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The Neglect of Divorce in Marital Research: An Ontological Analysis of the Work of John Gottman

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THE NEGLECT OF DIVORCE IN MARITAL RESEARCH: AN ONTOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WORK OF JOHN GOTTMAN

by

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ABSTRACT

THE NEGLECT OF DIVORCE IN MARITAL RESEARCH: AN ONTOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WORK OF JOHN GOTTMAN

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This thesis explores why the divorce rate has remained relatively stable over the past few decades, even in the face of rapidly growing social sciences – particularly the branch associated with the study and treatment of marriage – through an analysis of the work of John Gottman. This thesis chiefly claims that divorce is not addressed in marital research. It is argued, however, that far from being intentional on the part of researchers, the disregard for divorce in the marital research is actually due to underlying, unrecognized assumptions. Specifically, this thesis analyzes the most fundamental assumptions – the ontological assumptions – upon which the investigation of marriage is conceptualized. The body is divided into three parts: First, the apparent absence of divorce in the marital literature is discussed, providing a starting point for the ontological analysis. Second, a section on ontology sets up the analysis. It begins

with an introduction to two categories of ontological assumptions. These assumptive frameworks are used to guide the analysis of the marital literature. The final part analyzes John Gottman's research as a case example of the marital literature, uncovering the ontological assumptions of his work and demonstrating that many of his assumptions are potentially problematic for addressing divorce. After briefly wrapping up the arguments herein contained, the thesis discusses an alternative ontology which provides a framework whereby, if employed, marital researchers can begin to more adequately address the divorce epidemic.

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Marriage is one of the most highly valued social institutions among Americans today (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), and yet paradoxically, it is as fragile as ever (Fowers, 2000) with a dissolution rate at around 50%. Consequently, divorce has become a big issue among social science researchers in the past several years. Their endeavor to uncover the dangerous implications of divorce have brought to our attention some concerning facts: the divorced are worse off financially (Hao, 1996; Lupton & Smith, 2003), in general experience poorer health (Lillard & Waite, 1995), and by and large experience more social disorders, such as depression (Marks & Lambert, 1998), than married individuals. Divorce is even harder on the children involved. For instance, children of divorce are more depressed (Ge, Natsuaki, & Conger, 2006) and more prone to other psychological illnesses and criminal behavior than those raised in married households (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Truly divorce is one of the most distressing social ills facing our nation today.

Unfortunately, the divorce rate has been fairly stable for nearly three decades. The 1970s saw the greatest historical increase of divorce in the United States, peaking in the early eighties at just over 50% (Munson & Sutton, 2004). Since 1981, the divorce rate has declined slightly, but not by much. At the beginning of this decade, it stood just below 50%, though several researchers were still projecting that a majority of marriages would end in divorce (Faust & McKibben, 1999). Gottman (2002), perhaps the most renowned marital researcher, has consistently claimed that over half of all first marriages will end in divorce (see also Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Levenson, 1999; Gottman, 1994) and others have related a similar story more recently (Rice, 2005; Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006).

Recent history has also seen a significant increase in social scientific research, which represents the scientific attempt to answer the problems of human relationships. Among the many problems addressed by the social sciences, divorce was specifically targeted beginning in the 1940s, and since, the study of marriage has become a discipline of its own—marriage and family therapy (MFT; Nichols, 1992). For decades now, both the science of marriage and the other social sciences have grown rapidly into the force they are today, arguably as large and as influential as the harder sciences of biology, chemistry, and physics. After 40 years of the social sciences doing battle with divorce and trying to enhance marriage, why has the divorce rate remained relatively the same?

The purpose of this thesis is to explore one facet of this intriguing question. As I will show, divorce is not specifically addressed in marital research. Far from this being intentional on the part of researchers, I will argue that this disregard for divorce is actually due to underlying, unrecognized assumptions guiding marital research today. To make this case, I analyze the most fundamental assumptions upon which the investigation of marriage is conceptualized – ontological assumptions. I first discuss the apparent absence of divorce in the marital literature, providing a starting point for the ontological analysis. The analysis then begins with an introduction to and an outline of two categories of ontological assumptions. These assumptive frameworks are used to guide the analysis of the marital literature. As an example of the marital literature, I have chosen to analyze the work of one of the most popular and well-cited marital researchers in psychology today, John Gottman, for reasons that will be made clear below. The purpose of the analysis will be to uncover the ontological assumptions of John Gottman's

research and determine to what extent it is based on assumptions that are potentially problematic for addressing the dissolving and maintaining of marital relationships.

