C H A P T E R   1

What Is Couple Relationship Education? Why Is It Needed?

Tears welled up in the corners of Rachel's eyes as she held out the plush-covered album page for me to see. The single large color photo showed her and David holding hands facing each other; another couple stood beside them also holding hands, also facing each other. The marriage celebrant stood between and slightly behind the two couples. The backs of the heads of gathered family and friends were in the foreground, with their smart clothes, and various eccentric, feathered hats perched on some of the women. In the photograph Rachel and David looked a little younger than they looked on that day in my office, perhaps 4 or 5 years younger. In the photo they looked radiant, smiling, eyes locked on each other. In my office they had strained expressions, slight downward turns at the corners of their mouths, with their taut eyes fixed on me.

David's voice quavered as he spoke. "Deb told us last week that she and Jeff are divorcing. Rach and I are gutted . . . our best friends . . . we shared our wedding day with them."

Like almost all couples who marry, David and Rachel, Debra and Jeff, had made commitments to each other that their respective relationships would be lifelong and loving. David and Rachel were still deeply in love, they spoke about each other warmly, and they often held hands in the sessions they had with me. They had fun together, sharing an eclectic set of passionate interests: martial arts, football, hiking, and classical music. They supported each other in their times of stress, each gently describing having jointly coped with the struggle as Rachel's mother became ill and died of breast cancer. They communicated often and closely, regularly sitting to talk about things that mattered to them, particularly their plans for the future—children, a new house that was closer to their families. I never met Debra and Jeff, but I heard about how their arguments had become frequent, and more unpleasant, over time. Fun,

communication, and sex seemed to have all but disappeared from their lives; the sense of a shared future, of the commitment to be together, had eroded. Toward the end of our first session Rachel sighed heavily. "With Deb and Jeff splitting, it makes us . . . I don't know. . . . "

I interjected, "Unsure, anxious maybe?"

Rachel replied, "Yes, like they were once in love like we are now. . . . So what does this mean for us?"

The divergent pathways of these two couple relationships reflect the diversity of what happens to couples in all developed countries of the world: almost all couples start out highly satisfied with their relationship, a lot of couples sustain that satisfaction and make their relationship work, but a lot of couples do not. In our work together, Rachel and David essentially posed two questions of me. "How does this happen, that two people so in love can lose their way?" and "What can we do to strengthen what we have and not finish up like Jeff and Debra?" This book is my attempt to address those questions in a way that is useful to professionals who work with couples.

A key assumption that is the foundation of this book is that there are crucial skills, attitudes, and knowledge that give partners a better chance of developing and sustaining a healthy, mutually satisfying couple relationship. Some people acquire these attitudes, skills, and knowledge through life experiences, but many people do not. Couple relationship education[1] (CRE) is the provision of structured learning experiences to help couples develop their relationship knowledge, attitude, and skills. CRE typically is targeted at couples who identify themselves as currently satisfied with their relationship, and builds on the strengths in the relationship to enhance commitment and healthy interaction. The key goals of CRE are to help couples sustain a healthy committed relationship, to prevent the erosion of relationship satisfaction that many couples experience, and to reduce the considerable personal and social costs of relationship distress and separation.

This book is a detailed guide on how to conduct evidence-based CRE. Evidence-based CRE draws upon the substantial research on what influences couple relationship satisfaction and stability, and uses an approach to CRE

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[1] I use the term *couple relationship education* to describe education for marryied couples or for couples who are in other forms of a committed relationship. In most cultures the majority of heterosexual couples who remain in a long-term committed relationship choose to marry, and there is some evidence that marrying has advantages for those couples. However, in many Western countries the majority of heterosexual couples choose cohabiting either as a prelude or an alternative to marriage. I believe most of what is described in this book can enhance the relationships of couples in any form of committed relationship. However, most research on committed couple relationships has been with heterosexual married couples. When a research finding is based just on married couples I use the term *marriage*, otherwise I use *couple relationships*.

that has been evaluated in well-designed research trials. Evidence-based CRE is brief, ranging in length from a single session (involving an assessment of the relationship with discussion of current strengths and challenges) to 12–14 hours of a skill training curriculum. (See Chapter 2 for a detailed review of the evidence on effective CRE.)

CRE is distinct from couple therapy. CRE works with couples who are currently satisfied in their relationship, and who are committed to that relationship. CRE builds upon the high level of positive emotion typical of currently satisfied couples, and has a strong emphasis on building the positive foundations for a great life together. In contrast, couple therapy is for people who are distressed in their relationship. Couple therapy often has to manage the high levels of negative affect in the relationship, and address the ambivalence many distressed couples feel about whether they wish the relationship to continue (Halford, 2001). Couple therapy is often extensive in duration, with evidence-based approaches often involving 15, 20, or more sessions of therapy (Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2006).

The intended audience for the current book is anyone who works as a couple relationship educator. By the term *couple relationship educator* I mean anyone who works with couples on their relationship, particularly those professionals who seek to strengthen couple relationships and prevent future problems. Many priests, ministers, rabbis, imams, and other religious leaders provide education and counsel to couples about their relationships. Psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, and other mental health professionals also work extensively with couples. Often these mental health professionals work predominantly, or even exclusively, with distressed couples. I hope this book will encourage these professionals to expand their practices to include CRE as a form of early intervention with couples. Some community and religious organizations support a tradition of relationship mentors. Relationship mentors can be individuals, but most often are couples who support other couples in their relationship. This book is intended to assist all these people to work as effective couple relationship educators.

WHY PROVIDE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION?

Sustaining a healthy, mutually satisfying relationship across a lifetime is a substantial challenge. Almost all marriages and other committed couple relationships begin with high relationship satisfaction (Bradbury, 1998). The partners usually hope (and expect) that the relationship will be lifelong. Unfortunately, for many couples, their initially positive feelings decline with time. Between one-third and one-half of marriages in developed countries

deteriorate to the point where distance or conflict become predominant, at least one of the partners gives up on the relationship, and the couple separates. The rates of relationship deterioration and separation are even higher in cohabiting couples. However, the erosion of relationship satisfaction that many couples experience is not inevitable. Couples who develop core relationship knowledge, skills, and attitudes greatly enhance their chance of sustaining a healthy, mutually satisfying relationship.

Figure 1.1 summarizes 12 key reasons for professionals to provide, and couples to attend, CRE. This figure is a useful handout to provide to couples. The next two sections of this chapter review the evidence to support the statements included in the figure.

The Significance of Couple Relationships for Adults

Sharing a lifelong committed relationship with a partner is an almost universal aspiration. For most people, that means getting married. More than 90% of people marry by age 50 across almost all countries, cultures, and religions (United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2003). Even among those who choose not to marry in Western countries, the vast majority of people enter "marriage-like" cohabiting couple relationships (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). The desire to be in a committed partner relationship is so pervasive that some psychologists have argued that it reflects an evolutionary imperative (Buss, 2003).

When people achieve their aspiration for a strong, mutually satisfying marriage, this is a very powerful predictor of positive health and well-being in the partners. In an extensive review of research evidence, Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith (1999) concluded that being in a satisfying marriage was one of the strongest determinants of life satisfaction for adults, and that this was true across a diverse range of cultures. In addition, a mutually satisfying marriage is associated with resilience to the negative effects of life stresses (Coie et al., 1993), high self-ratings of health and well-being (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), low rates of diagnosed psychological disorder (Halford, Bouma, Kelly, & Young, 1999), greater life expectancy (Hu & Goldman, 1990; Waite & Gallagher, 2000), fewer diagnosed health problems (Schmaling & Sher, 2000), and better coping with major illness (Schmaling & Sher, 2000).

Being happily married is also associated with financial well-being. Relative to single or unhappily married individuals, happily married individuals have greater career achievement and earn higher incomes (Daniel, 1995; Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, & Kessler, 1996; Schoeni, 1995; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). While some of this "marriage premium" is likely due to selection effects, there is evidence that marriage is associated with higher pro-

1. A loving, lifelong couple relationship promotes a long and healthy life.

2. A loving, lifelong couple relationship helps your career and finances.

3. A loving lifelong couple relationship protects you and your partner against stress.

4. Being raised by parents in a loving, lifelong couple relationship is really good for children.

5. A loving lifelong couple relationship is usually valued by extended family and friends and assists you to feel part of a broader community.

6. Strong, loving couple relationships can be strengthened with couple relationship education.

7. Despite usually starting with love and commitment, about one in three marriages and one in two cohabiting relationships end within 10 years.

8. There is key relationship between knowledge and skills, which can be learned, that help people sustain a loving lifelong couple relationship.

9. Most adults have learned some, but not all, of the important relationship knowledge and skills.

10. Across a lifetime there are inevitable stresses that can strain a couple relationship, but having the right relationship knowledge and skills helps manage the strain on your relationship.

11. Many separated people report that they wish they had worked harder on their relationship, but they did not know what to do.

12. Should problems develop in your relationship, knowing what to do and going for help early gives you a much better chance of solving those problems.

