Longtime Couples Tell Their Story: An Integrated Constructivist View of Marital Relationships

Li Shaozhuan

University of California Irvine, Irvine, CA, USA

The current study was designed to explore how longtime couples understand and manage their marital relationships into later time of their lives. An integrated approach of social exchanged and symbolic interactionism was adopted to understand how longtime couples develop, organize, and adjust their experience of marriage via active exchange and interactions. Participants were five Caucasian heterosexual couples who have been married for more than 18 years. A narrative interview was conducted on each couple separately. Participants were asked to tell a story of how their marriages started and developed in time jointly. Four major processes emerged from the current study displayed how longtime couples proactively engage in managing their life together as a union. The current study revealed a series of exploratory results concerning how individuals in marital relationships communicate and cooperate with each other in the process of their marital relationship development. It also identified an interesting point of view concerning how couples actively manage their negative experiences regarding critical transitioning life events related to their marriage. This adds evidence to understand and predict marital outcomes from a micro-social constructivist approach. Implications about couples and family counseling from a social-constructive approach, as well as the probability of synthesizing a social-constructivist family framework with a systemic family framework, are thus provided.

Keywords: longtime couples, marital relationship development, social exchange theory, symbolic interactionism

The family dynamics and patterns of interaction have long been identified as a central topic of marriage and family psychologists (Wittenborn, Dolbin, & Keiley, 2013). Traditional research designs were mostly focused on individual, static, and independent features (e.g., Sternberg, 1986; Fehr, 1988; Lee, 1988; Aron & Westbay, 1996), rather than from a systemic, dynamic, and interdependent approach (Awosan & Hardy, 2017; Heafner & Mauldin, 2019; Wittenborn et al., 2013). Besides, only limited studies have explored how young and newlywed couples actively build their successful marriages (e.g., Acitelli, 1988; Stanik & Bryant, 2012), and there is still a limited amount of literature that discussed how different, if at all, it might be for longtime couples to sustain their successful marital relationship through their life time (Chadiha, Veroff, & Leber, 1998; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993; Mouzon, Taylor, & Chatters, 2020). Therefore, marriage and family therapists found existing research of limited help for their clinical practice since they do not offer an updated and dynamic perspective on how they can help couples actively engage in building and maintaining their marriages (Beutler, Williams, & Wakefield, 1993; Gyani, Shafran, Myles, & Rose, 2014; Košutić, Sanderson, & Anderson, 2012). Such gap between the growing need and the lack of up to date data about couples building

Li Shaozhuan, Ph.D., Counseling Centre, UC Irvine, Irvine, CA, USA.

their marital relationships interactively calls for a non-traditional approach of study as was proposed by classic research decades ago but not necessarily advanced by following scholars (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Matthews, 2012).

Constructivist Theories of Marital Relationships

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange perspective provides a conceptual framework for understanding the marital relationships (e.g., Murstein, Cerreto, & MacDonald, 1977; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). A small set of concepts are adopted to interpret and predict what happens during the process (Stephen, 1984). For example, Reward refers to things that result in satisfaction or pleasure in marriage while Cost refers to things that result in dissatisfaction and thus inhibit such (Hansen, 1987). Distributive Justice refers to the mechanism that partners adopt in their relationship to ensure a fair exchange, while Reciprocity refers to the mechanism that governs the outcomes of social exchanges and makes sure that the outcomes are equally distributed to both partners (Gouldner, 1960; Stephen, 1984). However, the social exchange approach has long been criticized because it fails to take into consideration the ever changing/developing nature of marriage. Stephen (1984) noted that individuals' unique perception and interpretation of what has been exchanged and how they are exchanged may significantly influence the process and outcomes of marital relationship development.

Symbolic Interaction

The symbolic interaction approach mainly focuses on micro-sociological knowledge process of meaning and identity development (Stephen, 1984). Blumer (1969) summarized three ways of human symbolic interaction: (1) that individuals act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them; (2) that the meaning of things is derived from the social interaction that individual has with their fellows; (3) that these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the individual in dealing with the things that individual encounters. Family has been identified as the micro context of married partners' conscious meaning making (Katz, 1965). Researchers further argued that such symbolic processes and ritualistic behaviors can be best understood under a symbolic context that defines partners' behaviors as a couple (Bolton, 1961; Conroy, 2014). However, symbolic interactionism is also criticized because it is very difficult to test empirically, due to their abstract expressions and vague descriptions (Denzin, 1969; Stephen, 1984; Ho, 2012).