Marital Research and Divorce

While it seems logical to expect a growing population of marital researchers and therapists to make some dent in the divorce rate, few scholars doubt the "success" of marital therapy. In fact, marital therapy's success has been well documented empirically (Shadish & Baldwin, 2003). But a closer look at the definition of success reveals something interesting: outcome instruments rarely – if ever – define success as "preventing divorce." Few outcome studies do follow-up beyond immediate post-treatment (i.e., nine months) and therefore cannot determine whether therapy has prevented divorce from occurring one or more years later (Gottman, 1994). The questions found within outcome measures are even more revealing. For instance, in the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, considered by many the most commonly used measure of marital therapy outcome (Dutcher, 1999; Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995), none of the 32 questions actually measure the fact of divorce, and only one even mentions divorce. Most other outcome measures focus not on divorce prevention, but on agreement between spouses and individual positive affect. If outcome measures fail to measure divorce prevention, then "successful" marital therapy may not prevent divorce.

Indeed, most scholars do not consider the preventing of divorce as one of the primary goals of marital therapy. For Kadis and McClendon (1998), who attempt to represent the whole of marital therapy in their *Concise Guide to Marital Therapy*, marital therapy is successful when couples "[feel] better as a result of the experience" (p. 12). In other words, success is not about preserving the marriage; rather success is about

establishing and maintaining good feelings among the various members of the relationship. Moreover, the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT) does not profess divorce prevention as a primary goal of its professional members (AAMFT, 2007). It is true that many researchers assume that "agreement" and "good feelings" among partners will help prevent divorce, but this cannot be known if it is not measured. This raises an obvious question: why is divorce not measured?

What is or is not measured in any scientific pursuit is based upon the theories espoused by researchers; this includes, among marital researchers, definitions of success, follow-up procedures, and types of outcome measures. However, while theories indicate to researchers what to investigate, the theories are themselves laden with assumptions (Slife & Williams, 1994). These assumptions, while often implicit, are the very core of the theories that guide scientific investigation. Therefore, if something is not being measured—in this case, divorce—then the most crucial factor in this absence are the assumptions underlying the theories of explanation.

Ontology

While there are many types of assumptions, this thesis deals primarily with ontological assumptions. Ontological assumptions are "fundamental, taken-for granted assumptions about the ultimate reality of things" (Slife, 2005, p. 157). These types of assumptions guide how researchers and practitioners understand phenomena. For example, during the early middle ages, the Western world was dominated by Christianity, which assumed the spiritual dimension of humanity to be the ultimate reality. Consequently, understanding psychological illnesses often emphasized supernatural (spiritual) explanations (Hergenhahn, 2005). Alternatively, many modern neuroscientists

assume that ultimate reality is matter or material, thus when they look to understand mental illness, they resort to biological understandings (Hedges & Burchfield, 2005). In other words, the way reality is conceived, as evidenced both in the middle ages and presently, guides the different kinds of understandings that occur. Thus if marital researchers conceptualize relationships based on certain specific ontological assumptions, these conceptualizations will help determine how successful marriage is understood, and thus how it will be defined as a measure of therapeutic outcome.

In this section, I will discuss two ontologies which have been singled out by other scholars as relevant to the social sciences. The first is an ontology that is said to have been adopted by the western intellectual tradition. By this I mean it is an ontology upon which much of modern science (and thus modern psychology) was built, beginning in the renaissance and on into the enlightenment and the 19th century (Taylor, 1989). This ontology became the metaphorical spectacles through which social scientists saw the world and upon which both theory and research in the social sciences became based (Bishop, 2007). The second ontology has risen historically, in part, as a reaction to our contemporary ontology. While it is not the only alternative to our contemporary ontology, it is one that is being considered useful and viable in helping to account for the same phenomena for which modern psychology has accounted (Reber, 2007). Following the work of Slife (2005), I have labeled these ontologies, respectively, abstractionism and relationality (see also Reber, 2007; Nelson, 2007).

