Winds of time and place: How context has affected a 50-year marriage

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Abstract
To examine the effects of contexts on a relationship, we consider the case of our own 50-year marriage and its preliminaries. We employ a three-level conception of a couple’s environment. The macrocontext refers to the prevailing cultural winds in a society that affect all its residents during any given historical era. The mesocontext pertains to the settings in which a particular relationship operates, such as its family and other social networks, physical habitats, work settings, or institutional associations, often chosen by the partners themselves. The microcontext is the pair’s own intimate environment, constructed over time by the partners’ unique interactions. Each of these contexts has affected us. We describe and analyze instances of luck, choice, and dyadic interaction in our 52-year relationship.

In June 2002, we celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary. Our marriage continues to be a highly satisfying enterprise. It has been favored by a largely beneficial environment—some of which has smiled on us from forces beyond our control and some from our own doing. Nonetheless, our marriage is still a work in progress; both our relationship and our individual selves have changed over the years and will continue to do so.

Why might we want to publish details of our personal relationship, an unusual way to celebrate an anniversary? The announcement of this special issue on contextual effects on relationships started us thinking about such influences on our own marriage. Having spent many years studying and writing about other people’s relationships and their environments, we thought we would like to write about our own.

Relationship scholars have sometimes attributed the state of a couple’s union to their personalities, to their cultural, social, and physical environments, or to the joint sphere that the partners have built between and around themselves. However, those effects are easier to distinguish conceptually than in practice, and they often are strongly interconnected. In accord with this issue’s theme, our paper emphasizes influences on our marriage from our environments, but the selection of those environments has itself been affected by our personalities and mutual interaction.

A thesis of this paper is that a couple’s contexts can function either to facilitate or to inhibit the couple’s relationship. This fact has long been acknowledged in the relationship literature (e.g., Berscheid & Campbell, 1981; Kelley et al. 1983; Levinger, 1965, 1994, 1999; Levinger & Moles, 1979; Surra & Milardo, 1991), but it is often ignored by people at large and even by relationship researchers themselves (see Berscheid, 1999, pp. 263–265). An older couple’s
autobiography is a means for exploring this thesis. The authors' retrospections can reflect on the impact of a broad variety of events and on changes over successive periods of their relationship. In contrast, prospective studies by outsiders would be far more limited in breadth or time span.

Winds

We begin with a metaphor. Three summers ago, we bicycled on the windy southern islands of Denmark. During that trip, we thought about headwinds, tailwinds, and even crosswinds—and also about our own long relationship.

First, the winds. One easily notices every headwind. A strong headwind makes bicycling difficult, sometimes very difficult; furthermore, sudden crosswinds can push you off your course. Add some cold rain and bicycling can become a miserable challenge. When the wind is at your back, however, you hardly perceive it; instead of showing gratitude, you tend to believe it is yourself who is strong and capable.

In our marriage, the two of us share similar values, communicate well, deal with problems directly, care much about each other, and have a strong sexual attraction. All these are great assets, but we recognize that our tailwinds have greatly outnumbered our headwinds. We both grew up in an era that helped uphold marital vows supporting permanence; our families expected long-term loving relationships and modeled them for us. Furthermore we have been favored by good health for ourselves and our children, good education, and comfortable financial resources that have permitted choices denied to couples in less fortunate circumstances.

Different levels of "environment"

Before proceeding, it is important to distinguish among three contrasting but interconnected levels of context that affect any pair relationship. We label them the macro-, meso-, and microcontexts.

The macrocontext consists of a society's dominant cultural-historical norms, laws, physical resources, and economic opportunities that affect all its residents and relationships. It determines the broad environmental conditions in any given era. Within the winds metaphor, the macrocontext is the source of prevailing winds and of long-term warmth or chill.

The mesocontext reflects aspects of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) "meso-" and "exo-system" and Huston's (2000) "ecological niche." This middle context mediates between broad sociohistorical macroconditions and the unique accretion of microevents in a specific pair's interaction. It refers to the local settings in which individual partners or couples develop and reside, including both (a) their social environment, such as their family and friendship networks, their work settings, or the institutions to which they belong, and (b) their physical environment, such as their housing, distances from work or friends, or the attractiveness of their community. Such settings are the source of more temporary winds and temperatures that can change substantially in a matter of months, weeks, days, or even hours. Note that meso- and macrocontexts usually have remained undifferentiated in writings about close relationships (e.g., Levinger, 1994); in their general model of "the causal context of dyadic interaction," Kelley et al. (1983, p. 57) lump these contexts together as merely the "social" and the "physical" environment.

The microcontext is the intimate or not-so-intimate environment a particular couple builds for itself over time, through the partners' own interactions and the cumulation of their thoughts and feelings about each other. This microcontext is ideally one of pleasant breezes. For instance, the poet Kahlil Gibran wrote as follows about marriage: "let there be spaces in your togetherness, and let the winds of the heavens dance between you" (1923, p. 15, emphasis added). At times, however, the microcontext is one of squalls or powerful storms. Couples differ greatly in the storminess of their microcontext.

Some might consider the microcontext to be an integral part of the couple
relationship, but we prefer to distinguish between the two. We here conceive a "relationship" to consist of a pair's degree of interdependence—that is, the frequency, diversity, and strength of its meshed interconnections (Kelley et al., 1983). In contrast, the accretion of events in a couple's history and the development of the partners' mutual attitudes and scripts create a unique atmosphere for the pair's future conduct and choices. This context may be calm or harried, orderly or messy, quiet or noisy. The intimate environment also refers to a couple's sleeping arrangements, division of labor, use of leisure time, and a variety of other mutually developed norms or structures.

Individuals or couples have little control over their macrocontext. They have a varying amount of choice in selecting their mesoenvironments, depending on their culture, location, resources, and inventiveness. But couples have much influence on their microcontext, which they begin to construct from the start of their relationship. In turn, choices of contexts determine what new influences affect the choosers (e.g., Buss, 1987).

In this paper, we will consider different aspects of our varying environments as we believe they affected our first encounter, our dating and sexual relationship, building our premarital commitment, and our 50 years of marriage. We will examine issues and events at selected points.

Our Premarital Relationship

First encounter

We met at a student camp north of San Francisco, on July 22, 1950. Ann, at 19, was a junior majoring in psychology at the University of Michigan, which she attended in the footsteps of her father and grandfather. She had grown up in Laurel, Mississippi, but in June 1950 her parents moved from there to Northern California. George, aged 23, was a psychology graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. He was born in Berlin, Germany, of Jewish parents; his family had left Germany in 1936 for England and in 1941 had come to the United States. He had graduated from Columbia College at 19 while in the U. S. Army, and later spent a year exploring a business career before going to psychology graduate school.

Our unlikely meeting and its lasting impact were strongly influenced by our social and physical mesoenvironments. George, a 1949 participant in an international work/study camp called the Lisle Fellowship, had helped find the site for the 1950 California unit north of San Francisco, near Muir Woods. Ann knew both of the Lisle directors from Michigan and had originally planned to join this California unit. We happened to visit the camp on the same weekend, at a time when the resident campers were otherwise occupied. Thus we got well acquainted on Saturday afternoon, talked more over dinner, and then both decided to join seven other students who were staying overnight near the top of Mount Tamalpais to witness Sunday's sunrise.