A Integrated Framework: Couples, Family, and Beyond

An integrated framework consisting of both social exchange theory and symbolic interactionism has been identified as an applicable method of understanding marriage and relationship development (Rosenbaum, 2009). Such an integrated model reconceptualizes interactions between partners as a micro-social exchange process. In such a process, partners actively exchange their own constructs of meaning of their marriage, either through confirming or disconfirming, and finally reaching a consensus, a shared meaning of their relationship (Rosenbaum, 2009; Singleman, 1972). This process can serve as predictors of marital relationship development (Rosenbaum, 2009; Stephen, 1984).

In summary, social exchange theory provides a valuable clinical sociological approach that takes into account couples' relationship in terms of balance of power, justice, and fairness, while symbolic interactionism theory emphasizes the importance of the "couple's problem" to be understood within the couple's relationship,

as well as to be extended into the broader social world (Rosenbaum, 2009). Drawing upon such combined theories, it can offer holistic and integrated perspective for clinical practitioners to combine classic medical, cognitive, and behavioral models of conceptualization and treatment planning that lead to a better understanding of the social context of how the couple's problems have emerged and are maintained, and thus maybe treated/changed via therapy interventions.

Beyond the Couples: Emerging Into the Family System

The social exchange and symbolic interactionism process are never limited between the partners only, but among all members of the family. Such shared understanding and interpretation of their marriage, which was initially co-created and shared by the couple only, will later become shared by the entire family (Stephen, 1984). Hence, through this combined process of social exchange and symbolic interaction process, the married partners gradually develop interdependence, which tightly connects the two individuals as they form a union (Haas & Deseran, 1981). Cox and Paley (1997) noted that the systemic approach is born in the work of sociologists and early family therapists. The family system approach views family members as interdependent and interrelated. Hence, no individual is free from the influence of other family members. Family system sensors outside information that could influence the partners, and thus partners manifest their identities through interactions with every other individual in the family (Gubrium, 1988). This is the origin of how some family system therapists view couples' mental disturbance as a manifestation of family dysfunction, rather than individual pathology (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978; Minuchin, 1985; Ruben, 1998).

Integrating Social Exchange and Symbolic Interactionism

Berger and Kellner (1964) argued that marriage serves as the context of objectivation, which is when individuals actively process their subjective experiences, and the meanings derived from them, into socially constructed "reality". Individuals develop and accept this "reality" through continuous interaction and exchange with the other, as a shared "reality". Previous work focused on sub family system/triangulation either as the origin of family mental disturbances as well as the opportunity for curing them (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin et al., 1978; Minuchin, 1985). Research also focused on this topic as the manifestation of coping strategies to maintain family stability when critical transitions occur alongside the course of family development, such as chronic illness and death (Conroy, 2014; Wilgus, 2008), career decision-making (Lopez & Andrews, 1987; Pagnan, Lero, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2011), and marital violence and family dissolution (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Kreager, Felson, Warner, & Wenger, 2013; Lansford, 2009).

The Current Study

The current study is designed to achieve several goals. First, it is designed to apply an integrated theoretical perspective, which consists of both social exchange theory and symbolic interactionism, in the attempt to add empirical evidence of utilizing an integrated model of social exchange and symbolic interactionism, and to interpret what has been exchanged and how they have been exchanged as longtime couples establish and maintain their marriage. Second, by focusing on longtime couples, the current study attempts to add empirical evidence in the field about how couples understand marriage and family development continuously, especially during the phases after their early stages of marriage (Chadiha et al., 1998; Veroff et al., 1993; Mouzon et al., 2020). Third, how this framework applies when the couple's marriage emerges into a broader family system context is explored. Finally, the current study is also intended to explore how couples

actively give meaning and alter meaning when necessary to prevent or alter negative experiences that is generated by challenging and critical transitions specifically within a synthesized framework of social exchange and symbolic interactionism, in hope of adding empirical and process oriented evidence to understand longtime couple's unique experience of marriage and interdependence, to bridge the gap between the early proposed joint-narrative approach and the very limited amount of data that followed such direction during the last two decades (e.g., Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Kellas et al., 2010; Rank & LeCroy, 1983; Rogers-de Jong & Strong, 2014; Sakellariou, Boniface, & Brown, 2013).