The purpose of this section is to clarify and compare these two ontologies. I will first define the two ontologies generally. Then I will answer the question “What is a marriage?” from both an abstractionist and a relational ontology. This will help to

identify concretely how marital relationships are conceptualized from both frameworks. I answer this question in three stages: first, the "where" of marriage will outline how marriage is understood in relation to its location; the "who" of the marriage will define for us how spouses are understood from each ontological perspective; and finally, the "how" of the marriage will define how the spouses are understood to relate to one another, in light of the "where" and the "who." Finally, I will revisit the original question, "What is marriage?" before proceeding with the analysis.

Defining ontologies

Abstractionism. An abstractionist ontology essentially takes abstractions to be fundamentally real, and all persons, places, or things are best understood as abstracted from one another (Slife, 2005), or abstracted from their context. Context refers to particulars of the person, place, or object, such as its immediate surroundings or its history. Consider a hammer. From an abstractionist perspective, a hammer is best understood as an object in and of itself, removed from its context of tool box, work bench, user, or history of function, and as having properties which do not change even when the context changes. In other words, a hammer is a hammer, whether it is being used to pound nails or to keep papers from flying away. It retains properties which define it as a hammer in spite of the context. An abstractionist's focus is always on sameness across context; that which is bound to context becomes secondary. Individuals, in this sense, are understood in a similar manner, in that they have unchangeable properties which are contained within the "skin" of the person and carried—unchangeably—from context to context, such as home, work, or school, or from one relationship to another. One can see where psychological science has adopted an abstractionist framework when

one considers the notions of “personality,” “identity,” “trait,” or “self” (Slife & Richardson, in press), which are often considered a set of essentially unchangeable characteristics that are maintained from context to context (Myers, 2007). The abstractionist will not deny that there are changeable aspects of the individual, however change is not fundamental. Instead, the abstractionist will seek unchangeable laws that are said to govern the changes, which laws are another form of abstraction. For the abstractionist, individuals “begin and end as [unchangeable], self-contained individualities” (Slife, 2005, p. 158) and understanding what is real—whether it concerns an individual or a relationship—requires an understanding of the self-contained, and thus abstracted, properties of individuals.

Relationality. On the other hand, ontological relationality supposes that all things are first and foremost in relationship with one another. Persons and objects share their being with the context of which they are a part and thus are best understood in relation to their context. Consider once again the example of the hammer. The relationist would claim that, because the hammer shares its being with the context, its identity can fundamentally change as a consequence of a changing context. It is best understood as a hammer when it is pounding nails and it is best understood as a paperweight when it is holding down papers. Likewise, the identity of individuals can fundamentally change when their context changes. Unlike the abstractionist, the unchanging is not understood as the fundamental, with the changeable as the secondary. A relationist attends to the unchanging *and* the changing nature of the individual as he or she navigates different contexts. The *fundamental* reality of any individual consists *both* of the individual and his or her constitutive relationships, which includes the changing and unchanging. It is true

that the individual may maintain similarities across contexts, but the relationist is just as concerned with the essential differences that occur when an individual changes contexts. It is the similarities (unchanging or constant parts) *and* differences (those parts which do change) which constitute the whole of, and thus make up the fundamental reality of, an individual or a relationship. The best understanding, from this relational perspective, is an understanding of the whole.

It is important to note that abstractions and relationships inescapably exist from both ontological frameworks. The question from either ontology is not so much "what exists" as "what is considered fundamental." From an abstractionist perspective, the abstracted and unchangeable is fundamental, and relationships are considered secondary. In other words, the abstractionist acknowledges the existence of relationships—even values relationships—but sees the relationships as secondary to the self-contained individuals (Reber & Osbeck, 2005). Indeed, the abstractionist would even see relationships as internalized or a part of the individual. For this reason, abstractionism is sometimes called a weak relationality (Slife, 2005). On the other hand, from a relational perspective, relationships are fundamental and abstractions are secondary. Individuals are always in relationship and the relationships are crucial to understanding the individual. From a relational ontology, individuals cannot be understood *except* in relationship, thus relationality is called a strong relationality.