FIGURE 1.1. Twelve good reasons to attend couple relationship (marriage) education. For most—though not all—people, a loving, lifelong couple relationship involves being married. There is evidence that, on average, married people are more likely to be happy and to stay together than people who live together. Some readers might prefer to describe what they offer as marriage education, and to explain the benefits of a loving, lifelong marriage.

ductivity and achievement even when controlling for selection effects (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Furthermore, married people have fewer days of work absenteeism (Rodriguez & Borgen, 1998), and are much less likely to need social security support (Blank, 1997; Thomas & Sawhill, 2005). In contrast, divorce is a major predictor of financial difficulties and the need to seek social security (Funder, Harrison, & Weston, 1993; Thomas & Sawhill, 2005).

The Significance of Couple Relationships for Children

Children benefit from a strong, happy relationship between their parents. Children who grow up in a stable home with both parents in a satisfying marriage have better mental, physical, educational, and peer-related adjustment than other children (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1996; Sanders, Nicholson, & Floyd, 1997). In contrast, parental conflict and divorce are risk factors for child depression, conduct disorder, poor social competence, health problems, and academic underachievement (Amato, 2001). Moreover, these negative effects of parental discord influence offspring adjustment into adulthood. People whose parents or grandparents divorce are at increased risk for divorce themselves (Amato, 2000; Amato & Cheadle, 2005), and parental marital distress when children are growing up predicts distress in the marriages of the offspring in adulthood (Amato & Booth, 2001).

I do not highlight the negative effects of parental divorce to suggest that couples should remain together in high-conflict or violent marriages. The research evidence indicates that children benefit from living in homes with parents in low-conflict, mutually satisfying marriages. Moreover, countless single mothers and fathers are doing their very best to provide a safe and stable home for their children, and single parenthood can be the best option available to some parents. However, where it is feasible, growing up in a home based on a loving marriage seems to convey many advantages to children. For example, relative to other children, the children of happy stable marriages are much less likely to grow up experiencing poverty (Funder et al., 1993; Smock, Manning, & Gupta, 1999), or abuse (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

The strong links between marital functioning and a wide range of adult and child outcomes has led to a growing recognition among researchers and policymakers that this entity that most people desire in their lives—happy marriage—has important public health consequences (see, e.g., Hahlweg, Baucom, Bastine, & Markman, 1998; Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008). As a result, policymakers across many nations strive to implement programs that can help couples achieve their aspirations for a mutually satisfying relationship and family stability (for examples of trends and issues, see Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008; Seefeldt & Smock, 2004). An important element of these new family policies is encouragement and funding of CRE, which

is strongly supported in countries as diverse as Australia, Germany, Norway, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Hahlweg, Baucom, et al., 1998; Halford & Simons, 2005; Huang, 2005; Thuen & Lærum, 2005).

Couple Relationship Education and Couple Therapy

Marriage and family therapists, psychologists, and other mental health professionals traditionally have addressed the problem of couple relationship distress almost exclusively through providing therapy to distressed couples. Several approaches to couple therapy (e.g., cognitive-behavioral and emotion-focused therapies) can improve relationship satisfaction for the majority of couples who present for therapy when treatment is delivered by highly trained therapists (Snyder et al., 2006). However, it is clear that couple therapy is often challenging to deliver effectively. By the time many couples present for therapy they have developed ingrained maladaptive communication and conflict management patterns, and high levels of negative thoughts and feelings about the relationship. Positivity toward each other is significantly eroded. These patterns are resistant to change, making successful therapeutic outcomes (namely, achieving sustained reestablishment of relationship satisfaction) difficult to achieve (for discussion of the management of these couple therapy challenges, see Christensen, Doss, & Atkins, 2005; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Halford, 2001; Snyder & Whisman, 2003).

Couple therapy as applied in routine practice achieves small effect size gains in couple relationship satisfaction, effect sizes substantially lower than the large effect sizes reported in research studies evaluating the efficacy of couple therapy (Hahlweg & Klan, 1997). Furthermore, in clinical practice the rates of dropout from couple therapy are often high (Hahlweg & Klan, 1997), and consumer satisfaction with couple therapy is low relative to satisfaction with other forms of psychotherapy (Seligman, 1995).

CRE has the advantage of working with couples when they are most positive and enthusiastic about their relationship, and seeks to harness that commitment and energy to promote positive relationship functioning. In contrast to couple therapy, dropout from CRE typically is rare (Halford & Simons, 2005). Moreover, couples completing CRE overwhelmingly report that the experience was positive, and that they learned important relationship-enhancing ideas and skills (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008).

Another advantage of CRE is that it seems relatively easy to deliver effectively. There is considerable evidence that people other than mental health professionals, such as clergy, lay leaders (Markman, Williams, Einhorn, & Stanley, 2007), or midwives (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008), can deliver CRE effectively after relatively brief (10–15 hours) training in CRE delivery.

In contrasting couple therapy and CRE I am not arguing that couple therapy is ineffective or should not be offered. However, I am suggesting that CRE has an important contribution to make in helping more couples realize their ambition of sustaining a healthy, mutually satisfying relationship. The need for CRE becomes clear when the challenges of sustaining a healthy couple relationship are analyzed.

THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINING A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

The Changing Context of Marriage

Across most nations of the world with reliable data, marriage rates have declined and divorce rates have increased since the 1970s (United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2003). Table 1.1 presents the ratio of marriages to divorces in selected countries from Western Europe, Australasia, North America, and Asia. The extent of the changes varies greatly from country to country, with marked differences between developing and developed countries. Across almost all countries people are delaying marriage and getting married at older ages, but this trend is much more marked in developed than developing countries (United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2003). Divorce rates increased in most countries between the 1950s and 1990s, and are substantially higher in developed than developing countries. The median divorce rate in developing countries increased from 13 to about 25 per 1,000 population between the early 1970s

TABLE 1.1. Changes in the Ratio of Marriages to Divorce in Selected Countries

	Marriage-to-divorce ratio	
	1980	2005
Australia	3.1	2.1
Canada	3.0	2.2
Germany	3.5	2.0
Italy	28.5	6.4
India	—	63.9
Japan	5.0	2.5
South Korea	12.5	2.1
United Kingdom	2.6	2.0
United States	2.0	2.7

and 2000, and in developing countries from six to 14 per 1,000 (United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2003).

The decline in marriage rates and increase in divorce rates reflect, in part, the side effects of some positive socioeconomic changes. In the last half-century declining marriage rates and increasing divorce rates correlate with women gaining more access to education, greater control over their fertility (i.e., more access to reliable contraception), and greater participation in the paid workforce (United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2003). In the 1950s almost all women in developed countries needed to get married to attain economic security. Women found it very difficult to leave a marriage—no matter how dysfunctional the marriage might have been—because they typically had many dependent children and lacked the economic means to support themselves and their children (Coontz, 2005).

Socioeconomic change around the world is moving marriage toward being a voluntary union between partners, rather than a social arrangement shaped by circumstances. This trend is well illustrated in the world's most populous country: China. Economic development in China has occurred at the extraordinary growth rate of more than 10% of gross domestic product (GDP) every year from the early 1990s to 2008, but this development has disproportionately benefited the large urban areas (Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, 2003). In the poor rural areas of China where education is rare, and female wages are low or nonexistent, marriage rates are high, and divorce rates remain stable and very low; in the industrialized boom areas surrounding the cities of Beijing and Shanghai, divorce rates in 2002 were more than triple those in the rest of the country and growing rapidly (Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Similarly, in the developed countries of North America, Western Europe, and Australasia, increasing divorce rates correlate across time with increasing education and participation of women in the workforce (United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2003). Even in the wealthiest country in the world, the United States, there is a longitudinal correlation over time between women's labor force participation and divorce rates (South, 1985).

Coontz (2005) documented the changing nature of marriage in the United Kingdom, noting that marriages arranged by family members were the normal process for arranging marriage for much of recorded history. Such arranged marriages were seen by the families and the partners as economic arrangements based on mutual benefit. Concepts of social good, duty, economic security, capacity to raise a family, and benefit to the extended family were strong in the rhetoric surrounding marriage. Only in the last few hundred years have notions of marriage as a romantic arrangement based on mutual attraction between the partners become more common. Arranged marriages still are common in many developing countries, such as India and

rural China, and the reported satisfaction of partners in such arranged marriages is at least as high as in romantic marriages, and the divorce rates are much lower (Huang, 2005). Interestingly, a number of social commentators in Western countries have recently criticized a perceived overemphasis on individual partner satisfaction in marriage, arguing that more attention needs to be paid to the social good resulting from continuing strong marriages (e.g., Australian National Marriage Coalition, 2004; Bradford et al., 2005).