Well before our companions rose on Sunday, we climbed up the rocky path under the stars and sat at the mountain top. We then observed the magical transformation of the sky and landscape below. As the sky lightened, the edges of the clouds displayed the full spectrum of colors from dark purple to a brilliant white. As we watched, the fog between mountain and valley slowly dissipated and our view expanded. We could see San Francisco, the East Bay, the North Bay, and also the Pacific coastline.

Our physical setting was spectacular. In fact, the whole experience was so exciting that George decided that, rather than taking Ann to her return bus, he would drive her all the way home to Ukiah, 90 miles north. There he was invited for Sunday dinner with her family.

Contexts. We would never have met without a huge assist from our respective social networks, nor pursued our connection without our experience of the beautiful mountain top. Ann's parents' warm hospitality also helped. Those were the first, but
certainly not the last boosts our relationship received from our social and physical environments.

Little is known about the long-term effects of first meetings under dramatic conditions, although one study did find heightened immediate arousal in subjects who met an attractive opposite-sex stranger while crossing a precarious suspension bridge (Dutton & Aron, 1974). Nonetheless, the imprint of that long-ago Sunday morning remains high in our store of romantic memories. That setting had a major impact on both of us, but note that we ourselves had chosen this conducive situation; our similar rhythms and mutual appreciation of nature facilitated the experience.

**Dating and further involvement**

How did our relationship develop? We report it in our own words.  

**George:** I thoroughly enjoyed my further encounters with Ann during her remaining seven weeks in California that summer. Not only did I journey up to see her in Ukiah, but a month later she and I joined a pair of married friends of mine on a camping trip to Yosemite National Park. My attraction to Ann’s charm, beauty, and intelligence continued to grow.  

**Ann:** On my part, I thought it amazing that George was interested in me at all. Not only was he tall and handsome, but he was a graduate student, had lived in six different countries and spoke four languages. Each time we were together I tried to focus just on the present, not really believing I would see him again. Our trip to Yosemite was a high point of my summer. George shared his enthusiasm for this place. And I, a flatlander, had the chance to hike to the tops of Vernal and Nevada falls, drink out of rushing streams, and sleep under the stars near El Capitan.

I must mention another important aspect of the environment—the social mores. In 1950, a widely accepted rule (also, undoubtedly, widely violated) was that a “nice” girl did not have intercourse before marriage, or at least not before being engaged. The penalties for a woman were strong. My mother worried about my going camping with George. But my own boundaries were so well internalized that I knew that, while I might sleep with him literally, I definitely would not do so figuratively. In today’s world, a pair like us might well have had wonderful sex on our first night or in Yosemite. Instead, while we felt a strong sexual attraction, our physical expressions stopped well short of intercourse.  

**George:** My later visit to Ukiah on a parched Labor Day weekend was especially exciting. After an impromptu Saturday night camping trip with Ann’s parents and two sisters, the six of us returned Sunday afternoon to find an inferno of flames sweeping down the hills beyond the Cottons’ house at the town’s edge. The windblown sparks drove the fire downhill rapidly; it threatened all the houses on the street and seemed uncontrollable by the two local fire trucks. Ann’s father and I, however, climbed on the roof with garden hoses and kept spraying the cedar shingles to protect them against showers of fiery sparks. Fortunately, after the fire burned up most of its fuel outside the green backyards, the wind shifted in the opposite direction. All of us were, of course, elated by the house’s narrow escape. Once again, the circumstances and my part in averting disaster strengthened my connection to the Cotton family.  

**Ann:** In September I headed back to Michigan. When I left Ann Arbor in June I had not been sure I would return. It seemed practical to transfer to the University of California. With George’s encouragement I might have done so, but he was unhappy with the political situation at his campus where outstanding faculty members had resigned in pro-

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1. Although most of this paper is authored jointly, we will intersperse our individual comments to reflect complementary perspectives.
test against a recently instituted loyalty oath. Furthermore, neither of us was ready for the kind of commitment that my transferring would have suggested.

We did write to each other during the fall. Thanks to our two universities having top football teams, we looked forward to attending a California-Michigan Rose Bowl game at the end of Christmas vacation, and to meeting in Los Angeles for a New Year’s Eve date. Due to some miscommunication around Christmas plans, George thought that Ann’s ardor had cooled and only reluctantly followed through on his plans to go to LA. He was stunned therefore on New Year’s Eve when she gave him a beautiful pair of socks she had just finished knitting for him. This tangible sign of her interest put our relationship back on track.

Later, during her January break, Ann visited New York City where George had gone after passing his Master’s exams; she met George’s parents there. On his way back to Berkeley, George stopped in Ann Arbor to see Ann and also to interview faculty members concerning his admission to the Michigan social psychology program. Two months later Ann decided to take courses in the Berkeley summer session, and this allowed us to see each other frequently that summer.

**Contexts.** Throughout this time we discovered a surprising compatibility between people with such different backgrounds. Not only did our mutual love of nature and adventure bring us into stimulating environments, but we were comfortable with each other’s families and friends. Meanwhile we were building smooth and rewarding interaction patterns at the micro-level. After our first encounter George had written to his brother that “I’ve met a wonderful warm girl, but not one I’d want to marry”; by January George was changing his mind.

**Building a lasting commitment**

It took almost two years from our first meeting to our marriage in June 1952. The wedding date was a compromise between George, who was ready to commit himself to marriage by the summer of 1951, and Ann, who was less sure and also had desired some postcollege independence.

**Ann:** Though we occasionally discussed marriage, I *definitely* wanted to wait until after my graduation from college. My ideal plan had been to work for two or three years, with travel in the summers. Although George wanted us to marry before I graduated, I was sure that was too soon.

**George:** I was four years older than Ann. I felt emotionally needy and eager for a lasting mutual commitment. After I transferred from Berkeley to the University of Michigan program in September 1951, I found that eight of my eleven graduate classmates were married and I envied their seeming security. (Little did I fathom my classmates’ own stresses and strains, nor guess that several of these classmates in turn envied me for my independence.) I urged Ann to make up her mind about marrying me, and though I felt it reasonable to wait until she graduated in June I would not guarantee that I could wait for her much longer than that.

**Ann:** We married on graduation day. This meant that I have never really lived on my own. What did I gain? I had an extremely difficult teaching job that first year, and George was great to come home to. Meanwhile he had a hard year with four comprehensive exams and his dissertation proposal. I think both of us found life as a married couple richer and less stressful than we would have found life without each other’s committed support.

Our 1950s environment helped script our decision-making. We did not even consider living together before marriage, a compromise that 20 or 30 years later would have been quite acceptable in a university town. In the 1950s, sleeping together even over one night was a socially risky undertaking. For example, one evening a female graduate student who had attended a meeting at George’s rooming house got a ride home and left her bicycle overnight next to his
house. The next morning George was wakened by his landlady pounding on his door and asking angrily if a woman had stayed there overnight. The prohibitions against premarital cohabitation were so strong that in 1967, 16 years later, Barnard and Columbia Colleges suspended two seniors who were caught renting an apartment together. In other words, we had no viable option between remaining single and becoming married.