Method

Participants

Final qualified participants were five Caucasian heterosexual longtime couples from the local community who have been married more than 18 years. The study was based on voluntary nature so no incentives were provided for the participants, and has been approved by IRB (Indiana University Bloomington, IRB STUDY #1310616150). The age range of male participants was 43 to 76 (Mean = 61.4, SD = 12.36), the age range of female participants was 40 to 65 (Mean = 56.8, SD = 10.28), and the range of length of marriage was 18 to 43 years (Mean = 30, SD = 11.34) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participant Couples

	Male	Female	Year of marriage
1	64	62	40
2	60	54	29
3	65	65	43
4	76	63	20
5	42	40	18
Mean	61.4	56.8	30
SE	12.36	10.28	11.33

Procedure

Inform consents were signed separately by all five couples. All interviews were conducted in confidential and private environment, and were recorded and stored in an encrypted drive that was deleted one year after the research is completed. While conducting the interviews, each couple was presented with a piece of paper with a brief story-telling sequence: (1) How you met; (2) getting interested in each other; (3) developing a relationship; (4) getting married; (5) couple with young children; (6) couple with adolescents; (7) launching children and moving; (8) longtime couple. This sequence is composed based on family development theory and the forerunner work on this topic of Veroff et al. (1993). Please refer to their work for details.

The researcher initiated each interview with a brief statement to make the participants feel natural and relaxed: "Please talk freely to give a story according to this sequence. Tell me in your own words the story of your marriage. Just tell me about your lives together as if it was a story with a beginning, a middle and how you look at things in the future. There is no right or wrong way of telling. There might be a chance that I jump into and ask some follow up questions, but I will minimize my interruptions while you are talking". Each interview took about one hour.

Analysis

The researcher watched all the recordings several times and generated a verbatim content transcription of the couples' talk. All the transcripts were typed out, each couple separately. The researcher conducted an integrated approach of social exchange and symbolic interactionism to analyze the content about what have been exchanged and how between the couples. In step one of analysis, the researcher marked each meaningful sentence and phrase, and coded them as-is according to grounded theory (e.g., Ralph, Birks, & Chapman, 2015). After this, the researcher conceptualized each coded excerpt as one of the three major categories: Reward/Cost (index RC+/-, RC+ refers to Reward while RC- refers to Cost); Comparison for Commitment/Alternative (index CC/CA, CC refers to Comparison for Commitment while CA refers to Comparison for Alternative); Reciprocity/Attributive Justice (index RJ+/-, RJ+ refers to perceived justice in a relationship while RJ- refers to perceived injustice in a relationship). The outcome of this step is thus conceptualized as "social exchange (index SE)" to identify what has been exchanged.

In step two, a symbolic interaction analysis was conducted based on the aforementioned outcomes. The researcher focused on the transition of every two or three coded excerpts, rather than the specific content of them, and identified the dynamics that couples used to organize and order their experiences around such. When couples talked about a coded theme first and then gave meaning to it based upon their understanding of it, this was coded as "derive meaning (DM)". When couples proposed a meaning of a presenting coded theme first and then designed their behaviors or responses according to the meaning they proposed, it was coded as "apply meaning (AM)". When the meanings of several logically connected coded themes were inconsistent, the "manage meaning (MM)" was used to conceptualize the nature of couples' effort to actively and consciously alter their conflicting understandings to reach agreement. See Table 2 for an example of such two steps coding.

Table 2

An Exemplary Illustration of the Integrated Social Exchange and Symbolic Interactionism Coding

Kara: So now we are in a very important transition period since we have to make arrangements for retirement, even that will not happen really fast. But we still need to get prepared for working a slower schedule than the past. Because some of his healthy issues, he has to somehow slow his schedule. And this is another topic of our marriage. Because you might be young and healthy, but it won't last, you know, forever, you are gonna be older for sure. And at some point you are not gonna be healthy sure. So it is clear that if you are gonna marry someone, you will deal with this. You can see this in our wedding vow. The basis of our marriage was not only a man and a woman live together, that's only part of it. Both of us have a commitment to God, the Jesus, and he makes plan for our life that we would serve people and show them loving and care. We found that, when we met each other, we could do that together better than we could by ourselves. We made a kind of life-long team, you know, to do this. Cal: (nodded)	SE.4.RJ+ SE.5.RJ+ SE.1.CC	SI.8.MM SI.9.DM SI.1.AM SI.2.MM

As the final step of the current study, an expert qualitative researcher was invited to conduct external audit. The external auditor was not involved in the research process and was not acquainted with the data and analysis until the study was done. This provided a satisfactory level of objectivity of the study (Miller, 1997).