Changing laws about divorce also have shaped the nature of marriage and divorce. In developed countries divorce laws typically date from the 19th or early 20th centuries[2] (Gonzalez & Viitanen, 2006). When first introduced, most divorce laws required establishing that a partner had done a blameworthy act, such as perpetrating violence or adultery (Gonzalez & Viitanen, 2006). Since the 1960s most Western countries have made legislative changes to introduce "no-fault" divorce law. Under no-fault divorce law, the only required grounds for divorce are that the couple has separated, and in most legislatures the process of divorce has been made less expensive than under earlier legislation (Gonzalez & Viitanen, 2006). Thus, in Western countries marriage has rapidly evolved from a union often enforced by economic imperatives and difficult divorce processes to a voluntary union that can be dissolved by unilateral action by either partner.

Increased Life Expectancy

Increased human life expectancy has substantially lengthened the duration of a lifetime marriage, which some commentators argue make it more likely that partners will change, grow apart, and ultimately divorce (Pinsof, 2002). In now-developed countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, it has been estimated that during the preindustrial era marriages lasted on average 15 years (Pinsof, 2002). The majority of marriages in that era ended through death of a partner, attributable to the combination of the high maternal death rates and the effects of infectious disease producing a low mean life expectancy. The current estimated mean duration of marriages in the United States is about 16 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), which is similar to the mean duration 150 years ago. However, now marriages of the mean duration of 16 years most often end in divorce, whereas 150 years ago the death of a partner was the most common cause of marriages ending at the average duration of 15 years.

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[2]It is noteworthy that divorce was banned in some developed countries until relatively recently; Italy only permitted divorce from 1970, Spain from 1981, and Ireland from 1996.

The Rise of Cohabitation

In most Western countries cohabitating heterosexual couples are a substantial and increasing minority of all couple households. For example, cohabiting couples now make up 8% of all U.S. couple households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). The rates of cohabitation have increased in the last 30 years in most Western countries. For example, cohabiting couples as a percentage of all couple households has increased from 2% in 1970 to 16% in 2006 in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), and from 6% in 1980 to 16% in 2001 in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003).

The trend for more couples to cohabit has been a significant source of concern to some prominent religious leaders, social scientists, and social policy analysts, who have made public pronouncements about the importance of marriage (e.g., Australian National Marriage Coalition, 2004; Bradford et al., 2005; Wilson, 2002). A key issue for many of these commentators is that marriage is an accepted social institution involving a firm commitment to the partner, that commitment is often based on strongly held social and religious values, and that there are broad social supports for marriage from extended family and community. In contrast, cohabitation lacks the social and religious underpinnings of marriage, the level of long-term commitment to the relationship is often unclear, and often extended family and the broader community are less supportive of the relationship than of a marriage. Commentators have expressed concern that cohabitation is (wrongly) seen as equivalent or even superior to marriage (e.g., Australian National Marriage Coalition, 2004).

There is substantial social science research showing that cohabitation is different from marriage. While marriage is universally accepted as a commitment intended to be lifelong (even if that intention is not always realized), cohabiting couples vary substantially in their long-term commitment to the relationship. In Australia about half of couples who have recently begun cohabiting report they think they are likely to marry their partner, one-quarter state they are not sure, and one-quarter think they probably will not marry their partner (Qu, 2003). Most often cohabitation is a transitional arrangement for couples that either leads to marriage or to separation. Across a range of Western countries, more than 80% of cohabiting couples either marry or separate within 5 years (Qu & Weston, 2001). Cohabitation is now the most common means for couples in Western countries to begin a committed relationship. The vast majority of couples in these countries who married in this century cohabited before marrying, with recent research showing that 85% of marrying couples in Australia cohabited premaritally, 84% in Canada, and 74% in the United States (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

One often-expressed concern is that premarital cohabitation undermines the chance of successful marriage. Research up to and including the 1990s found a robust association across Western countries between premarital cohabitation and an elevated risk of divorce (DeMaris & Rao, 1992; de Vaus, Qu, & Weston, 2003b; Hall & Zhao, 1995; Kieran, 2002). However, this correlation does not show that premarital cohabitation causes increased risk of divorce. Individuals who choose to cohabit have an overrepresentation of certain personal characteristics that make them more likely to have relationship problems (Clarksburg, Stolzenberg, & Wake, 1995). Cohabitation is most common among people who are young (under age 25), have been previously married, have children from a past relationship, are poor or socially disadvantaged, or who have some level of psychological disorder, all of which predict increased risk of divorce (de Vaus et al., 2003b). Many of these characteristics compromise long-term relationship commitment. For example, in the United States, studies show that many parents forming a stepfamily express concern about whether their children will get on with a new partner, and whether the new partner will parent their children in a manner acceptable to them (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; White & Booth, 1985). When one statistically controls for the differences between people who choose to cohabit or not cohabit, then the claimed negative effects of premarital cohabitation on marrying couples' risk for divorce are close to zero (Hewitt & de Vaus, 2009).

Cohabitation is much more widely accepted in most Western countries now than it was a generation ago (de Vaus, Qu, & Weston, 2003a). As the extent of social deviance associated with cohabitation has declined, the magnitude of any effect of premarital cohabitation on divorce rates has declined. After controlling for the effects of the individual characteristics of partners who choose to cohabit, there is no negative effect of premarital cohabitation on separation in cohorts of couples married after the early 1990s (Hewitt & de Vaus, 2009), at least in countries where premarital cohabitation is widely practiced (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006).

In the United States there have been repeated claims (e.g., Why Marriage Matters, 2007) that premarital cohabitation is associated with increased risk for divorce in the United States. However, U.S. couples who expect to marry their partner when they start living together have similar relationships, and no higher risk of divorce, than couples who only begin living together after they get married (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Thus, in the United States low long-term commitment to the relationship when cohabiting, rather than cohabiting per se, is associated with poor relationship outcomes.

In summary, in contemporary Western cultures cohabitation is of two general forms: committed couples, who probably are planning to marry; and less committed couples, who often are young, forming stepfamilies, or socially

disadvantaged. These less committed couples sometimes decide to marry, but often separate. Cohabiting couples who do marry seem to suffer no ill effects from premarital cohabitation. Whatever the moral stance one might take, social science evidence suggests that cohabitation is probably unrelated to relationship outcomes when cohabitation occurs within a relationship of strong commitment. However, marriage remains the most common way that strong relationship commitment is expressed in most contemporary Western cultures (Qu, 2003).

Declining Thresholds for Initiating Separation and Divorce

Social change has modified the determinants of divorce. As noted earlier, prior to the move to no-fault divorces, legal dissolution of a marriage required establishment of specific negative behaviors by one spouse, the most common of which were adultery or violence. The majority of marriages that ended in divorce in that era had severe problems, though some divorces are known to have been obtained by one or both spouses falsely claiming the required conditions (e.g., adultery) existed to allow divorce (van Poppel & de Beer, 1993).

The high threshold to initiate divorce in earlier eras reflected social attitudes that now have changed. In the 1960s the majority of adults in the United States and Australia endorsed the view that divorce should only occur when the marriage had severe problems (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1997; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). However, by the late 1990s the majority of adults in the United States (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), most countries of Western Europe (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006), and Australia (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1997), endorsed the view that divorce is acceptable if the partners no longer wish to remain together. Relative to the 1960s, in the early 2000s more people describe psychological motives ("I felt we had grown apart," "We were not communicating") as the reasons for their divorce (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006), rather than severe conflict, violence, or adultery. Both cross-sectional (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006) and longitudinal studies (Amato & Rogers, 1997) show that severe marital problems like violence or adultery now predict the occurrence of only a minority of divorces. Separation is often the outcome for relationships that initially have only mild problems (Amato & Rogers, 1997), and relationships that were once highly satisfying (Johnson & Booth, 1998). In other words, the threshold for marital dissolution has declined.

Women are more likely to initiate divorce than men (Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995). Women report more marital dissatisfaction, and exhibit more severe psychological adjustment problems, than men prior to the separation (Bloom

& Caldwell, 1981; Diedrick, 1991; Riessman & Gerstel, 1985). Moreover, women's relationship dissatisfaction is a stronger predictor of divorce than men's dissatisfaction (Amato & Rogers, 1997). The decline in the threshold for initiating divorce is particularly noticeable for women.

Separation does not have the benefits expected by many people contemplating leaving an unhappy relationship. It is true that people leaving marriages with severe problems benefit. For example, Aseltine and Kessler (1993) showed that among respondents who were experiencing severe marital conflict or violence, separation was associated with a decrease in depression. However, as noted earlier, most people who separate are not leaving a violent or high-conflict relationship. Almost all people who separate from a committed relationship report substantial distress, and significant difficulties in adjustment, at least initially (Sweeper & Halford, 2006). It is noteworthy that the level of adjustment difficulties seems similar in people recently separated from marrying and cohabiting relationships. While for most people these adjustment difficulties abate with time, problems sharing parenting responsibilities with a former partner are very common and often chronic sources of stress (Sweeper & Halford, 2006).

