
  - **Partner Support:** “Does your partner really care about you?”
  - **Partner Strain:** “Does your partner criticize you?”
  - **Joint-decision making:** “My partner and I are a team when it comes to making decisions.”

• **Relationship Risk**
  - “During the past year, how often have you thought your relationship with your spouse or partner might be in trouble?”
Findings – Depressive Symptoms

- Depressive symptoms at age 18 related to higher perceived life stress (age 32) and relationship risk and poorer adaptive interaction (age 43)

- Higher perceived life stress (age 32) associated with poorer adaptive interaction and higher relationship risk for women* (age 43)
Findings – Expressed Anger

- Expressed anger at age 18 predicted increased perceived life stress and relationship risk.
- Those with anger symptoms that decreased more slowly from 18 to 25 experienced higher perceived life stress and relationship risk.
Findings – Self-Esteem

- Self-esteem at age 18 predicts less relationship risk and better adaptive interaction
- Those whose self-esteem rose more slowly had higher perceived life stress and relationship risk
Discussion

• Poorer mental health at **end of high school** predicts less adaptive interactions and higher relationship risk **25 years later**
  
  • Results striking when considering only symptoms measured, not diagnoses
  • Directly and indirectly via perceived life stress for anger and depressive symptoms
  • Magnitude of effects range from $\beta = .23$ to $\beta = .35$.

• **Not only initial levels of mental health at age 18, but changes** in expressed anger and self-esteem over the transition to adulthood predict relationship risk in middle adulthood
  
  • Important addition to the VSA model
  • Aligns with idea of plasticity from Developmental Systems Perspective
  • Magnitude ranges from $\beta = .35$ to $\beta = .45$. 
Discussion

- Supports transition to adulthood as key developmental period in which mental health sets in motion a **cascade** of influences felt through lifespan
  - Evidence found through the significant indirect effects
  - Intimate relationship functioning is only one set of possible outcomes

- Also supports notion that mental health in the transition to adulthood offers a **supplemental pathway** to later relationship outcomes
Incorporating a developmental systems perspective into conceptual models of relationship success or failure adds valuable information and forces exploration of continuity and discontinuity in functioning across the lifespan.

These results suggest that seeds are sown in one’s mental health during the transition to adulthood, positively and negatively, that continue to bear fruit in midlife romantic relationships.
Acknowledgements