What is a relationship?

It goes without saying that this rather thin account of the two categories of ontology is somewhat vague and needs to be further fleshed out. For that purpose, a thicker rendition of each of the categories is now presented in answer to the very specific

question, “What is a marriage relationship?” As stated above, I begin with the “where” and the “who” of the relationship and then finish with the “how.”

Where? The “where” of the marriage relationship concerns how the marriage is understood in reference to its location; in other words, what role the location plays in understanding the marital relationship. For the abstractionist, the best way to understand a marriage relationship is abstracted from the “where,” or from the context (e.g., a laboratory). The abstractionist is primarily concerned with the unchangeableness of the relationship and where contextual elements change, such as time and location, the abstractionist will attempt basic explanations independent of context. This might include, as mentioned earlier, unchangeable laws that account for the changes. The more real part of the relationship is expected to maintain a certain constancy—with little, if any variation—in the face of changing contexts. “Where” the relationship occurs is outside of context, or abstracted from context, such that the changes that occur in context do not impede a pure understanding of the fundamentally unchanging relationship. Any time contextual elements such as time, emotion, or culture are factored out of an explanation of the marriage, the explanation is abstractionist.

An example might further clarify the abstractionist “where.” Often, a married couple who seeks therapeutic help will be seen in the therapist’s office. If the therapist attempts to understand the couple’s relationship, the understanding will be derived in a different context (the office) than where the troubled relationship most frequently occurs (e.g., at home). Because an understanding is assumed to be attained outside of the context of the home, it is considered to be fundamentally independent of the context of the home. What the abstractionist therapist expects to understand is a troubled relationship that is

basically unchangeable, thus carried from the home to the therapist's office. Consequently, coming to the office should not change any important, fundamental characteristic of the troubled relationship, for any home-bound (contextually-bound) property of the relationship is secondary to the unchangeable, abstracted relationship important for the therapist's understanding. Additionally, the unchangeable relationship is best understood when it is abstracted from its other changeable contexts, such as in a laboratory.

From a relational ontology, relationships must be understood "where" the relationship occurs. In other words, relationships are contextually bound and cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the relationship in context. Culture, situation, time, and space all help to constitute any marriage relationship (Slife, 2005) and a full understanding of the relationship (its changes and its stability) is not achieved independent of the context, but rather as these contextual elements change. A relational therapist would assume that seeing a couple in the office would change the context wherein the couple most often relates, which might significantly change the relationship. The relationist would value the changes from context to context as much as that which does not change, for both similarities and differences are part of the relationship. A therapist from this ontological perspective might also choose to see the couple in the context wherein the relationship most frequently occurs, such as at home, which might contribute to a fuller understanding of the couple's relationship across different contexts. The therapist would also recognize that his or her very presence might alter the relationship, given the change in context which has occurred. Neglecting the role of the context (including spatial, temporal, or cultural location) would be detrimental to any

attempts at intervention because the therapist's understanding of the relationship would be severely impaired. A relational ontology assumes that a contextual understanding is the best understanding.

Who? The "who" of the relationship refers to how the individuals of the marriage are understood. From an abstractionist ontology—or a weak relationality—the "who" of a relationship is best understood abstracted from his or her particular context, including from his or her spouse. The "who" is considered self-contained (i.e., the self contained independently of his or her context) in that, though his or her qualities are developed through socialization, the qualities become a property of the self-contained individual (Reber & Osbeck, 2005). For instance, when information is exchanged in a relationship, the information can affect an individual, but only insofar as the information has been taken from the *outside* of the individual and "processed" within the individual. As the "who" of marriage is self-contained for the abstractionist, then any understanding of a relationship necessitates first and foremost an understanding of the *individuals* of the relationship. Indeed, as Reber and Osbeck claim, understanding and explaining relationships from this perspective focuses on the "thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of each party, for it is assumed that these factors ultimately determine whether and how the relationship is maintained" (p. 65).