Many people who leave a marriage and form a new relationship do report a better relationship the second time around (Johnson & Booth, 1998). However, at least some of the negative behaviors partners exhibit in a first distressed marriage, they carry over into their second marriage (Johnson & Booth, 1998; Prado & Markman, 1998). If there are children from the first marriage, then the challenges of the next relationship are substantial. Stepfamilies have particularly high rates of couple relationship distress and separation (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 2000).

In contrast to the option of leaving a distressed relationship, many couples find they can enhance a troubled marriage. High proportions of couples who report marital dissatisfaction at one time, but persist with their relationship, report that their relationship subsequently improves (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). This is not to say that people should be forced to stay in relationships they find unsatisfactory. However, CRE can usefully highlight that separation often does not produce the desired benefits, at least in the case of people leaving relationships without severe problems. In other words, working on a distressed relationship often can be a useful option.

In summary, couple relationships historically were social and economic marriages arranged by extended families. In Western cultures couple relationships have evolved to be love-based arrangements between partners, which most often begin with cohabitation that sometimes leads to marriage. In the past marriages were almost universally lifelong, and divorce was rare and only available if serious problems were evident. Now in Western countries breakup of couple relationships is more common and determined to a large

extent by the degree to which the relationship is mutually satisfying to the partners. Given the centrality of relationship satisfaction to the fate of couple relationships, it is important to understand the influences on couple relationship satisfaction.

AN ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF THE INFLUENCES ON COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Relationship satisfaction in couples is almost universally high at the time of marriage (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Glenn, 1998). Couples also have generally positive expectations of their relationship, and despite the well-known statistics about high divorce rates, see themselves as highly likely to be married to their partner for life (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996). However, the average relationship satisfaction decreases markedly across the early years of marriage (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Glenn, 1998); about 3–4% of couples separate each year in the first 10 years of marriage (Glenn, 1998). There is now a large research base investigating the variables that predict couples' future relationship outcomes (i.e., relationship satisfaction and separation; Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Holman, 2001).
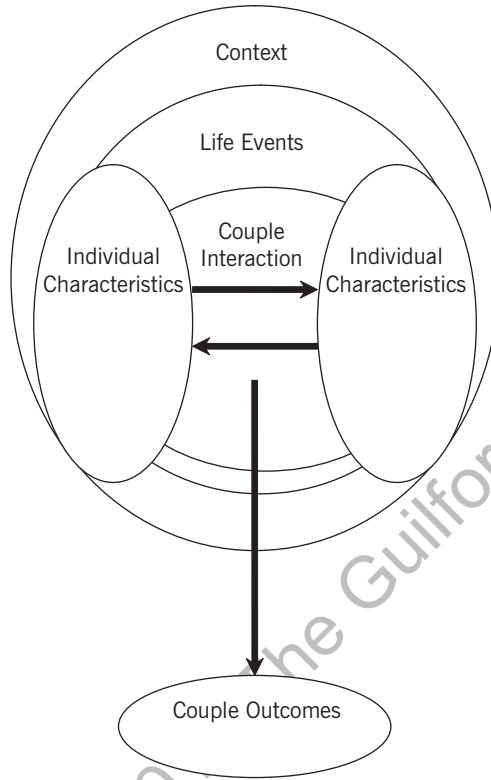
The variables that predict couple relationship outcomes fall into four broad categories (Halford, 2001), which can be integrated into the ecological model depicted in Figure 1.2.

1. At the outermost level of influence are sociocultural variables, which provide the context in which relationships occur. The previous section of this chapter outlined a range of socioeconomic, legal, and cultural developments that have changed the nature of marriage. There also are contextual variables that operate at a local level that differentially influence couples within a given culture. For example, positive support of the couple relationship by family and friends predicts sustained high relationship satisfaction (Larson & Holman, 1994).

2. Life events include major life events (e.g., birth of a child, a change of job) and daily uplifts and hassles (e.g., being praised by the boss, getting caught in traffic, an argument with a coworker). Stressful life events and daily hassles each predict deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Story & Bradbury, 2004). As depicted in the diagram, some life events are shared by the couple; other life events are experienced specifically by one partner.

3. Individual characteristics are relatively stable individual differences that partners bring to the relationship, such as negative family-of-origin experiences, low partner education, psychological disorder, and certain person-

FIGURE 1.2. An ecological model of influences on couple relationships.

ality variables, each of which predict deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Holman, 2001).

4. Finally, couple interaction includes the partners' behaviors, thoughts, and feelings during interaction. For example, positive couple communication and shared realistic relationship expectations predict sustained relationship satisfaction and stability (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Holman, 2001).

Context

Couple relationships occur within a cultural context that defines how couple relationships are supposed to be. The earlier sections of this chapter high-lighted some general assumptions about relationships shared across Western cultures. There also are important variations both within and between those cultures. For example, German couples without relationship problems engage

in similar levels of verbal negativity as Australian distressed couples (Halford, Hahlweg, & Dunne, 1990), suggesting that greater levels of negativity are more acceptable in the German cultural context than in Australia. Partners who differ in their ethnic, racial, or cultural background often differ in their expectations and beliefs about relationships (Jones & Chao, 1997). This diversity in partner assumptions and beliefs can be a source of great strength for a relationship when the partners are able to draw on the wisdom and strengths of different cultural traditions. At the same time, substantial differences in expectations can be a significant source of conflict between the partners (Jones & Chao, 1997). Marriages in which partners have very different cultural backgrounds break down at somewhat higher rates than other marriages (Bitrchnell & Kennard, 1984; Kurdek, 1993).

A related issue is the relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction. Research suggests that when both partners attend religious services regularly they have a somewhat lower risk for marital dissolution and report higher marital satisfaction (Call & Heaton, 1997; Heaton & Pratt, 1990; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). Taken with the research presented above on the effects of cultural similarity, it seems that the association between shared religiosity and couple relationship satisfaction can be partly attributed to the partners sharing core values and beliefs. In addition, since almost all religions emphasize and support the value of marriage, it is likely that religious couples both endorse such values and receive support from their community for their marriage (Mahoney et al., 2001).

In Western countries, poverty and social disadvantage are associated with a low probability of getting married (Haskins & Sawhill, 2003; McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997). Many young, unemployed, poor people see marriage as requiring being financially stable and view such financial stability and marriage as personally unattainable (Edin & Kefelas, 2005; McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997). Yet, ironically, getting married is associated with increased likelihood of escaping poverty (Haskins & Sawhill, 2003). Some social policy analysts recommend CRE as a poverty reduction strategy by developing in the disadvantaged skills and knowledge that enable marriage (Haskins & Sawhill, 2003). However, chronic social disadvantage is associated with high risk for divorce in married couples (Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002), and in particular, economic strain from unemployment predicts deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996). It seems likely that there is a reciprocal influence between social disadvantage and the probability of staying happily married.

Work provides the resources that allow people to perceive marriage as a reasonable aspiration (Haskins & Sawhill, 2003), and often provides extra stimulation and ideas to enrich the relationship (Thompson, 1997). However, stressful jobs can impact negatively on couple relationships. In particu-

lar, stress experienced at work is associated with increased negative affect in marital interactions (Krokoff, Gottman, & Roy, 1988). Chronic stress, such as social disadvantage, often exacerbates negative responses to work stress, which in turn can have a negative impact upon marital interaction and satisfaction (Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005).

There are consistent findings that approval of one's spouse and relationship by friends and extended family predicts high couple relationship satisfaction and stability (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Kurdek, 1991a, 1991b). At the same time, excessive intrusion by family on selection of dating partners and subsequent mate selection predicts relationship problems (Benson, Larson, Wilson, & Demo, 1993). In summary, young adults are wise to heed concerns about a new partner expressed by close family or friends, and family are wise to express real concerns to their loved one but to watch that they are not being intrusive in the couple's relationship,

Life Events

"Life events" refer to developmental transitions and acute circumstances that impinge upon a couple or individual partners. Relationship problems have been argued to be more likely to develop during periods of high rates of change and stress (Karney et al., 2005), and high rates of stressful life events predict deteriorating couple relationship satisfaction (Neff & Karney, 2004; Story & Bradbury, 2004). For example, declines in couple relationship satisfaction are often associated with the transition to parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Feeney, Hohaus, Noller, & Alexander, 2001; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000), loss of work (Gore, 1978), and increased stress at work (O'Driscoll, Brough, & Kalliath, 2006).

There are a variety of mechanisms by which life events impact upon couple relationships. Some life events modify the time available for positive couple activities. For example, becoming parents adds about 40 hours of work per week to a household, and modifies the social activities couples can engage in, which typically is associated with decreases in quality time shared just with the partner (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Feeney et al., 2001). Similarly, a work promotion often increases work responsibilities and can reduce couple time (O'Driscoll et al., 2006). Life events can also influence partners' moods, and this can spill over into couple interactions. For example, fatigue from coping with the demands of infant care or high stress at work are both associated with more negative affect in marital interactions (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Halford, Gravestock, Lowe, & Scheldt, 1992).