Though painful in the short run, this was probably beneficial in the long run. In fact, it was a major reason why we eventually resolved our most serious nonagreement: our very different feelings about religion. Even though we both enjoyed attending the Ann Arbor Friends Meeting, religion was far more peripheral in George’s than in Ann’s life. Therefore Ann wanted to make sure that our beliefs would not clash later, especially since George came from a nonreligious Jewish background and she had been a committed member of the Presbyterian Church. She had even headed the Student Religious Association in her junior year at Michigan. Furthermore, marrying someone outside your religious faith—that is, entering what was then called a “mixed marriage”—was a far bigger issue in the 1950s than more recently (Glenn, 1982; Kalmijn, 1991). Ann’s parents, and even George’s, felt uneasy about that prospect.

How did we actually resolve our conflict? In late November 1951, following months of talking about our getting married, Ann told George that she indeed would marry him. George rejoiced: At last he could plan for a future together. Several evenings later, however, George discovered that Ann had neither written nor called her parents to tell them about our engagement. This discovery alarmed him, for it suggested that Ann still had unresolved hesitations. (Looking back, George’s sensitivity to Ann’s discomfort and our immediate discussion of it indicates our ability, even then, to perceive and confront serious problems together. We believe that the work we did then on this issue prepared us to deal with other conflicts in later years.)

George: Early the next morning we met to ponder Ann’s hesitations. Before dawn I drove over to her residence and we parked in the arboretum to talk undisturbed. Essentially, Ann still felt uncomfortable about our differences in religious outlook. She feared we still did not fully agree about the role of religion in our lives. After much further talk and with both of us in tears, we decided to end our brief engagement and to date other people again unless and until we could resolve this problem.

Ann: Through our tears we watched the sun came up. One of us, I’m not sure who, said unintentionally: “Well, at least we’ve seen a beautiful sunset.” Nevertheless, we still remained much in love. After George went to his office that morning, he was overtaken by uncontrollable sobs. His sense of loss was extreme. Ann reacted similarly. And, despite our resolve to explore alternatives, we were both too sad to talk with other people about our breakup and sure that no one else could possibly understand our misery. Therefore we kept seeing each other daily until Ann left for her Christmas break in California.

After Ann’s return in January, though, we decided we had to stop seeing each other and truly to look for other partners. We did then start seeing other people, but also kept phoning each other late in the evenings throughout February and into mid-March. These phone calls were essential; before, whenever we had seen the other’s sad expression, we would much rather kiss than think. Again the context favored us, because in January Ann had left university housing with its strict curfews and corridor phones to live with a family she admired, and who went to bed early. Their phone was on a long cord that reached into her room, which allowed us to talk late at night and focus on our ideas without distraction. Today, easy access to phoning is taken for granted; in 1952, it was a huge contextual plus.

Ann: Then came the decisive turning point. I remember my best friend asking me in March how George and I were
resolving our dilemmas and my replying that we weren't far apart, but that I wasn't sure about marrying him. In fact, I was also attracted to two other men: One, in California, who at Christmas had swept me off my feet after hearing that George and I had broken up; the second, in Michigan, who was trying to reactivate a previous relationship.

Nonetheless, I kept comparing other men to George: the more similar to George, the higher I rated them. One day I realized that the man most like George was George himself. That same week, in a conversation with a married woman I admired in the Quaker Meeting, I asked what she and her husband believed about a certain religious question; she told me "I don't know what Bill believes, but what I believe is...." Suddenly it dawned on me that wife and husband need not have the same beliefs about every aspect of religion, as long as they respect each other's views.

Meanwhile, though George and I were not dating, we continued our long telephone calls. On the night of March 20, George and I had a particularly intense phone call. He said, "I think we need to talk in person." I agreed. Well after midnight, he drove over and picked me up. Once more, living with a family allowed me to slip out, which would have been prohibited in a dorm. And, as we talked in the car, all my misgivings suddenly disappeared.

In my most recent letter to my parents, I had written about going out with Max. I decided I now needed to write them several letters: one to mention that George and I were dating again, a second to say I was in love with him, and a third that we wanted to get married in June. This time, I not only found it easy to write my parents, but I couldn't stop to put the message into three letters. Everything just poured out. I was so happy I could not contain myself. The next day we reinstated our engagement, surprising everyone who knew us. (Today, I too am surprised by this quick decision and bet-

ter understand the people who tried to talk us into waiting longer.) Less than three months later—with both sets of parents’ cautious approval—we were married.

Looking back we believe that, if our social environment had permitted us to live together, we would have been less motivated to deal with our divergent feelings about religion, and that Ann's December discomfort could later have surfaced in harmful ways. Instead, during the interval between our first and second engagement we developed a deeper sense of spiritual harmony which energized our relationship during the following years.

Contexts. Our courtship progress did have major turning points (see Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981; Levinger, 1983), including one serious downturn, all derived to some degree from contextual causes. Uptown 1 came on New Year's Eve before the Rose Bowl game when Ann surprised George with the knitted socks; without both our universities being selected for this game, we would never have met there. Uptown 2 came from George's decision to transfer from Berkeley to Ann Arbor after completing his Master's degree; if Michigan had not had a much better social psychology program, he would not have applied there. Uptown 3 arose from Ann's taking summer courses in Berkeley, which permitted us ample time to deepen our relationship. Our probability of getting married rose gradually until it hit its major downturn in December, which was determined mostly by Ann's personal feelings. But despite that setback we kept our hopes alive—largely because we both had invested heavily in building a powerful microcontext—and by the time of Uptown 4 in March 1952 our remaining doubts had dissolved.

Nonetheless, our evolving commitment was driven more by a gradual deepening of our relationship than by specific determinative events (see Surra & Hughes, 1997). It grew through joint experiences such as
kayaking, hiking, and camping together, developing shared political attitudes based on our mutual concerns for a fair society, and liking each other's friends.

We can consider the commitment process from an additional perspective, that of the gradual buildup of our mutual attractions and felt obligations toward each other, as well as the devaluation of alternative attractions (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Levinger, 1976). Our bonds had become so strong that, during our ostensible breakup between December and March, it now seems that we never truly broke our ties. It was not that our alternative outcomes were poor, but they never matched those we had experienced earlier in our own relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Our Marriage

The Macrocontext

Consider two quotations, a generation apart. The first is from Anne Morrow Lindbergh, writing about marriage after its formation:

Marriage, which is always spoken of as a bond, becomes actually...many bonds, many strands,...making up a web that is taut and firm.... It is made of loyalties, and interdependencies, and shared experiences. It is woven of memories of meetings and conflicts; of triumphs and disappointments. It is a web of communication, a common language, and the acceptance of lack of language, too; a knowledge of likes and dislikes, of habits and reactions, both physical and mental. It is a web of instincts and intuitions, and known and unknown exchanges. (Lindbergh, 1955, pp. 81-82)

The second excerpt recounts the writer's thoughts while she attended the funeral of Mary Jones, her dear friend. Reflecting on the Joneses' "indescribably moving and precious" marriage, and considering it as "one of the great possibilities that life has to offer," she says the following:

During Mary Jones's funeral, I basked in the thought of her marriage, hoarding the warmth against the astral chill of an unknown future. The future chilled me not because I think it promises to eradicate long, happy marriages from the face of the earth; only the most tyrannical social system could accomplish that. What chilled me was a more general sense of the transformation of our society from one that strengthens the bonds between people to one that is, at best, indifferent to them; a sense of an inevitable fraying of the net of connections between people at many critical intersections, of which the marital knot is only one.... (Talk of the Town, The New Yorker, Aug. 30, 1976, pp. 21-22)

Lindbergh presumes that her description is typical of marriage in the 1950s, a web taut and firm. The second author—writing only 21 years later under a cloud of gloom—sees such lasting relationships as no longer the norm, in an era that put a much greater emphasis on individual autonomy and self-actualization (e.g., Raush, 1977; Toffler, 1970). Note that the U.S. divorce rate more than doubled between the mid-50s and the mid-70s (Norton & Glick, 1979); it then stabilized somewhat in the 1980s and '90s, although marriages themselves have become less universal or traditional (Glenn, 1998).