Result

Four major processes emerged from the current study displayed how longtime couples proactively engage in managing their life together as a union: (1) integrating social exchange and symbolic interactionism; (2) couples as active author and critic of their experience; (3) family as carrier and extension of marriage; (4) family as an advanced context for social exchange and symbolic interactionism while aging.

Integrating Social Exchange and Symbolic Interactionism: Interpreting Phenomena and Meaning Making

According to constructivist and some post modernism perspectives, lived experiences can only influence people through the process of "meaning making" (Kohler-Reissman, 1989), in which the couples actively develop their own understanding and interpretation of their similarities and/or differences, and decide whether or not to preserve their marriage in time. Such perceived meaning of similarities and differences can be the result of the couples' early experience, beliefs, and values held before marriage, and can correlate with couples' expectation of their marital future.

The following excerpt displayed one couple narrated about how they started their romantic relationship and how they decided to move into marriage:

> Excerpt 1:
> Kate: (.) That summer. I had an accident that (.) A bus ran over my left foot. And I had nine reconstructive surgeries (.) So (Farr) heard about my accident, and felt really sorry for me (.). So I got this card, and I thought (.) that it was very compassionate, very loving, very warm (.), so I thought this is interesting. So I wrote him back (.) (RC+) (DM)
>
> Farr: (.) And I think at that point it was still a friendship, I thought that she was a really nice person. (.) We'd go to basketball games together, and we'd go to movies, through that semester or the few first months of the semester, our relationship really developed and grew into a really good friendship. (DM) (.) We both began talking about our feelings about each other and we both shared that we both like each other more than friends and we both wanted to go further in our relationship (.), and (.) we talked about marriage. (RC+) (MM) We didn't wanna date each other unless we were serious. We were not just going to date for fun. We were gonna date with a purpose. And at any point one of us thought like this was not moving towards marriage, we would, you know, end the relationship. (CC) (AM)

For this couple, even though they shared many other similarities, the core similarity for their marriage is their similar values toward it. We can see from this excerpt that Kate started with a direct description of how they started to know each other, and then Farr added more details about how they created shared times and activities. However, from here Farr altered the topic and interpreted that though these similarities are important, their similar attitude towards dating and marriage is the foundation of a serious relationship. This excerpt demonstrated how initially the facts are vivid and important, once the interpretation is provided, the significance of such interpretation became salient while the significance of the facts faded.

In the following excerpt from another couple's narrative, we can see how they actively managed the influences of their early experiences with family of origin regarding gender and family roles, to build their own family and overcome all the differences:

> Excerpt 2:
> Olivia: So (.) because we were probably the only two unrelated educated people in this town that were still unmarried (.) (CC) So it just started off pretty slow (.) We probably didn't get real serious until the next summer and by that fall we decided it was probably, would be a good thing to get married (.) (RC+)
>
> Uri: (.) So there were some rough edges to iron out along the road, but it only took about a year before we realized that yes we really did think we were going to be a very compatible couple (.) I grew up on a farm, not in a terribly conservative family, but I had role models in my family that were very traditional role models, (.) and that was a rough spot because I tended to bring some of those attitudes into our marriage. Olivia on the other hand came from a long line of very strong willed women, and so we had some rough moments in the first five years, I would say, as any married couple does, but never to the point where we were ready to walk away (.) (RJ-) (MM)

From the above excerpt, we can see that the couples actively give meaning to the similarities and differences of their early experiences they brought into their marriage, and therefore the lived experiences themselves are significantly less influential than how they are perceived and interpreted by the couple. In other

words, it really matters that the couples can figure out an interpretation of each other as acceptable and compatible, than simply who they are and how they are similar or different.

Couples as Active Author and Critic of Their Experience

As discussed above, couples actively give and adjust meaning of events in their marriages when necessary to prevent negative outcomes that are generated by challenging and critical experiences. When put in the scope of social exchange and symbolic interactionism framework, it is noticeable how this process manifests. One important process of such identified in the current study is: When a challenging/critical experience occurred (such as Cost (RC-), Comparison for Alternative (CA), or perceived injustice in a relationship (RJ-)), an effort of Manage Meaning (MM) can be located closely after. When a satisfactory experience occurred (such as Reward (RC+), Comparison for Commitment (CC), or perceived justice in a relationship (RJ+)), multiple efforts of Derive Meaning (DM) and/or Apply Meaning (MM) can be located closely after.