Stressful life events do not have a uniform effect on couples. For example, while most couples report some deterioration in relationship satisfaction at

the transition to parenthood, some couples report that the transition to parenthood enhances relationship satisfaction (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Shapiro et al., 2000). Couples with more positive couple communication and effective mutual support and problem solving are believed to be more resilient to the negative effects of stressful life events (Markman, Halford, & Cordova, 1997; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). When couples use these skills effectively, then they develop a shared way of understanding and responding to stressful events, which Bodenmann and colleagues describe as "dyadic coping" (Bodenmann & Cina, 2006). If partners use dyadic coping through stressful events, this predicts sustained or even enhanced relationship satisfaction (Bodenmann & Cina, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2000). For example, mutual support and dyadic coping through severe illness in one partner is reported by many couples to bring them closer together (Halford, Scott, & Smythe, 2000).

Individual Characteristics

"Individual characteristics" refer to stable historical, personal, and experiential factors that each partner brings to a relationship. Many normal personality variations do not predict relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001). However, neuroticism is one personality trait that consistently predicts relationship satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). *Neuroticism* is the extent to which an individual experiences and has difficulty managing negative feelings like depression and anxiety (Costa & McCrae, 1980).

A second personality trait that is associated with low couple relationship satisfaction is an insecure attachment style (Collins & Read, 1990; Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Feeney, 1994; Kobak & Hazan, 1991). *Insecure adult attachment* is the extent to which an individual feels anxious about, or tends to avoid, emotional closeness in intimate relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Insecure attachment is alleged to develop primarily in childhood through early experiences of caregiving by parents (Bowlby, 1973). Sensitive and responsive parenting leads a child to develop secure attachment, which reflects positive expectations about the behavior of others in close relationships (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Inconsistent, harsh, or unresponsive parenting leads to insecure attachment, which involves either high anxiety that others will abandon you, and/or discomfort with emotional closeness (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In essence, Bowlby (1973) argued that attachment style serves as a foundation for the interpretation of adult relationship experiences, which shape the individual's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to others (Collins & Read, 1994).

While attachment style is seen as being developed in childhood, it also can be modified by adult relationship experiences (Bowlby, 1973). Experienc-

ing a mutually satisfying relationship predicts increasing attachment security in the partners, particularly a reduction in anxiety over abandonment (Davila, Burge, & Hammen, 1997; Davila, Karney, & Bradbury, 1999). However, significant childhood trauma can establish relatively stable insecure attachment that can impact on couple relationships. For example, children who are maltreated or sexually abused by family members show sustained attachment insecurity (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998), and insecure attachment predicts increased risk of relationship distress, violence, and divorce in adulthood (Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994; Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004; Kesner & McKenry, 1998; Pistole & Tarrant, 1993).

Aside from normal personality variations, a major risk for relationship distress is if one or both partners suffer from psychological disorder. High rates of relationship problems consistently have been reported in populations with severe psychological disorder (Halford, 1995). The most prevalent psychological disorders associated with relationship problems are depression, alcohol abuse, and some anxiety disorders, especially panic disorder and general anxiety disorder (Emmelkamp, De Haan, & Hoogduin, 1990; Halford et al., 1999; Halford & Osgarty, 1993; Whisman & Uebelacker, 2003). Relationship problems and individual psychological disorder seem to exacerbate each other (Halford et al., 1999; Whisman & Uebelacker, 2003). For example, alcohol abuse at the time of marriage predicts deteriorating marital satisfaction (Leonard & Roberts, 1998), while the onset of alcohol abuse is predicted by low marital satisfaction (Whisman, Uebelacker, & Bruce, 2006). Similarly, depressive symptoms and marital distress reciprocally predict each other (Davila, Karney, Hall, & Bradbury, 2003). In addition, certain personal vulnerabilities may dispose people to both psychological disorders and relationship problems. For example, deficits in interpersonal communication and negative affect regulation are risk factors that predict the onset of both alcohol abuse (Block, Block, & Keyes, 1988) and relationship problems (Arellano & Markman, 1995; Clements, Cordova, Markman, & Laurenceau, 1997; Lindahl & Markman, 1990; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993).

Negative experiences in the family of origin predict low relationship satisfaction. In the family of origin, having parents who divorced (de Graaf, 1991; Glenn & Kramer, 1987; Glenn & Shelton, 1983; Pope & Mueller, 1976), or who were violent toward each other (e.g., Burgess, Hartman, & McCormack, 1987; Mihalic & Elliot, 1997; Widom, 1989) predicts low couple relationship satisfaction and increased risk of separation. In contrast, a positive lifelong marriage between one's parents is associated with more positive expectations of marriage (Black & Sprenkle, 1991; Gibardi & Rosen, 1991), and with more positive communication and conflict management in couples prior to marriage (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000; Sanders, Halford, & Behrens,

1999). Positive expectations and communication are likely learned from parents' relationships and subsequently mediate positive adult relationships of the offspring. Consistent with this interpretation, Story, Karney, Lawrence, and Bradbury (2004) found that negative communication mediated an association between parental conflict and divorce with the couple's own relationship distress and divorce.

Each partner's and the couple's relationship history are associated with relationship outcomes. Individuals who have had a cohabiting relationship with someone other than their current spouse, or who have had large numbers of sexual partners prior to marriage, are at higher risk for deteriorating relationship satisfaction than people without those histories (Holman, 2001; Teachman, 2003). The reason for this effect is not entirely clear, but might be related to having a low threshold of commitment to enter cohabiting relationships, and being more willing to end those low-commitment relationships if difficulties arise. Couples who know each other for at least 12 months before marriage are more likely to sustain high relationship satisfaction than couples who marry quickly (Birchnell & Kennard, 1984; Grover, Russell, Schumm, & Paff-Bergen, 1985; Kurdek, 1991b, 1993). This effect of time is likely attributable to the extended dating period allowing partners to select effectively for compatibility, and for them to develop shared and realistic relationship expectations.

Couple Interaction

"Couple interaction" refers to how couples think, feel, and act when they are together. Almost all couples planning marriage report relationship satisfaction consistent with relationship happiness, but couples reporting premarital relationship satisfaction toward the lower end of the happy range are more likely to experience later relationship distress and divorce (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Holman, 2001; Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). Couples who commence marriage only moderately happy seem to struggle to adapt in the early years of marriage. Once some relationship dissatisfaction is established early in the marriage, it tends to persist (Johnson & Booth, 1998). Couples with modest initial relationship satisfaction are at high risk to separate in the first few years of marriage (Holman, 2001; Huston et al., 2001).

Holding realistic and shared relationship expectations is important to couple relationship outcomes. In particular, realistic and shared expectations about the importance of communication, appropriate methods of conflict resolution, the balance of couple versus individual time, and gender roles is cross-sectionally correlated with (Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982) and predicts future relationship satisfaction

(Holman, 2001; Larsen & Olson, 1989; Olson & Fowers, 1986; Williams & Jurich, 1995). In contrast, unrealistically positive expectations (e.g., "We will never disagree") predict deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Larsen & Olson, 1989; Olson & Fowers, 1986). In addition, premarital reports of disagreements about core relationship expectations and values predict elevated risk for divorce (Clements et al., 2004; Holman, 2001).

Shared and realistic relationship expectations are not just relevant to couples early in marriage: relationship expectations impact on the couple when they experience major life transitions. Couples becoming parents who disagree about how they should manage household and parenting responsibilities are at high risk for relationship distress after they become parents (Feeney et al., 2001; O'Brien & Peyton, 2002). For example, if a woman expects her partner to share these responsibilities equally, and the man does not meet these expectations, this predicts deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Feeney et al., 2001). Similarly, shared and realistic expectations about roles and activities after retirement predict marital satisfaction in older couples retiring from paid employment (Higginbottom, Barling, & Kelloway, 1993).

Another key attribute of couple interaction is the extent to which partners work to sustain and strengthen their relationship, which my colleagues and I refer to as "relationship self-regulation." The notion of self-regulation has a long history in psychology, and there have been several comprehensive formulations of the role of self-generated events in the regulation of behavior (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Karoly, 1993). Across these conceptualizations, there is a central assumption that individuals can regulate their own behavior. That is, people do things at one time, with the intent that this influences their later behavior. For example, if you check the weather forecast and learn that it is likely to rain today, you might put your umbrella by the front door to remind you to take it when you leave the house.

Applying self-regulation theory to couple relationships, Halford, Sanders, and Behrens (1994) proposed that couple relationship self-regulation (RSR) consisted of appraisal, goal setting, and change implementation. *Appraisal* involves being able to describe one's own current relationship behaviors and the major influences on those behaviors in a manner that facilitates relationship enhancement. *Goal setting* involves defining specific and actionable goals for change in one's own behavior, based on one's appraisal of relationship functioning. *Change implementation* involves taking active steps to achieve relationship goals. The RSR process is iterative and cycles back to appraisal of the extent to which desired behavior changes were achieved, and whether this produced the desired relationship changes. For example, consider a couple relocating for work. High RSR would involve appraising current behavior and the likely impact of the relocation on the relationship (e.g., "We will both be busy in new jobs, and missing family and friends. Under pressure I

have tended to focus on work and neglect my partner and after the move she might be feeling isolated"); goal setting (e.g., "I want to give this move the best chance of working for both of us. I need to be supportive and focused on us as well as the new job"); and implementing self-change to help sustain the relationship satisfaction of both partners (e.g., "I will take one night every week and every second weekend for couple time, and we will talk each week about how the move is working for each of us").