Our own marriage, then, was formed in an historical era that not only promoted durable pair bondings, but also traditional gender roles (e.g., Lopata, 1994; Parsons & Bales, 1955). In a later era it had to withstand strong crosswinds that blew many marriages off course. Instead, favored by our meso- and microcontexts, we moved toward a greater mutual equality in our work and family roles.

Ann: For me, important tailwinds have come from the timing of shifts in macro-level expectations for and by women. During the early years of our marriage I taught elementary school, a most appropriate job for a young female college grad at that time. Three months before our first child was born I left paid employment, as was expected in the 1950s. From 1955 to 1973 I was occupied
at home with children, a highly socially approved role. This mother/homemaker role was hard work and had its stresses, but I was never asked, "And what else do you do?" Actually I did quite a lot "else," but as a volunteer—another role that later went out of favor. In contrast, wives who desired full-time professional careers struggled against powerful headwinds at that time; not only did they generally do a disproportionate share of the housework and child rearing, but they also met serious discrimination in the work place.

By the early 1970s, when women’s "at home" and "volunteer" roles were being disparaged and more women were asking for equal opportunities, I neared the end of my full-time mothering and had become ready for new commitments outside the home. Thus, after our youngest son entered junior high school, I found it exciting to enter graduate school and, later, to move back into paid employment.

For me, doing child rearing and professional career sequentially was comfortable. Today, many wives and husbands negotiate a far more complex division of roles.

**George:** I benefitted from the 1950–60s' normative division of marital roles. While I was still in graduate school, Ann was a most supportive partner during times of stress. Later, when I made three job-related moves over eight years—to Bryn Mawr College near Philadelphia, then Western Reserve University in Cleveland, and finally to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst—there was no question about whether Ann would join me. In that era we, like other couples, just assumed that wives were the family nurturers and husbands the economic providers. Ann's full-time mothering allowed me to pour my full energy into my work, but at that time we considered my job success as our family's success. In today's two-career couples, it is far harder to identify so completely with the other partner's work involvements.

**Meso- and microcontexts**

**George:** By the time Ann became ready to undertake a new professional career, I had become secure enough to endorse her goals and to enjoy her successes. Partly this was because we had established a mutually satisfying pattern of communication at the microlevel, and partly because my own contact with feminist colleagues and graduate students (a mesolevel influence) prepared me for such a role switch—one that many other husbands at that time were resisting.

The closer a couple gets, the more it creates its own contexts—a fact that has received little emphasis in relationship research. For instance, a married couple chooses where and how to live, or when and how many children to have; it develops its social networks (see Levinger, 1977; Milardo & Helms-Eriksen, 2000) and makes many other choices that later affect it greatly. For instance, close couples are more likely to make joint friends or to care for each other's family members than are couples with looser ties (Milardo, 1988). In aggregate, those decisions define the settings in which a marital relationship exists.

Note, however, that many couples, both in our own and in other societies, have far fewer choices about their contexts than we have had. Their cultural norms may inhibit joint male-female decision-making and promote abusiveness, their lack of formal education may confine them to low-wage jobs; beyond that, poverty and racial discrimination often force couples to live in unhealthy neighborhoods—and those settings, in turn, have destructive influences on their family lives (e.g., Rubin, 1976; Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995).

In our own marriage, we were able to find rewarding careers with adequate financial compensation. We lived far from both sets of parents and felt free to develop an autonomous lifestyle; had we lived near one but not the other, we might have been torn by pressures to conform more to norms of the nearer relatives. Furthermore, we attended Quaker Meeting wherever we
lived, which supported our values of simplicity, openness, and equality. This also led us to participate in antiwar and civil rights activities. Our resulting network of friends, many of whom have liked active outdoor recreations such as camping or canoeing, became a congenial context in which to pursue our interests.

In building up our microenvironment, we developed mutually satisfying behavioral routines, unique pair norms and expectations, as well as mutual obligations and emotional investments (see Levinger, 1976; Levinger & Snoek, 1972). Our shared knowledge and patterns of communication helped us deal with conflicts as they arose.

Four successive periods in our marriage have posed rather different challenges: (a) An early period lasted from 1952 to 1965, during which all four of our sons were born and we made all three moves. (b) An early-to-middle period went from 1965 after our move to Amherst until 1973, when Ann began to retool her work career and found new opportunities outside the home. (c) A middle-to-later period followed until 1992, the year we retired. During this time our sons moved away, George enjoyed the most productive part of his professional career, and Ann obtained her doctorate in family counseling, worked as a school psychologist, and became a lecturer at the University of Massachusetts. (d) Our post-retirement period still continues. Initially our relationship was strongly influenced by our macroenvironment; later, it became increasingly affected by the meso- and microcontexts we had ourselves constructed.

*Early years (1952–65)*

Our first home was a pleasant three-room apartment in Ann Arbor. George was a graduate research assistant and Ann an elementary school teacher. Our first salaries were low, but so were our expenses. Many things young couples today consider essential did not exist: e.g., personal computers, televisions, microwaves. We had one used car and one telephone. Early on we decided that being rich means having more than one spends, and we began being careful with our money.

**George:** While in graduate school, I sometimes doubted whether I had chosen the right profession, but never my choice of wife. I much enjoyed our new life but had to make major adjustments. Living together certainly produced occasions of conflict.

In my parents' family it was customary to blame someone whenever anything went wrong or was misplaced. I soon discovered from Ann that such accusatory behavior was counterproductive, but it took me much longer to actually soften my long-learned critical tendencies. Also, Ann and I began with rather different tastes, as well as divergent reactions to gifts and family rituals. After our engagement, for example, I was appalled when Ann told me that now we had to select china and silver patterns to help family friends choose our wedding presents. Despite my reluctance, we went to make those decisions at a department store and found rather opposite tastes. When we rank-ordered our top 10 “acceptable” patterns in each category, we discovered nearly perfect inverse correlations and decided to settle on patterns from the middle of our ranks.

Three months later, when we unpacked the gifts which Ann’s parents had shipped to us after the wedding, I continued my critical behavior. As I unwrapped an electric coffee maker, I suggested checking it out in Consumer Reports and Ann got so mad that she picked up a rolling pin and shook it at me. I, however, quickly seized a mixing bowl and put it over my head—allowing us both to burst into laughter—and this dissolved our tension.
Ann: I still remember George's funny face under his stainless steel helmet and particularly my warm feeling that, with humor, our marriage would make it, no matter what.

Ann taught for two and a half years, resigning three months before Bill, our first child, was born. By that time George had finished his Ph.D. degree and had become a research associate, first at the Research Center for Group Dynamics and later in the Psychology Department.

Ann: I found the social norms of that time most helpful. While I was pregnant with Bill, three other wives of fellow graduate students were pregnant too. All of us had been working full-time and now were becoming full-time mothers. Rather than feeling trapped, we felt on vacation. That first summer we spent hours at a nearby beach, two of us swimming and two watching four infants on beach towels. We even had bridge luncheons, which none of us had done before—and I, for one, never since. When the babies became toddlers our gatherings were less relaxed, but still a source of fun and companionship.