The following excerpt provided an example of how Kate and Farr worked together to develop a constructive style in talking about their marital experience. They obtained this belief from their early experiences with family of origin and religion, and they applied such proactively throughout their marriage.

> Excerpt 3:
> Farr: Well I would say (.) first (.) don't live together before you get married (.) (DM)
> Kate: Yeah.
> Farr: I think (.) the key is (.) working on communication, working on resolving conflicts. (DM) (.) We tend to communicate with each other the way we've watched our parents do it (.) So bad communication skills can (.) maybe (.) pass down through generations. (RC-) So if we don't work (on) it and try hard to communicate well, then we do what comes naturally. (.) So communication I think is very important. And then, I do think, just enjoying each other, and laughing together. (MM)
> Kate: (Look at Farr and nodded)
> Farr: (Laughing together) is important as well. Because I think when you are going through challenges in life (.) and being able to laugh at times is helpful (.) (RC+)

Through active meaning management, this couple successfully found a way to deal with the negative communication style they might have learned from their family of origin and transformed it into a constructive one. It is noteworthy that they reframed the negative communication style that could weaken their relationship into a positive one.

The following excerpt demonstrated this process from a different perspective: talking about aging and death. When thinking about aging and death, things became tough for Nat and Talma. By talking alternatively, they provided a vivid example of the process that they are simultaneous the author and the critique of their marital narrative.

> Excerpt 4:
> Nat: I guess we still think (about) death, (.) as a naturally (.) occurred phenomena (of aging). (DM) Not a thing to worry about (.) But at least, I want to die well. (DM)
> Talma: Well, everybody would like to die well, but not everybody gets to die well. (DM)
> Nat: But we can work on that.
> Talma: But we can try to do that for each other, I think. (MM)
> Nat: Support each other as well (.) Oh! Suicide, too, I guess. Like if we were really sick, and we want to help each other die, we would work it out someway (.) (MM)
> Talma: That's the first time I've ever heard that from you. I thought that's against you religion (.) This is a whole new line of thought here you are introducing (.) (MM)

Nat: I mean it's more you and me (.) (MM) I would grant you that (.) But I'll support you when things come to you. That's different. (MM)

Talma: I would say I've never imagined about that to you. (MM)

Nat: I would like to say I want to. (MM)

When Nat brought up the "suicide" narrative, Talma was completely surprised. Nat had a plan about the final chapter of his life, but it was very challenging for Talma. She could not agree with him immediately. Talma even pointed out that she thought this is against Nat's religion as an attempt to veto this plan. From the above excerpt we can see even after Nat offered a solution, Talma still found it hard to accept. It is clear that though after several rounds of "manage meaning" back and forth, they still have not reached an agreement at this point during the interview. However, their symbolic interdependence is also established through this process because none of them took this decision as their own independently. They both tried to incorporate each other into this process and therefore this "end of life" story is a piece written by them together.

Family as Carrier and Extension of Marriage

The majority of research concerning the development of marriage has long been focused on the early stages, especially the "nuclear family", from which children were excluded. However, due to the continuous nature of social exchange and symbolic interactionism theory, couples are expected to continue their active interaction throughout the entire marriage. Starting from the birth of the first child, couple's marriage realm will be inevitably extended. Couples need to learn to deal with one or multiple new members' occurrence and development.

The following excerpt displayed how the birth of children influenced the major aspects of their marital life, which resulted in a completely different career plan and life trajectory:

Excerpt 5:

Kara: So when (.) we had a baby (.) we had a big decision to make because (.) am I going to try to keep teaching (fulltime) because (.) he was in the medical school so he was (.) gone all the time (.) Well long before that we had committed that if we had children, which we hoped to, we (.) should raise them ourselves and we should spend primary time to take care of them, and teach them. So at that point I thought well, I really need to stop teaching, but that wasn't our plan (.) We thought (.) we'll wait until the last year of his medical school (.) But the good thing was (.) my husband was able to (.) receive a scholarship (.) from the (.) Army. And this turned out to be really an important part of our life story. (RJ-)

Cal: I think, (speaking of) important decisions, (.) it is that we (decided) whenever we had a child, she would stay home, to be, what we call in America, stay-at-home mom. That was one of the most (.) "foundational" decisions. (MM)

