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Editorial overview: Contemporary insights into the relationships and stress nexus: Contexts, processes and outcomes

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The myriad of stressors faced by couples and families in contemporary society are complex and far-reaching, impacting many interpersonal processes that in turn affect a variety of physical and mental health outcomes [1]. Despite acknowledgement of these associations, the specific mechanisms and pathways through which stress influences specific interpersonal processes enroute to generating health outcomes remain somewhat elusive. This is not to suggest we know nothing about some of the connections between stress, relationships, and well-being. Indeed, over the last two decades, research has begun to identify a few of the social, cognitive, affective, and physiological pathways through which stress can impact relationship functioning, how and why negative relationships often exacerbate stress responses, and how and why positive relationships may at times buffer them (see Ref. [2]; Farrell and Simpson, this issue). Nevertheless, identifying the specific moderators and mediators and their relative contributions to these critical processes has proven challenging.

Within the past few years, however, researchers have begun to help fill some of these important gaps. The 30 articles assembled in this special issue illustrate many of the most important advances that have occurred in recent years. Some of this work has emerged in the context of ongoing longitudinal studies that have examined how stress impacts relationships directly, maturing to the point that some researchers can now forecast the cascading effects of stress on relationship functioning, and vice-versa (e.g., Masarik and Conger, this issue). Other insights are attributable to recent advances in new methods that permit better, more precise measurement of physiological stress responses in relationships (e.g., [3], Slatcher and Schoebi, this issue) and the application of epigenetic ideas to stress and relationships (e.g., Whisman and South, this issue). Other advances have stemmed from the application and integration of major relational theories with specific models of stress (e.g., Sbarra and Coan, this issue), which have been sorely lacking. In developing this special issue, we brought together leading scholars from various sub-disciplines of psychology and related fields and asked each set of authors to provide a comprehensive, multi-faceted perspective on the sub-area of stress and relationships with which they were most familiar. As editors, we could not be more pleased with the final product of this assemblage.

The theme for this special issue grew out of a small international conference on relationships and stress held in Melbourne, Australia in 2014, which was co-chaired by the three of us (Karantzas, McCabe, and Simpson). The aim of the conference was to bring together scholars to address four salient, diverse themes within the study of relationships and stress: (1) normative life

2 Relationships and stress

interpersonal relationships, evolution and social behavior, and how interpersonal experiences early in life affect adult outcomes. He has served as editor of *Personal Relationships* (from 1998 to 2001) and the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes* (from 2009 to 2014).

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transitions (e.g., marriage, parenthood, caring for spouses or parents), (2) non-normative/unexpected life transitions (e.g., acute and chronic physical/mental illness, natural disasters, infertility), (3) within-couple processes and relationship dissolution (e.g., predictors [such as communication/conflict, relationship transgressions, intimate partner violence, sexual dysfunction] and outcomes of divorce/dissolution/health problems), and (4) external stressors to couples/relationships (e.g., work/family spill-over, being an ethnic/social minority). When planning this special issue, we increased the breadth of topics to include addiction (Rodriguez and Derrick), pornography (Campbell and Kohut), blended families (Zwicker and DeLongis, Pasch and Sullivan), physiology (Farrell and Simpson), genetics (Whisman and South), sexual dysfunction (McCabe and Connaughton), same sex relationships (Rostosky and Riggle) and therapeutic approaches targeting relationships under duress (Wiebe and Johnson, Christensen and Doss, Epstein and Zheng).

The special issue showcases a number of excellent papers that: (a) provide comprehensive, state-of-the-art reviews of each subarea within the field of stress and relationships, and/or (b) offer new, thought-provoking theoretical models that synthesize key concepts and ideas linking stress, relationship functioning and processes, and various indicators of well-being. What is most striking about the papers is the theoretical and conceptual overlap that exists among them. This speaks to the complex, multi-faceted nature of the ties between stress, relationships, and various outcomes along with the need to approach this broad area by bridging distinct subareas through the application of integrative theoretical frameworks. Fortunately, relationship science has several strong, integrative theories and models that offer excellence guidance.

Several of the papers, for instance, use attachment theory as a lens through which to understand how different kinds of stress affect certain relationship processes enroute to predicting different types of individual and dyadic outcomes (e.g., Farrell and Simpson, Feeney and Karantzas, Wiebe and Johnson, Karantzas and Gillath, Sbarra and Coan, Simpson and Rholes). Attachment theory is appealing for several reasons. First, it is one of the most widely studied lifespan theories of close relationships (see Refs. [4,5]). Second, it elucidates how different forms of stress ought to affect individual and dyadic outcomes. Third, the theory focuses on diathesis-stress effects (see Ref. [2]).

Several other papers draw on the vast social support and coping literatures, including specific models of social support and coping at the individual and dyadic level, to clarify how relationships characterized by positive versus negative social support exchanges and coping responses can buffer (or sometimes exacerbate) stress responses (e.g., Badr and Acitelli, Cutrona and Russell, Karantzas and Gillath, Randall and Bodenmann). In addition, various authors call for future researchers to utilize existing theories or models to better understand certain findings that, on the face of it, seem inconsistent or paradoxical (e.g., Karantzas and Gillath; Rodriguez and Derrick), but could provide a path toward identifying the specific mechanisms or transducers that explain specific connections between stress and well-being, whether it be physical health or mental well-being (e.g., Marshall and Kuijer, Overall and McNulty, Repetti and Wang).

Another cross-cutting theme running through several papers is the importance of adopting an applied and/or therapeutic focus to relationships and stress (e.g., Braithwaite and Holt-Lunstad, Doss and Rhoades). While some

102 papers review empirical evidence on the efficacy of
 103 different relationship-focused therapeutic approaches
 104 (e.g., Lavner and Bradbury, Epstein and Zheng,
 105 Halford and Pepping, Christensen and Doss, Wiebe
 106 and Johnson), several others accentuate the need for
 107 research findings to be translated into intervention pro-
 108 grams and services in order to help couples and families
 109 deal with dysfunctional relationship dynamics that often
 110 generate additional stress (e.g., Eckhardt and Parrott,
 111 Fincham and May, Neff and Karney, Pasch and
 112 Sullivan). Other papers examine how dealing with stress-
 113 ors impacts relationship processes and outcomes, whether
 114 the source of stress lies in being a minority group member
 115 (Rostosky and Riggle), struggling with financial hardship
 116 (Neff and Karney), managing chronic illness (Badr and
 117 Acitelli, Karantzas and Gillath), or learning to cope with
 118 relationship loss (Sbarra and Coan).

119 The papers in the special issue are essential reading for
 120 both clinicians as well as theoretical researchers in the field
 121 of relationships. They highlight the importance of ensuring
 122 that there is a strong theoretical base to interventions to
 123 resolve relationship problems stemming from internal and
 124 external stressors. A major strength of the papers is that
 125 they provide this theoretical understanding of how and
 126 why particular stressors impact on relationships.

127 Viewed as a group, the papers in this special issue highlight
 128 the diversity and breadth of research encompassed under

the broad umbrella of relationship and stress. Collec- 129
 tively, these papers shed important new insights into this 130
 thriving and multifaceted field. One major challenge for 131
 the future is to determine how to integrate this large and 132
 diverse constellation of theories, models, and empirical 133
 findings in a way that provides a clear roadmap for 134
 future investigators. A second major challenge is to plan 135
 and develop new programs of research that involve 136
 “transformative studies”, those that can help couples 137
 and families who are experiencing different types of 138
 chronic stress and strain to deal with these challenges 139
 more effectively. 140

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