In the 1950s and early '60s nothing challenged the values my mother had passed on to me. I could say to George without hesitation: "Decisions about what job you take are yours. I know what my job is, and I can do it well wherever you want to go." In the summer of 1957, after Jim's birth, we left Ann Arbor for Bryn Mawr.

George: I encountered strong headwinds in the search for my first academic job in 1957, when my research associate job was ending. I had a wife and two children to support, but the job market for social psychologists was tight and I had not yet published much. Although Ann knew I was concerned, I did not fully share my anxieties with her.

I did find a job teaching research in a graduate social work program at Bryn Mawr College. Subsequently I discovered that this choice had been fortuitous: It led me into early studies of family and marital relationships outside a laboratory setting, but it took six or seven years before I found that my research approach had become fruitful.

Ann: The spring of 1957 was a truly happy time for me. I greatly enjoyed our two year old and my second pregnancy. With Jim's birth it felt like we had a real family. Only after George had accepted the Bryn Mawr job did he tell me how anxious and depressed he had been. I was then filled with the contradictory emotions of gratitude and guilt—gratitude that he had shielded me and allowed me such happiness, and guilt that I had not been fully aware of his distress.

Despite our basic harmony, I'd give an incomplete picture if I ignored our occasional squalls. Both of us had to make major adjustments and, of course, I particularly remember my own. I recall during our early days in Bryn Mawr the frustration of working hard at home all day and feeling I had accomplished nothing. Or, even worse, telling George what I had accomplished and hearing him say he wasn't interested in discussing housework; as I recall, that particular interchange ended with me screaming and crying. When we had both had jobs outside the home, we had shared the housework. Even after our first child was born, George had been very helpful. However, when he became an assistant professor his work pressure increased. He was still great with our two children, but no longer wanted to spend his limited spare time on cleaning. I think he actually said, "It's not worth my time to do housework; you can hire someone"—not a comment I appreciated. Eventually I did hire a cleaning woman, and what a wonderful woman she was. She came every second Tuesday, sent me off for a day on my own and somehow happily cared for two children and cleaned wonderfully. But still, I had that job all the rest of the time; and, though I found mothering extremely rewarding, I never really felt able to keep on top of housework.
Looking back, I wonder why I didn't find the move to Bryn Mawr more difficult. A mitigating factor was that having children helped connect me to the new neighborhood. Within weeks after our move I had met four lively, dynamic women who had seen me stroll by with the boys. Each of them and their families became long-term friends.

George's increased work pressure, from a mesocontext requiring visible academic achievement, spilled over into our home and continued to do so during later years. Ann was able to buffer some of the resulting strains, partly because of her full-time homemaking; this would have been far harder for a wife with outside employment (see Lopata, 1994). She also received support from her women friends in similar positions.

George: 1960 brought a new son, Matthew, as well as another move. After I accepted a position at Western Reserve University, our family moved to Cleveland where we stayed five years. I took with me a large research grant for studying marital problem solving and a year later was invited to study the fate of divorce applications at the Cleveland court. Both these projects, of course, engaged me thoroughly in thinking about what makes marriages work and what forces break them asunder.

Meanwhile, we had to do our own marital problem solving. We now had three sons under the age of six, had bought a large old house in near-disastrous condition, and George had a new, and trying, job. We were constantly busy and sometimes overwhelmed. Looking back, we recall feeling emotionally dead; we did not even argue much. Only toward the end of that first year did we discover a way to return joy to our relationship: On a beautiful May weekend, we left our house and children with a babysitter and headed away for a romantic overnight. We called this having an "affair" with each other, and we vowed to repeat such weekends at least once a year.

Food for thought came from George's professional research and teaching. His studies of marital problem solving found that the most satisfied pairs showed a combination of high task competence and high social responsiveness (e.g., Levinger, 1964) and his theorizing and research on divorce processes examined the attraction and barrier forces that hold marriages together (Levinger, 1965, 1976). Many of those ideas were brought literally into our home where George's marital research seminar met repeatedly, with Ann as an occasional observer. Ann's involvement in George's work strengthened our micro- as well as our mesocontext.

Ann: After our first difficult year, I found Cleveland an exciting place. We began to make close friends. Again, our children provided many of the initial connections. In 1962 our fourth son, David, was born and I was thrilled that, for the first time, George was allowed to be with me for the delivery; his excitement and joyful laughter delighted me. Our Cleveland years were rich for me in many ways. I was more involved in community issues than before or since—especially civil rights activities in the inner city and the suburbs—and had a wonderful group of nearby friends who not only regularly shared child care activities, but were also intensely involved in creative and important political work.

Through all the early child rearing years, George was an extremely helpful coparent. We both accepted the importance of good parenting and the importance of George's professional work. After a full day of being alone with the children I welcomed his coming home. I often felt like a well that, after giving water all day, was nearly dry, and his appreciation refilled me. It defied my imagination to think of doing a good mothering job without his support.

George: I enjoyed coming home to the family. When the children were small, I generally did most of the evening bath and bedtime story routine. As they grew older, I became involved in homework
projects and such activities as coaching hockey. Our family also went camping, biking, and hiking together. In Cleveland, we made a small ice rink in our backyard in the winters—our micro attempt to influence not the actual cold, gray weather, but our own attitude toward it. While maintaining the rink, we were delighted whenever the temperature was low and the sun behind clouds.

Contexts. Although our Cleveland environment, and raising our lively young sons, led to considerable stress, particularly in the first year, it also helped us cope with our problems. Ann built a strong friendship net with other mothers, George had various congenial colleagues and doctoral students, and the two of us benefited from our well-tested patterns of interaction and decision making.

Children were always a vital part of our marriage. Long before we knew each other, each of us had planned to have a family and our premarital dialogue on religion focused on what each of us desired for our children. Even so, we waited before beginning a family, enjoying almost three years as just a couple. By the time our first child was born we were eager to be parents. Even during the most demanding periods of child rearing, we appreciated the rewards of our family life and the experiences our children led us into.

Our household division of labor was fairly traditional and continued so until later years. Ann did laundry, sewing, and most of the cooking, cleaning, and shopping, while George managed most of the outdoor work and nearly all financial matters. Still, we did lots of joint home maintenance as well as joint decision-making. George was a strong coparent but his primary job was outside the home. He worked most evenings and part of most weekends on writing and class preparation.

We did learn from one bad decision, which came from rushing into the purchase of our Cleveland house. In order to complete the purchase during our trip to Cleveland with all three children during the 1960 spring vacation, we quickly bought a large old house in poor condition, though in a good neighborhood. In our inexperience, we failed to have the house inspected or even to ensure that the owners would empty out their extensive trash. We paid for that decision with weeks of cleanup and a year of aggravation and expensive remodeling. Nonetheless, we rarely blamed one another for the mistake and eventually felt pleased with the results of our labors. Furthermore, when five years later we had to buy another house before moving to Amherst, we approached that purchase more carefully and this time our choice process was highly successful.


Early to middle years (1965–1973)

In 1965 we moved to Amherst, from a large house on a small lot to a small house on eight wooded acres. We loved being close to the woods and in touch with the rhythms of nature. After the intense activities of urban Cleveland, moving to Amherst was a great change of pace. As we progressed from summer into winter, however, the smallness of our house added stresses.