Kara: It affected many things (.) (RC-)

Cal: It affected many things because based on that I accepted (.) the army scholarship, that (.) when I completed my medical school, (not like) some of my friends had one-hundred thousand dollars of debt (.) I didn't have any (.) But I had to go to the army for two years (.) and that turned out to be a very important thing (.) (RC+) (MM)

From this excerpt we can see that the arrival of their first child created a tough career-family dilemma in front of them. They were "forced" to reflect on their original belief of child rearing and gender roles and practice at a time much earlier than planned: They had to rationalize whatever decisions they would make while at the same time to figure out a new practical path to support the decision. They did not simply take the pregnancy and parenting as a rough spot; instead, they actively integrated it as part of the construct of their marriage, and adjusted their initial plan and altered the narrative of their life course.

In the following excerpt, the couple specifically described how their son came-out as gay influenced the family life as a whole as well as their marriage, and how they actively adjusted their own beliefs as a coping/defense mechanism:

> Excerpt 6:
> Uri: (.) Our third child was very different. He was a gay child who was very strong willed and (.) wanted to do everything (.) his way and only his way, and it was a challenge (.)
> Olivia: But it wasn't miserable.
> Uri: No (.) not at all.
> Olivia: We felt bad for him. The only misery we had was that he was a gay man in a small (.) farming community. It was hard for him. But (.) he didn't care. He was (a) surprise in (our) life, and (.) he surprises us still every day. (MM)
> Uri: Well (.) I am the youngest of three boys (of my family), and my oldest brother is also gay (.) and that gave me a little preparation (.) for having a son who is gay. But still when it's your son that's being yelled at school, and has a hard time because a lot of people just will not accept him for who he is, (.) it (.) hurts you inside in a much different way than (.) it's your brother. (RC-) (MM)
> Olivia: Yeah (.) but he made it. And now he's at (college) and now he's happy. He got through it. (RC+) (AM)

The above excerpt showed that when the couples recalled the tough process of supporting their son's gay identity. They were challenged not only by the fact itself, but also their son's way of responding to it in a very strong-willed way. Additionally, the context, being in a "small farming community", created additional stress on this process. The couple's happiness was so tightly bonded to the child's struggle of identity that they educated and prepared themselves, to help and support their gay boy. The narrative of their marriage was successfully rewritten from "a couple in a small farming community" to "a couple in a small farming community with a gay son". Their son's identity development process was not a separate part, but a very importantly integrated part of their marriage narrative.

Family as an Advanced Context for Social Exchange and Symbolic Interactionism While Aging

While children growing up, couples are also aging. Their marriage narrative changes from living with children to living without children, as known as the "empty nest" family. Sometimes they have to help with grandchild rearing, and sometimes with taking care of elderly parents of their own. Especially for the "empty nest" phase, their marriage narrative, though seemingly also focuses on themselves mostly, is very different from the previous one when they first got married. Another important transition of aging after retirement is how they deal with their increased spare time alone with lots of work related identity. After retirement, individuals have significantly more "free" time to use. The couples will have more time to stay with each other closely, and will need to figure out what to do with such time. It is expected that a higher level of intense symbolic interdependence could be developed.

The following excerpt illustrated how this couple ritualized their daily routine after retirement, and therefore developed a high level of symbolic interdependence.

> Excerpt 7:
> Laud: (.) You know there (are) just a lot of things on a daily (base) and we enjoy our time together, (.) (such as) our evenings (.) Some of them (.) she may be on the computer and I'm at my desk in our bedroom working on something (.) But we always (.) every night (.) at least a couple of hours when we are both downstairs in our recreation room where we are watching TV together or doing something together (.) (RC+)
> Kala: And that's important. (.) I feel guilty if I don't make that time to be with him, (.) and I think because it's important to both of us. (.) (RJ+) (AM) And we (talk) about laughing at difficult times. [Kala provided a specific experience of it here] (.) (RC+)

Laud: (.) We tease each other but always in a positive sense (.) Kala could always read me pretty well and (.) I'm the kind of person who has to have a certain amount of private time (.) I think she knows that there are some times (when) I just have to have a little bit of alone time… (MM)

Kala: (.) I think you don't need as much now as you used to. I mean at first I (was) a little hurt (by that), but then as (.) I've gotten older I've become more understanding of (this). (MM)

It is interesting to see that their lives are so closely connected and even blended together, including "making fun of difficulties" and developing a balanced schedule between "staying together" and "have some alone time", etc. From the current excerpt we can observe a different pattern of communication between the couple that, whatever they choose to do, it is no longer something that is interpreted from an individual perspective, but from a couple's perspective. Teasing each other, and even spending some time alone, the presence and participation of both parties are thus taken for granted. Their living a retired life together is therefore routinized and symbolized.