In addition to these RSR competencies, conceptualizations of self-regulation often refer to persistence in self-change efforts. For example, Bandura (2001), in a comprehensive review of self-regulation, documents the substantial variation in individuals' persistence in the use of self-control strategies in the face of initial adversity. In the context of couple relationships, such persistence might be important. Thus, in our example of the relocating couple, adaptation to a new city is likely to require continuing, persistent attention to the couple relationship.

RSR is associated with relationship satisfaction in recently married and long-married couples (Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Kimlin, & Halford, 2005), and predicts later relationship satisfaction (Halford, Lizzio, Wilson, & Occhipinti, 2007). In particular, the extent to which each partner individually reflects upon the relationship, and takes personal responsibility to enhance the relationship, predicts sustained relationship satisfaction (Halford et al., 2007). In contrast, partners who attribute any relationship difficulties to stable characteristics of the spouse are unlikely to take responsibility for the relationship or make an effort to enhance the relationship (Halford et al., 2007). A negative pattern of attributing relationship difficulties to the behavior of the partner predicts deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Fincham, Bradbury, Arias, Byrne, & Karney, 1997; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000).

Another aspect of the couple relationship is the way the partners think about their relationship. Gottman and colleagues assess what they call "couple bond" by asking couples to conjointly describe their relationship history (Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000; Shapiro et al., 2000). Couple bond is seen as reflecting whether the partners have strong relationship commitment, and see their lives as a shared experience with their spouse. A strong couple bond is associated with the partners describing their relationship history with a shared view of events as a common experience (labeled as a sense of "we-ness"), positive expressions of affection and valuing of the spouse, and descriptions of jointly working to overcome adversity (labeled as "glorifying the struggle"). A strong couple bond predicts sustained relationship satisfaction in newlywed couples (Carrere et al., 2000) and in couples expecting their first baby (Shapiro et al., 2000).

The concept of dyadic coping is a similar idea to the couple bond. As described previously, dyadic coping predicts sustained high relationship sat-

isfaction when couples are confronted by a major life stress, such as one of them having a serious or potentially life-threatening illness. Furthermore, couples who describe such threats as a shared experience requiring dyadic coping discuss their emotional responses to the threat together, and who provide mutual support, show substantially better individual adjustment to the stress (Bodenmann, 2005; Coyne & Smith, 1991, 1994; Lichtman, Taylor, & Wood, 1988; Scott, Halford, & Ward, 2004). Thus, a common theme in the couple bond and dyadic coping concepts is that couples who see themselves as a team and their lives as a shared journey tend to sustain high relationship satisfaction.

Couple Communication

Couple communication has been the most extensively studied aspect of couple interaction, with the majority of research focusing on how couples communicate when discussing topics that are a source of disagreement between the partners. As couple communication is often the major focus of most evidence-based relationship education programs (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003), the research on couple communication as an influence on couple relationships is examined carefully in the section that follows.

Positive communication when discussing conflict topics is associated with relationship satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Specifically, high relationship satisfaction is associated with partners listening respectfully to each other; asking questions to clarify meaning; speaking clearly, positively, and succinctly about problems; and showing positive feelings. On the other hand, high rates of criticism, disagreement, interrupting each other, sarcasm, and negative feelings predict deteriorating relationship satisfaction, and this deterioration is often evident across the early years of marriage (Clements et al., 1997; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Markman, 1981; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998).

A somewhat different approach to examining the association of couple communication with couple relationship satisfaction is to focus on patterns of couple communication. Demand–withdraw is the most widely researched communication pattern. *Demanding* involves one partner seeking to discuss an issue in the relationship, often by stating unhappiness or criticism of the partner. *Withdrawal* from conversation of that topic usually involves changing the topic, not responding to the partner, or physically leaving the discussion. The occurrence of demand–withdraw is reliably associated with low and deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Caughlin & Houston, 2002; Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Kurdek, 1995). Overall it

is more common for women to demand and men to withdraw, than vice versa (Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Christensen & Shenk, 1991). However, if men are seeking change from their female partners, then men become more demanding and women tend to withdraw more (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993).

There are important limitations to the research on couple communication and relationship satisfaction. While most studies find an association of relationship satisfaction with communication, the specific associations vary between studies, with satisfaction being correlated with different specific aspects of couple communication (Heyman, 2001). For example, deteriorating newlywed relationship satisfaction is predicted by low rates of positive verbal communication during conflict discussions in some studies (Johnson et al., 2005), but not others (Kiecolt-Glaser, Bane, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2003; Markman, 1981). High rates of negative verbal communication during conflict predict deteriorating relationship satisfaction (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003; Markman, 1981), though the effects of negative communication might not be evident when there is coexisting positive affect (Johnson et al., 2005). High negative affect is a reliable predictor of deteriorating relationship satisfaction, though it is variously suggested that it is the occurrence of specific affects (e.g., contempt, disgust) or the ratio of the rates of positive and negative affect that is crucial (Gottman, 1994; Gottman et al., 1998). Even with the relatively robust finding that demand–withdraw predicts deteriorating relationship satisfaction, this effect is only evident for women's but not men's relationship satisfaction in some studies (e.g., Heavey et al., 1995), and not evident at all if the partners also express high levels of positive affect (Caughlin & Huston, 2002).

The inconsistent observed association of relationship satisfaction with specific communication behaviors and patterns is likely due, at least partially, to the methodological limitations of studies. Most studies have modest sample sizes, assess numerous indices of communication, and typically only a few of these indices predicted satisfaction; this raises significant concerns about the power of studies to detect modest magnitude associations and the reliability of any detected associations (Heyman, 2001). Furthermore, differences in the systems used to code couple communication, and variations in methods of consolidating individual codes into summary codes, make it difficult to determine the consistency of findings (Heyman, 2001). Finally, except for a small number of recent studies, most longitudinal research predicting marital satisfaction from couple communication assessed satisfaction at only two time points (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998). This approach does not allow modeling of the trajectory of change, which can generate unreliability in findings (Bradbury et al., 1998). Despite the many studies assessing couple communication and satisfaction, the only clear, well-replicated findings are

that overall negativity and withdrawal each predicts deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Heyman, 2001).

Aside from methodological issues, inconsistent findings on the communication–satisfaction association probably reflect the fact that the specific communication behaviors that help sustain relationship satisfaction vary between couples. For example, the exact communication behaviors associated with relationship satisfaction vary by culture (Halford et al., 1990), and by which partner nominated the topic being discussed (Johnson et al., 2005). Furthermore, deficits in couple communication of social support predict deteriorating relationship satisfaction only in couples that experience high rates of stressful life events (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Thus, a range of variables moderates the association of particular aspects of communication with relationship satisfaction.

It is noteworthy that in at least some studies the communication observed in engaged couples does not correlate with their reported relationship satisfaction at the time (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Sanders et al., 1999). It seems that communication difficulties often do not stop couples from falling in love or forming committed relationships, but sustaining relationship satisfaction is more likely when there is good communication (Markman, 1981; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). For couples who have been married for some time, these same communication assets predict sustained relationship satisfaction and decreased risk of relationship breakup (Clements et al., 1997; Gottman, 1993, 1994; Notarius & Markman, 1993).

Emotion

The expression of negative emotion is central to distressed couple interaction. Specifically, the expression of anger, contempt, or disgust by one partner toward the other predicts low and deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Gottman et al., 1998). Greenberg and Goldman (2008) propose that these negative emotions are secondary emotions that result from often unexpressed primary emotions, such as anxiety over possible abandonment, a sense of inadequacy, shame, or fear. For example, Greenberg and Goldman propose that someone who worries that his or her partner might leave him or her is often demanding of the other person during arguments, expressing anger and dissatisfaction about the relationship. They also propose that withdrawal is often associated with lack of emotional expression, or disregard for the other demanding partner, and that these secondary emotions are underpinned by primary emotions of a sense of inadequacy or resentment.

In the context of couple therapy, Greenberg and Goldman (2008) seek to facilitate access to the unexpressed primary emotions, arguing that this helps resolve relationship distress. In a similar vein in CRE, Markman and

colleagues (2007) suggest that assisting couples to recognize that there are often deeper unexpressed feelings that can lead to destructive conflict is useful in helping couples sustain high relationship satisfaction.