Ann: We laughingly but truthfully said there was no place in the house from which you could not hear an argument in any other place. This of course led to everyone becoming involved in everyone else's disputes. It was not a good work environment. As a temporary solution, George bought an old camping trailer which he parked behind our barn and equipped as a quiet home office.

George: Having found a job I wanted to keep, in a community where we wanted to live, brought me some early anxieties. With a tenure decision on the horizon, I worked strenuously on my new teaching assignments, on developing a new research program, and writing papers and grant proposals. My habits of working evenings and weekends were reinforced, but I did devote at least one weekend day to our family.

The fact that we had moved to a small town with a far smaller population of
researchable married couples, and to a
large university with plentiful numbers
of student pairs, led me to refocus my
professional research beyond the study
of marriage. I broadened my perspective
to include any and all “close” pair relation-
ships, studying their development,
maintenance, and dissolution.

Despite strains in our new environment,
our marriage survived well; Ann’s cheerful-
ness alleviated most of our family’s ten-
sions. Furthermore, after George received
tenure, we enlarged our house.

**Ann:** One saving grace during our early
child rearing years was that the boys’
bedtime was much earlier than ours;
also, they slept in their own beds. We
are amazed by young friends today who
maintain their marriage despite having
little adult evening time and sharing
their bed with their children. I don’t
think our marriage would have survived.

When our sons reached their teens they
began staying up later than we, but by
then they were more independent and
involved in their own activities.

**George:** Around that time the ethos of
marriage was shifting, a strong cross-
wind for many couples. In the late
1960s, conventional marriage began to
receive bad press. The idea of staying
forever with the same partner came to
be considered square; young adults
became fascinated with “swinging sex,”
and some of my professional colleagues
with “mate swapping.” In the early ’70s,
my marriage research seminar began to
analyze such concepts, as well as “open
marriage” (O’Neill & O’Neill, 1972, high
on that year’s best-seller list) and “group
marriage” (Constantine & Constantine,
1973). Those were challenging times for
committed relationships.

Ann and I participated in these discus-
sions of alternatives to monogamy and
verbally played with those ideas, but we
soon realized they were not for us. I con-
sidered them distractions at best. (We
also resisted other forms of distraction.
For instance, we chose not to put a desk
or piles of papers into our bedroom,
another instance of shaping our environ-
ment.) Aside from continuing to find
Ann loving and sexually exciting, I was
too busy to even imagine my communicat-
ing regularly with an alternative inti-
mate partner; I feared being unable
remember what I had told to whom.

Furthermore, I felt that my having an
affair would be unfair since, while I had
numerous opportunities, Ann’s childcare
responsibilities put her at a marked dis-
advantage at trying to get even. The idea
not only violated my values of simplicity
and openness, but also that of equality.

(My sincerity was tested during my
1970–71 research fellowship at Yale Uni-
versity, which required me to spend sev-
eral nights each week in New Haven. Not
merely to save money but also to avoid
temptations, I rented an extremely small
room with merely a single bed, desk, and
chair in a rooming house near the Yale
campus. Ann, who had seen this spartan
room, was therefore quite unflustered
when, soon after I had committed myself
to renting it, the landlady mistakenly
phoned our home to inquire whether I
was the gentleman “accompanied by a
tall brunette lady in a convertible” who
had wanted to rent a room. This is an
example of how one’s choice of physical
contexts may affirm one’s close relation-
ship; a different choice might have
endangered it.)

Instead, Ann and I formulated our per-
sonal response to having affairs. If—as
we had witnessed among a number of
our acquaintances—the resulting separa-
tion or divorce were expensive, then a
much cheaper alternative would be to
carry on affairs with each other inside
our own marriage. We agreed that the
money we’d save could pay for many
enticing vacations—and we also jokingly
vowed that, as a further deterrent, who-
ever sued for divorce would get custody
of our four children. Even the allure of
coupling with a novel sexual partner we
could simulate by pretending occasion-
ally that our own spouse was somebody
totally new.
Ann: I enjoyed being included in George's undergraduate relationship seminars in our home. We had opportunities to analyze books such as Bertrand Russell's *Marriage and Morals* (1929) in the light of current research, and to discuss with authors such as Larry Constantine the benefits and costs of group marriage. Students raised insightful questions and, in the process, we were confirmed in our own commitment to monogamy. (In the 1980s I started officially co-teaching a new relationships seminar with George. By then, students had become more conventional and less interested in alternatives. Planning the course together and discussing aspects of close unions with students enriched our own marriage.)

In 1972, our family accepted the challenge of spending a sabbatical year in Norway. This new environment required many adjustments, especially with all our sons attending Norwegian schools. It also brought our whole family closer as we shared the adventure of living in another country. We appreciated our sons, and their resilience and resourcefulness.

Ann: A second strong wind for change in the late '60s and early '70s came from the Women's Movement. Although I welcomed moves toward equality for women, I chose not to join any women's "consciousness-raising group." At that time I knew that if I focused on what I was missing, I might become highly dissatisfied. Still, by 1973, not only was my full-time mothering job ending but volunteer work, no matter how important or creative, was being disparaged. I had been happy with those roles and was not eager for new ones. For the first time, I felt out of step with societal norms.

Contexts. Nonetheless, despite Ann's discomfort with the macrocontext, both our micro- and mesocontexts were congenial. Our partnership had by this time navigated through many storms. Also, George was secure in his own occupational status and not at all threatened when Ann began to change her family role; in fact, he was delighted by her desire to go to graduate school.

Middle to later years (1973–1992)

Ann: After we returned from Norway in 1973, our household began to shrink when our eldest son went off to college. The next one left in 1975. By then I had made changes of my own. I was working part-time and was intensely involved in a doctoral program. In 1978, our final two sons headed out—one to college and the other to a Quaker boarding school—and I took a job as a school psychologist. When people asked us how we were coping with the notorious "empty-nest syndrome," I had a hard time appearing appropriately lonely. George and I found life as a twosome delightful. We loved being able to come home late, take naps before dinner, talk and cook together—all without having to coordinate our schedule with those of our sons. We enjoyed having the house to ourselves. Sex was less restrained.

I did not immediately realize that the empty-nest phenomenon had become far less common than in the '50s. We ourselves entered what I soon labeled "the revolving door" stage. Yes, all our children had departed, but they also came back—and left again, and returned again. This stage too had both pleasures and challenges. It was a treat to have adult children live with us under good circumstances—during school vacations, while working nearby, or while attending our local university. Having a happy, well-occupied son in the house was great, even if his moving in and moving out required adjustments. We were grateful that we could provide a haven when that was needed, but under negative circumstances we had to work hard to be supportive rather than overconcerned parents. At the time I thought this revolving-door phase would be permanent; actually it lasted only five or six years. During the past 20 years we've been
mainly on our own. Still, we greatly enjoy it whenever visits from our children, grandchildren, or friends fill our house.

George: As I matured, I became calmer and more encouraging as a husband and father. I felt less driven than earlier in my life. It was also helpful that I worked with female colleagues and graduate students, who pushed me toward greater sensitivity to needs for gender equality—probably reducing struggles Ann and I might otherwise have had.

We have been fortunate, so far, that in times of stress the two of us have been in basic agreement. For the most part, we have been able to support each other and to come out of difficult times with our relationship feeling strengthened rather than disrupted. We think that coping successfully with external challenges brings a couple closer together (see also Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996).