The following excerpt provided an advanced demonstration of how the longtime couple dealt with the issue that "things begin to fall apart and go wrong", and therefore developed a symbolic interdependence by supporting each other on a daily basis.

Excerpt 8:

Talma: Actually we talked a lot about aging. We spent a lot of time talking about it. 'Cuz stuffs start to go wrong, we can't feed as well, we can't hear as well, we cannot be in good shape physically (.) so it's like (a) series of small losses take place. (.) He (had) some health issues (.) last year (.) (RC-)

Nat: I had two surgeries.

Talma: Two brain surgeries. You just started thinking that you'd better have a good time every day. You probably started to notice that we are more living at the present. We live out of town, (.) (so) we can do a lot of interesting things every day if we can just make things slow down (.) (RC-) (MM)

Nat: I think we have a particular routine, I guess some kind of spiritual (.). We are (a) couple, we try to have breakfast together in the morning (.) We try to do some, not religious, but some spiritual things, you remember what it is? (RC+) (AM)

Talma: We buy books, like one of them is "A Thesis of Charity". Like 365 days (.) like in 365 days a year, in the morning, he read a page of it to me and I read a page of it to him (.) It's just like a way that we start every day (.) We've done that, all these years (.) And I'm lucky 'cuz (.) he makes breakfast every morning (.) (RC+) (AM)

Nat: I do. And then I go back to bed.

Talma: That's true too (.) I go to work, he goes back to bed (.) I think we also developed a little habit as a couple (.)

Nat: I kiss you when we apart (.)

Talma: Yes. We kiss each other in the morning, and when we go to bed. I think we developed little habits as a couple (.) (RC+) (DM)

From this excerpt we can see that the aging life of this couple is highly symbolized and ritualized, and that they very much depend on each other almost all the time. They talked to each other, read to each other, kissed each other, and all these behaviors were symbolized as a necessary daily routine of being a couple. The couple used this symbolized and ritualized pattern to "fight against" the illness and chronic "decomposition" of aging. It is clear that their lives are deeply combined as one, as known as a high symbolic interdependence. For this couple, they are not only dealing with "getting old" together, but also developing a new "norm/routine" themselves by actively writing a new symbolic interdependent narrative.

Discussion

The current study provided an empirical evidence of utilizing an integrated social exchange and symbolic interactionism framework to interpret the development of marriage of longtime couples. By focusing on longtime couples, the current study explored how this synthesized framework works for understanding and

predicting marriage development in a constructivist perspective, and thus provided implications for couples and family counseling. It provided a series of process oriented empirical data about what and how individuals in marital relationships communicate and cooperate with each other in the process of creating and maintaining their marriage development (e.g., Rosenbaum, 2009). It also added empirical evidence of how marriage and family therapists can help couples actively talk about their challenging experience/marital problems to prevent or manage their difficult experiences caused by critical events (e.g., Conroy, 2014; Kreager et al., 2013; Pagnan et al., 2011). The current study also provided empirical evidence and demonstration of how to understand and predict marriage outcomes from a micro-social constructivist approach, thus marriage and family therapist can use this perspective as they assess and evaluate the process and progress of therapy and intervention based on couples' effort of making and managing shared meanings in therapy sessions (Clarke, 1997). It is an exploratory study about how to design and conduct a detailed joint-narrative analysis of both the content and the process/flow of couples' narrative over time, and how this can provide more practical value for clinicians.

Although the current study provided implications about couple and family counseling from a social-constructive perspective developed during the last decade (e.g., Atwood, 1993), as an in-depth study of a small sample size about couples' unique experiential world, the current study does not provide any determinative or general conclusions that directly apply to all couples. By focusing on longtime couples recruited from Caucasian heterosexual population exclusively, any inference generated based on the current study should not be assumed when applied to culturally diverse couples. Further studies should focus more on elderly couples, culturally diverse couples, and non-heterosexual couples, to further examine whether these results are still applicable to them.

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