Violence

National representative surveys across many countries in the world show that interpersonal violence between partners in couple relationships is common (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004). For example, in the United States about 15–20% of married and cohabiting couples report at least one act of physical violence in the past year (e.g., Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 1998; Straus & Gelles, 1990). Furthermore, numerous United States–based studies suggest that aggression and violence are particularly common for young, recently married couples (Leonard & Senchak, 1996; O'Leary et al., 1989). Verbal aggression early in marriage predicts later occurrence of physical violence (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; Schumacher & Leonard, 2005). Once it occurs in early marriage, physical violence is often a persistent problem recurring over a number of years (O'Leary et al., 1989), particularly if the initial level of violence is frequent or severe (Quigley & Leonard, 1996). Both verbal aggression and physical violence predict deteriorating relationship satisfaction, and physical aggression predicts risk for marital separation across the early years of marriage (Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Rogge & Bradbury, 1999; Schumacher & Leonard, 2005).

There are widely differing levels of violence in couple relationships, and there is increasing evidence that at least two distinctive types of violence exist that can be classified on the basis of the severity of male violence (Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004). Severe violence is characterized by frequent, high-severity, male-to-female violence such as beating up of the partner; is associated with injury, psychological domination, and intimidation of the female partner; and male perpetrators of this severe abuse show distinctive characteristics such as frequent substance abuse and other antisocial behaviors (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000; Johnson, 1995). Less severe violence is characterized by infrequent, low-level violence (most commonly, pushing, slapping, and shoving); most often involves both male-to-female and female-to-male violence; and males in this category do not show the same psychological characteristics seen in severely violent men (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000). Longitudinal research suggests that less severe couple violence is unlikely to escalate to severe violence (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2003). Although less severe couple violence is not associated with the same level of risk of injury for women as severe violence, less severe violence is much more prevalent (Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004).

Interaction of Factors in the Ecological Model

The different components of the ecological model interact to influence couple relationship outcomes. For example, consider the following two couples who attended couple relationship education.

> Terri and Dirk are both successful professionals in their early 30s. They were introduced to each other by mutual friends through their local church, have been dating for 18 months, and recently decided to get married. Each of them has had previous long-term dating relationships, but they state that their relationship feels like "this is the one." Terri and Dirk moved in together 3 months ago, and are busy making plans for their wedding. Both Dirk and Terri's parents are delighted the two of them have decided to make a life together.

> Mia is a 34-year-old divorced woman who met Tony, who is 36 years of age, at the bank where they both worked. They started dating 7 months ago and have been living together for 4 months. Tony has never been married, and lived with his divorced mother before moving into Mia's house. Mia's son, Ben, is 9 and does not get on that well with Tony. Mia and Tony report they love each other very much, but disagree on how to parent Ben, and what to expect of Tony and Ben's relationship. They also disagree about whether to get married. Mia was let go from the bank following an economic downturn a month ago and her savings are being rapidly depleted. Tony wants to marry Mia, stating she is his "soulmate." Mia is wary about marrying again, reporting that her first marriage was violent and unhappy. Mia also is struggling with her mother's disapproval of the relationship with Tony. Mia's mother is Chinese and had an unhappy marriage that ended in divorce from Mia's father, who was German. Mia's mother feels Mia should only marry someone from her own Chinese culture.

A shared characteristic of the relationships of Dirk with Terri and Mia with Tony is that they are in the early stages of a committed relationship. The early stages of a committed relationship are good times for CRE. Couples typically have high relationship satisfaction as both these couples report, and are highly motivated to strengthen their relationship. At the same time couples face significant challenges in these early years. Most couples find that initial overwhelming attraction to their partner moderates, new relationship roles and routines need to be developed, and means of negotiating conflict need to evolve (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986; Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). Both these couples have these challenges before them.

The two case examples also illustrate how couples have diverse strengths and challenges in their relationship. Dirk and Terri have considerable financial resources they bring to the relationship, strong support from extended family

for their relationship, and come from families of origin in which the parents have sustained mutually satisfying marriages. In contrast, both Tony and Mia have experienced parental divorce and Mia has herself been divorced. They collectively have had little exposure to successful marriages. Mia is currently unemployed, and their finances are stretched. The couple knew each other for a relatively brief period before beginning to cohabit, and they are unresolved about whether to get married. Mia and Tony have the challenge of developing their relationship together while Mia must also attend to the responsibilities of caring for her son, Ben. Like many partners in stepfamilies, they struggle with how the stepparent should be involved with child care. They also have different cultures of origin and a lack of family support for their relationship.

Given this complex of differences between couples, how best does one focus couple relationship education? The research evidence is clear that the strongest predictors of couple relationship satisfaction from within the ecological model are at the level of couple interaction (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Halford, 2001; Holman, 2001). Furthermore, the predictors of couple relationship satisfaction at other levels operate through couple interaction. For example, it is likely that being raised by happily married parents exposed both Terri and Dirk to effective models of communication and conflict management. The commitment in Dirk's and Terri's parents' respective marriages might well also be reflected in the effort each of the fathers and mothers put into their marriage. Often parents will model the importance of relationship self-regulation by reflecting on the relationship and doing small but important behaviors like a spouse supporting the other in times of stress, active planning to have quality time together, and speaking warmly to and about each other. In contrast, Mia and Tony each were raised by their mothers, and did not get exposure to models of effective couple communication or relationship self-regulation skills. Thus, while a range of factors at different levels of the ecological model influences sustaining a mutually satisfying and stable relationship, often the patterns of couple interaction seem the strongest influences. And the good news is that healthy patterns of couple interaction can be learned relatively easily when couples are in currently satisfying relationships.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH ON COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS FOR EDUCATION

There are a number of important implications of the research evidence summarized within the ecological model of couple relationships for the practice of CRE. First, CRE has a crucial role to play in helping couples to sustain a mutually satisfying and stable relationship. Couple interaction is the most powerful predictor of couple relationship outcomes, and CRE can assist couples to develop crucial knowledge, attitudes, and skills that promote positive

couple interaction. (The evidence showing the effects of CRE is reviewed in Chapter 2.)

Assessing Couples to Ensure Relationship Education Is Appropriate

At least some couples forming relationships have significant personal problems that can impact upon their relationship. For example, hazardous drinking, other substance abuse, depression, and major psychiatric disorder are all substantial risk factors for future relationship distress and instability (Whisman & Uebelacker, 2003). Given the frequency of these problems, it is advisable to do some assessment of couples to identify whether psychological disorder presents a risk for the couple. Chapter 3 describes how to do such an assessment, and to how to use such an assessment to decide if CRE is appropriate to address a particular couple's needs.

To illustrate the need for assessment for suitability of CRE, consider the case of Hian and Zac, who have been cohabiting for 12 months and are planning to get married. Zac has a history of bipolar disorder. Psychoeducation for the couple could improve each partner's understanding of the nature of bipolar disorder, the role of medication and psychological treatments in managing the disorder, and how they can work together to manage the disorder (Birchwood, 1998). Such education has been shown to reduce stress in the partner of someone with bipolar disorder, reduce rates of relapse in the patient, and enhance patient functioning (Miklowitz, George, Richards, Simoneau, & Suddath, 2003; Rea et al., 2003). However, provision of such education might be beyond the scope of competence of many people who provide CRE. This is not to say that CRE would be irrelevant to couples like Hian and Zac, but that other forms of help might be needed.

Focusing Limited Education Resources on Couples Most Likely to Benefit

A third implication of the ecological model is that some couples have relatively low risk for developing couple relationship problems. In most Western countries 50% or more of couples who marry remain together for the rest of their lives (United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2003); the vast majority of these couples report being satisfied in their relationship at least most of the time, and most have not received CRE (Halford & Simons, 2005). Thus, it is clear that considerable numbers of couples sustain mutually satisfying relationships without CRE.

CRE provided to low-risk couples may make little difference to relationship satisfaction or stability, as many of these couples would have stable, mutually satisfying relationships without any education. From a social policy

perspective, expanding the availability of publicly funded, potentially expensive CRE to all couples might be unwise. In response to concern about divorce rates, many governments are committing substantial funding to marriage education. For example, the U.S. Senate approved an appropriation bill on February 1, 2006, committing an extra U.S. $500 million on CRE. Ensuring that large and increasing sums of money expended on marriage education are deployed cost-effectively is a major social policy challenge.

One approach to making CRE cost-effective is to have an integrated system of education that include steps of increasing intensity of education, with more expensive and intensive education being offered selectively to couples at high risk of future relationship problems (Halford, 2004). This has the advantage for low-risk couples of only giving them as much education as they really need, and only suggesting more time-consuming education when it is likely to be helpful. I elaborate more on this stepped approach in Chapter 3.

Given that CRE is likely to be of particular benefit to high-risk couples, attracting high-risk couples to relationship education is important (Halford, O'Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2006; Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997). Yet, CRE typically is offered to all couples entering committed relationships, irrespective of risk level. This might not matter if high-risk couples self-select to attend relationship education. Unfortunately, there is some evidence that shows high-risk couples are less likely to attend education than low-risk couples (Halford, O'Donnell, et al., 2006; Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997). Specifically, couples who are repartnering, bringing children from prior relationships, and who are less religious are less likely to attend CRE than other couples (Halford, O'Donnell, et al., 2006). These are couples who are at high risk of future relationship problems. Therefore, enhancing the accessibility of CRE to high-risk couples is important. I offer specific suggestions on how to increase accessibility of relationship education, particularly for high-risk couples, in Chapters 2 and 3.