Contexts. Our middle-to-later years were a period of increasing stability, but with some new twists. Having survived the earlier years of child rearing and departing, with all of our sons launched into adulthood we could focus more on our couple relationship. Here we soon noticed an interesting switch. Before, George’s work had usually taken precedence over Ann’s. Now, however, George was well established in his career whereas Ann was launching into her new one: Now she was bringing home the job stories and he was listening attentively. He also took on greater household responsibilities and did most of our day-to-day shopping. This period gave us opportunities to do more things separately.

Retirement years (1992–present)

George officially retired in 1992. Ann, who had two years earlier left her prized but demanding school psychologist job, continued teaching graduate courses at the university for another two years. Although retirement often severs all contact with one’s work colleagues, neither of us had to make an abrupt shift. Ann could continue to teach, and George could keep his office and still feel part of his department, despite being free to come and go. This kept us connected to our professional contexts and also lightened pressures on our microcontext.

Nonetheless we were both at home together much more than before. This spouse-in-the-house syndrome was both a pleasure and a sometime strain. Each of us was used to having separate and uninterrupted time. At first we felt we should speak to each other each time we passed by, but this became bothersome. Eventually we tried the simple signal of donning a hat to inform the other when we wanted to be ignored, and this effectively created more space for both of us.

One joy of retirement is largely retiring our alarm clock. Most mornings we can sleep as long as we want and then can stay in bed talking. To increase this pleasure, we installed a new bay window in our bedroom which lets us look into the woods while still in bed. We enjoy the changing light and the acrobatics of the squirrels jumping from tree to tree.

Retirement brought not so much leisure time as discretionary time to work in new contexts. It increased our opportunities to be involved in organizations we have cared about. George became active in an organization sponsoring affordable housing for low-income people, in another that critically analyzes federal budget priorities, and also on the board of a Quaker conference center. Ann leads discussion groups with young parents at a local family center and has headed the regional Alternatives to Violence Project in a prison. Together we have led numerous workshops at the prison. We have also become more active in our local Friends Meeting.

Ann: Each new activity has been enriching, but two that have especially affected our relationships are the prison workshops and my work at the Family Center. First, planning and conducting workshops together in a prison is a repeated challenge. We enjoy working in a team with inmate trainers in an atmosphere of
mutual respect. The emphasis of the workshop on communication skills and creativity certainly reinforces our own communication practices.

My work at a family center keeps me in touch with current issues and styles of parenting. It is both enriched by and enriches my relationships with my daughters-in-law. Often before I lead a discussion on a child-rearing topic I call one of them to try out my ideas and hear theirs. And, as I have told the parents at the family center and our sons and daughters-in-law, the stories and questions I get at the family center let me know that what George and I have considered crazy (like short-order cooking for each child, or having young children stay up until 10 p.m.) now borders on the normative.

We also have more opportunity to be with our children and grandchildren—most of whom live far away—in their homes or ours, and occasionally sharing a vacation elsewhere. Other travel has taken us farther afield. Living in another culture builds all sorts of skills. We enjoy planning for and surviving in novel environments around the world, including brief stints of teaching in China and Vietnam, living for a week in an ashram in Bali, or bicycling in various countries overseas.

George: In November 2000 I was hit by a crosswind of gale force. I had an accident in which my car was demolished even though I, the driver, received only minor injuries. The emergency room doctors, however, were troubled by my inability to remember what caused the accident, and they ran a series of tests which discovered an aortic aneurysm. When six weeks later I received open-heart surgery, the surgeon discovered my swollen artery had been "paper-thin." Again—despite my initial shock and unavoidable anxieties—I felt more lucky than I dared deserve, and the period of my convalescence brought out the best in our marital relationship.

Ann: Looking back on that time, I remember the week before the diagnosis as the roughest interpersonally. My most upsetting moment came when we went to look at the wrecked car. Seeing the mangled car body was deeply disturbing. It seemed a miracle that George had not suffered greater injuries. Visiting the car lot left both of us feeling fragile. George, who needed me to chauffeur him in our old car with a stick-shift, showed his tension by criticizing my driving, especially my shifting. In turn, I converted some of my anxiety into anger. Even though we understood these dynamics, it did not prevent angry exchanges. Eventually I decided that any time George criticized my driving I would just stop the car and breathe deeply.

Although the week after the accident was difficult, I remember the post-surgical time with pleasure. After several stressful days in the hospital, our subsequent relaxed time together was most gratifying. Throughout this whole time our family was extremely supportive.

Now we are both in our 70s and well aware of our aging. We continue to be active, but we anticipate a time when either of us may be incapacitated or when one of us is alone. In the meantime we treasure that we both still hike, swim, bicycle, and cautiously ski cross-country—and we revel in the fact that we still love being together. In choosing our travels, we try to do now what might be too difficult in the future. We are reminded of life's fragility not only by our own stiff knees and desire for extra sleep, but also by the illnesses and deaths of good friends.

Mesocontexts. It is clear that our mesocontexts have played an important part in our marital well-being. Their relative importance has, of course, changed over the years. Whereas parenting and colleague- ships were primary during earlier years, friendships and grandparenting have become more immediate recently.

In addition to our extended families, with whom we have maintained close ties, our life has been part of several, often
separate sets of networks. George has been heavily involved in the wider community of social psychologists, and in the many conferencing, editing, and publishing responsibilities this entails. In the past few years, he has joined a meaningful men’s group. Ann has often attended George’s conferences and is friendly with his colleagues. She has had her own networks of peers, which have varied as she shifted her concerns from mothering small children, to involving herself in school affairs, to engaging in social activism and later becoming a counselor and school psychologist. We have maintained other friendships in the community and through activities in our Quaker Meeting.

Probably our closest ties as a couple have been with our “canoe crew”—a bunch of similar-age good friends with whom we have long carried on active outdoor activities. Although our outdoor adventures are now less dramatic than before, our companionship has become even deeper. These diverse systems of friends and colleagues have enriched our own relationship over the years.

Microcontext. In examining our microcontext we can consider both its physical and behavioral aspects. For example, we continue to share one bed, even though we now have plenty of other beds available, but we have two phone lines to minimize impatience at waiting for the other to get off the phone or computer. We also have two cars, an ecologically incorrect luxury. On occasions when we have had only one car, we have realized how liberating it is not to be dependent on each other’s schedules. On the negative side, our microcontext is often cluttered. We both are involved in projects that flood us with paperwork and mail, and we struggle to keep ahead of this deluge.

At the behavioral level we enjoy a flexible division of labor, where we alternate in who cooks or bakes. Most special is our joint vacation travel, where we aim for two or three major trips a year that generally require mental and physical exertion. We continue to build novel experiences into what otherwise might become a routine time in our lives. Finally, we endeavor to make “spaces in our togetherness”; our interdependence is laced with large doses of autonomy.

Discussion

On writing this paper

We have enjoyed writing this review of our long relationship, largely because we continue to live, love, and work well together. George suggested the idea and drafted the framework, but this paper has truly been a joint project. First we had to agree whether to write it at all, and then whether to submit it for publication. In the meantime we had to negotiate how much to include and what to cut—a challenging set of decisions. For example, we soon knew that we could say only little about the 175+ child-years we have related to our four sons, even though they and their families have been vitally important in our lives. Throughout, we have edited and reedited each other’s words.