Providing Education at Relevant Times in the Couple's Life

The ecological model makes clear that times of change and stress are associated with risk for relationship deterioration. The vast majority of research on, and implementation of, CRE has focused on providing education when couples are entering marriage (Hunt, Hof, & DeMaria, 1998). Entry to marriage is a good time for relationship education because couples often face significant challenges early in marriage. As noted earlier, almost all partners entering committed couple relationships report high initial relationship satisfaction. However, in Australia and the United States, average relationship satisfaction declines across the first 10 years of marriage, between 10 and 15% of couples separate within the first 3–4 years of marriage (Glenn, 1998;

McDonald, 1995), and 33% of couples divorce within 10 years of marriage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Thus, helping marrying couples to establish effective relationship roles and communication is likely to be beneficial.

CRE also needs to be extended beyond married or marrying couples. As noted previously, in most Western countries a majority of couples choose cohabitation as either a prelude or an alternative to marriage. For these couples the transition to marriage might never happen, or might happen after many years of cohabitation when patterns of couple interaction might be well established. If we consider the example of Tony and Mia, this couple is at high risk for relationship problems, and the welfare of Mia's son, Ben, is dependent upon how their relationship develops. Assisting them as cohabiting couples could help them to decide whether to commit to each other, and to enact their choice as effectively as they can.

In addition to when couples are getting married or first living together, there are a number of other life events that might be associated with receptiveness to CRE. For example, the transition to parenthood, relocation in place of living, and major illness are all associated with increased risk of relationship problems (Gagnon, Hersen, Kabacoff, & van Hasselt, 1999; Shapiro et al., 2000), and couples often are receptive to couple-focused education at these times (Halford, 2004).

The transition to parenthood is an example of a major life change that warrants particular attention as a time for CRE (Cowan & Cowan, 1995). Approximately 85% of first-married couples have children (McDonald, 1995) and becoming parents is uniformly reported to bring a wide range of changes in the partners' relationship with each other (Cowan & Cowan, 1999). In Western countries the vast majority of couples having their first child attend antenatal education; these couples report that they want education about how to work as a couple and manage the relationship changes they expect to come from parenthood (Nolan, 1997). Unfortunately, most existing antenatal education largely ignores the couple relationship (Gagnon & Sandall, 2007).

In many couples, both married and cohabiting, relationship satisfaction progressively deteriorates and leads to contemplation of dissolution of the relationship (Gottman, 1993). In couples with long-standing, severe relationship distress, motivation to change the relationship can be low. Thus, long-term success rates for couple therapy are modest (Halford, 2001; Snyder et al., 2006). Low levels of presenting relationship satisfaction (Whisman & Jacobson, 1990), greater length of time of experience of distress (Johnson & Talitman, 1997; Whisman & Jacobson, 1990), and severe problems in managing conflict (Snyder, Mangrum, & Wills, 1993) are associated with poor response to couple therapy. Thus, presentation for assistance early in the process of satisfaction erosion is likely to enhance prognosis.

Couples with early warning signs of relationship difficulty might be willing to present for brief CRE, even if they would not seek out couple therapy (Larson & Brimhall, 2005). In one quasi-experimental study (Cordova, Warren, & Gee, 2002) and a randomized controlled trial (Cordova et al., 2005), Cordova and colleagues evaluated a "relationship checkup" in which they recruited couples who believed they might be beginning to have difficulty in their relationship. The "checkup" involved systematic assessment of the relationship and motivational interviewing to promote self-directed relationship enhancement. Significant gains in relationship satisfaction after the checkup were maintained for at least 12 months (Cordova et al., 2002, 2005). Thus, brief CRE for mildly distressed couples also holds out some promise.

Focusing the Content of Relationship Education Appropriately

The large number of predictors of couple relationship outcomes usefully can be classified into two categories of static indicators and dynamic factors. Static indicators cannot be changed through intervention. For example, mature age at marriage and positive family-of-origin experiences are static indicators that predict marital stability and sustained relationship satisfaction (Sabitelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). In contrast, dynamic factors are changeable. For example, realistic relationship expectations and effective couple communication predict sustained relationship satisfaction, and these can be developed in relationship education (Halford et al., 2003).

Many static indicators can be measured relatively easily. For example, parental divorce, age, previous marriages, length of time the partners have known each other, cohabitation history, and the presence of stepchildren can be assessed by simple questions. Assessment of these indicators can help determine a couple's risk level for future relationship problems. Moreover, these static indicators often are associated with dynamic factors that are changeable. For example, interparental physical aggression in the family of origin is associated with negative communication and aggression in adult committed relationships (Skuja & Halford, 2004).

Dynamic factors, such as couple communication and relationship expectations, often are more time-consuming to assess than are static risk indicators. For example, observed communication is a reliable predictor of relationship satisfaction, but it requires sophisticated recording equipment and highly trained observers to conduct the assessment. However, some dynamic factors are reliably associated with certain static indicators. For example, parental relationship stability in the family of origin is associated with positive communication in engaged couples (Sanders et al., 1999). Thus, it is possible to evaluate couples on easily assessed indicators like parental stability,

and these protective indicators are markers of likely positive communication. In couples without these protective indicators, promotion of positive communication can be targeted in relationship education. When communication improves in couples who are low in protective indicators (i.e., couples at high risk of relationship problems), this helps couples sustain relationship satisfaction (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001). Thus, the content of CRE should focus on dynamic factors established through research as predictors of couple outcomes.

Tailoring the Content of Education to Address Couple Challenges

Another implication of research on the ecological model of couple relationships for CRE is that each couple has a somewhat different profile of relationship strengths and vulnerabilities. These varying relationship profiles imply that different couples will need to learn different knowledge or skills to enhance their relationship. However, much existing CRE fails to attend to the heterogeneity of couples' relationship profiles. Almost all existing relationship skill training programs have a relatively fixed curriculum (Halford, 2004). Although all programs have multiple components, they all place substantial emphasis on enhancing couple communication and preventing destructive conflict. For example, these elements are suggested to be the most important aspect of PREP and central to its claimed benefits (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). This focus on enhancing communication is based on the research showing that negative communication in newlyweds predicts poor couple outcomes (Heyman, 2001). However, research also shows that differences between newlywed couples' communication predicts differences in future relationship satisfaction and divorce. This prediction can only occur if at least some marrying couples have low levels of negative communication that predict them being able to sustain high relationship satisfaction. As noted previously, there are diverse factors that put couple relationships at risk such as unrealistic expectations, poor communication, destructive conflict, poor individual stress management, hazardous drinking, aggression, and lack of support from family and friends (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Halford et al., 2003). CRE needs to tailor its content to address individual couples' relationship risks.

Recognizing the Limitations of Relationship Education

The ecological model also suggests that CRE has limitations in what it can achieve in strengthening couple relationships. CRE aims to promote the couple's knowledge and skills to enhance their chance of sustaining a mutually

satisfying relationship. In other words, CRE primarily targets change at the level of couple interaction, and to a lesser extent changes in individual characteristics. However, as illustrated in the contrasting relationships of Dirk with Terri and Mia with Tony, the broader context within which the couple relationship exists influences relationship outcomes. Changing these contexts is often beyond the scope of CRE.

Social and economic changes, rather than CRE, might be needed to address important contextual factors. For example, many couple relationships might benefit from the implementation of social policies to ameliorate the negative effects of economic change that produce high unemployment. Looking back to the case of Tony and Mia, Mia might need assistance to get further education and training to enhance her employment prospects. CRE is not a substitute for these services, but CRE might well be a useful part of the overall process of assisting couples like Tony and Mia.

The recognition of the importance of contextual factors, and the limitations of what CRE alone can achieve, has led some people to form "marriage movements." For example, in the United States such marriage movements have sought to strengthen marriage by addressing relevant laws, social policies, and cultural factors that influence couple relationship satisfaction and stability (Birch, Weed, & Olsen, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

There is strong evidence that mutually satisfying marriage conveys considerable benefits to the adult partners and any offspring they have. Sustaining a committed, mutually satisfying relationship is a challenge for many couples, partly as a function of changing social circumstances, and partly as a function of the high expectations many people have of their marriage. A large body of research evidence, which can be summarized into an ecological model, gives us guidance on the influences on couple relationship outcomes. It shows that couple relationship satisfaction and stability is, to a substantial extent, predictable. Our current knowledge does not allow us to predict for any given couple their relationship future, but it does allow us to identify risk factors for future relationship problems. CRE needs to address the dynamic risk factors that predict relationship satisfaction. CRE needs to attract couples at high risk of relationship problems, to offer education at times of change in couples' lives, and to tailor the content of education to address the profile of relationship strengths and vulnerabilities of particular couples.