A methodological caveat. All the “data” for this exploration derive necessarily from the authors’ self-reports. Readers may ask how valid are such recollections, as Olson (1977) did when he examined “insider” versus “outsider” views of relationships, as well as “subjective” versus “behavioral” reports. Olson concluded that each perspective taps a somewhat different version of reality.

In writing this paper we are, of course, insiders. Nonetheless, our reports describe both our memories. We find little difference between our “his” and “her” marriages (Bernard, 1972) except in tone or emphasis; this finding is also noted in a recent interview study of both spouses in 50 “good” marriages, where husbands and wives tended to give similar accounts of important aspects of their positive relationships (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p. 330).
Furthermore, many of our current memories (e.g., about why we broke our first engagement) are confirmed by recently rereading old letters that one or the other of us wrote shortly after the actual event.

Nonetheless, we cannot totally disengage our recollections from our current feelings about the marriage. The fact that our memory banks contain primarily good memories may reflect two complementary processes: (a) a general tendency, at the time of a past event, for happy spouses to focus primarily on the positive actions and intentions of the partner (see Holmes, 1991); and (b) a tendency in the present to project one’s current warm feelings so as embellish the past. Such dual tendencies are in accord with a comprehensive review of “attributions in marriage,” which concluded that—compared with distressed spouses—happily married partners tend to emphasize the impacts of positive events over those of negative events (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

Our recollections still can pull up their original emotions. As we looked for negative memories in order to present a more balanced picture, we could instantly return to the discord of that moment. For example, while we discussed our mistake in buying the Cleveland house, both of us became irritable again and our breathing tightened. It seems that if over the years we had chosen to focus on the negatives rather than on the positives, neither our relationship nor our bodies would be as healthy as they are today.

**Ingredients of our relationship**

Above we have described many examples of meso- and microcontexts, but we have only implicitly reviewed the main ingredients of our marital relationship itself. From writings on “marital quality” (e.g., Lewis & Spanier, 1979), we will abstract three interlinked elements: attraction, intimacy, and communication.

**Attraction.** Our mutual attraction has been high since the day we met. We have, of course, irritated each other at times and continue to do so, especially when task pressures interfere with our synchrony, but our overall affection has, if anything, grown stronger. We have similar biological rhythms and energy levels; we tend to go to bed about the same time, which facilitates both verbal and other intercourse. One noteworthy aspect is that both of us have, over the years, developed the habit of regularly expressing our love verbally as well as physically. The significance of such appreciative behavior is confirmed in recent diary studies of marital interaction and well-being (Reis, 2002).

**Intimacy.** Over the years we have shared many experiences and have heard each other’s stories countless times. We have shared joys and sorrows, and we know what either pleases or angers our partner. Furthermore, when one of us has a problem, he or she is likely to discuss it first with the other. We not only trust each other to adhere to our vows, but we also trust each other’s judgments in critical personal and interpersonal situations. That, it seems, is the crux of intimacy.

**Communication and conflict resolution.** Despite our mutual attraction and intimacy, we do, of course, experience periodic squalls. Some result from incompatible outside obligations. Others derive from our personal foibles or styles and preferences. A big source of past conflicts, before our children headed away, were our disagreements about how to deal with them or their problems. Currently, our biggest source is how to deal with paperwork or its disappearance. Misplacing a needed item still can lead to frustration and self- or other-blame.

In his analysis of threats to marital success, Gottman (1994) names four that he considers the most destructive: “criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.” Although we both are apt to critique the other’s behavior, we have rarely attacked each other’s personal competence. We do, however, experience instances of defensiveness: Sometimes, over the years,
when George has asked Ann, “Why are you being so defensive?,” she has countered with “Why are you being so offensive?”—and this has usually generated laughter. (George tends to be more accepting of criticism; perhaps because Ann’s style is more diplomatic.)

We recall no instances in our marriage, however, of either “contempt” or “stonewalling.” We have almost always respected the other’s opinions, if not always the actions. And, unless heavily stressed, we do listen to each other. In recent years, if one of us stews sleeplessly over some troubling problem during the night, the restless one may wake the other and talk about it; if so, we usually return to sleep feeling far calmer than before. In general, then, our current relationship contains a far higher ratio of positive/negative interactions than the “5:1” ratio Gottman (1994) promotes as most conducive to marital success. We have learned to voice our irritations with minimal attack, to hear each other with reasonable respect. Over the years, our marriage has transformed us as individuals and spouses, and in turn we have grown to transform the marriage itself.

Sternberg (1986) proposed that “consummate love” consists of the combination of three major ingredients, which he labeled passion, intimacy, and commitment. Our aim over the years has been to reach this high form of love. Although hard to achieve at times, it has been less difficult than one might imagine. For one thing, our strong continuing commitment to our marriage meant that we could work undistractedly on building our intimacy and stimulating our excitement. For another, by keeping intimacy and passion high, we had little interest in exploring alternatives that might have eroded our commitment (Kelley, 1983).

Conclusion

This selective account of one lengthy pairing has aimed to illuminate the important role of contexts in relationship development and maintenance. It has acknowledged that our tailwinds—including our solid parental models, our family’s good health and favorable socioeconomic status, as well as our life in pleasant homes and stimulating communities—have been far stronger than our headwinds. Many of our choices, though, have aimed both to anticipate or avoid headwinds and to cope with them when we did meet them.

It is impossible to disentangle how much we influenced our contexts and how much they influenced us. One point, however, is noteworthy: We have had considerable control over what to carry with us on our marital journey: what treasures to keep and what baggage to discard. Over the years, we have tried to focus on favorable experiences and either to resolve or reframe our negative experiences. We have tried to create a context of trust, and one that elicits verbal and physical affection. And, though we confront conflict privately, we avoid public arguments or put-downs and choose friends who are mutually helpful and respectful.

All three contrasting but interconnected levels of environment—the macro-, meso-, and microcontexts—have affected our relationship over the years. Looking back, we know we have been lucky. At the macro- or sociohistorical level we could take advantage of the prevailing winds. At the mesolevel, we could choose settings and connections that kept our journey safe, as well as active challenges to keep it interesting. At the micro- or intimate level, we could give each other and our union loving care when and where it has been needed.

References


Reis, H. T. (2002, Nov. 15). The regard of one's partner: Being valued, feeling valued, and recognizing appreciation. Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.


Appendix

From Skinner's Principles of Scientific Practice to Relationship Practice
(contributed by Jim Averill)

Skinner's (1956) principles of scientific practice*:

1. "When you find something interesting, drop everything else and pursue it."
(While pursuing one goal, Skinner observed some behavior that was interesting; he dropped his original goal and developed the Skinner Box in the process.)

2. "Some ways of doing research are easier than others."
(The Skinner Box allowed easy observation and recording.)

3. "Apparatus sometimes breaks down."
(When the Skinner Box jammed, he observed extinction and a way to study it.)

4. "Some people are lucky."
(Self-explanatory; many examples)

George and Ann's equivalent principles of relationship practice:

1. When you find someone interesting, forget others and pursue him or her.
(Pre-marriage vicissitudes)

2. Some ways of loving are easier than others.
(It’s hard work to maintain a relationship, but some ways may be less hard than others.)

(Breakdowns, if not terminal, provide opportunities for renewal and development in new directions.)

4. Some couples are lucky.
(Many examples)