The quality of a marital relationship, from this perspective, would depend on the positive "thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" of each spouse concerning the relationship. In other words, the quality of the relationship would be judged at the level of the individual because the individual is the primary (or, ontological) reality of the relationship. In fact, as mentioned previously, such is the case for several of the measures

that purport to assess marital quality. Many do so by measuring individual affect (e.g., Index of Marital Satisfaction; Positive Feeling Questionnaire) or personal thoughts and feelings (e.g., Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test) concerning the relationship (see Corcoran & Fischer, 2000). Using such measures to assess the relationship is in effect assessing each individual's self-contained, and thus private, emotions and personal properties, a practice that assumes abstractionism. In sum, the "who" of the abstractionist marriage are two self-contained individuals.

Relationality assumes human relationships to be "the fundamental reality of [human] existence" (Jackson, 2005, p. 210) and abstracting an individual from his or her relationships is to misunderstand that individual. The "who" from a relational perspective must be understood as a nexus of constitutive relationships, or in other words, as at least partly constituted by his or her relationships with others. The important thing to keep in mind here is that the individuals of any marital relationship each have a role in constituting the whole of the relationship, and thus the identity of their spouse. Consequently, significant changes to one spouse would mean a change in the other spouse, for in sharing their being, the couple will help to constitute one another. From this perspective, the reality of the "who" of a marriage is intimately tied to the constitutive marital relationship. Thus the quality of the marriage is less about the individual affect and more about the relationship itself. For instance, a quality marriage relationship from a relational perspective would not be a severed relationship, as in the case of divorce. I discuss the implications of not accounting for divorce below, but for now, suffice it to say that to be relational, assessment must focus on the relationship first (which includes the status of the relationship), not on the individual.

How? Let us now turn to "how" married couples relate. For the abstractionist, the fundamental reality of the individual is self-contained, abstracted from both context and other individuals. Consequently, the essence of individuals does not begin in relationship; relationships must be created (Slife, 2005). Because of the focus on abstractions, from this perspective the most important parts of the self are the abstractions which pertain to the individual—such as values, beliefs, and thoughts—which are said to be essentially unchangeable and acontextual. When individuals come together with the intent to create a relationship, this is done through "common abstractions" (p. 168). And because abstractions are "individual and potentially unique," then individuals who differ must "find or create some commonality" as part of building their relationship. A good relationship, from an abstractionist perspective, is one in which two self-contained individuals share their individual, abstracted values, beliefs and thoughts; that is, they have them in common. When they are not common to begin with, then to maintain the relationship, it is necessary to build some sort of commonality. For instance, a husband might attempt to persuade his wife to believe what he believes; or the couple might choose to "tolerate" the differences that exist between them – agree to disagree. The important thing to keep in mind is that some form of agreement is essential for maintaining a relationship from an abstractionist ontology.

One example of how this plays out in marital therapy research can be gleaned once again from outcome measures. Many instruments that purport to measure marital quality (e.g., Dyadic Adjustment Scale) ask couples about their level of agreement; the more the couple agrees, the better the quality of relationship (Corcoran & Fischer, 2000; see also Spanier, 1976). This is the same idea which sparked the founder of

eHarmony.com, Neil Warren (1992), to write that “similarity is critical” (p. 48) and propose individual traits such as values, intelligence, and interests as fundamental to creating a successful marriage. This type of matching is a boon from an abstractionist perspective, because it is assumed that two individuals cannot create a relationship until they share similar abstractions, and that the relationship is best when conceptual agreement is highest.

On the other hand, the relationist holds that individuals are always in relation to one another by virtue of their shared context and their shared being; they are two parts of the same relational whole. Thus, a relationship need not be built from this perspective. Instead, the question of “how” from a relational ontology deals with the quality of what already exists. The best relationships are those in which the married individuals each live into what is real about the relationship, the reality being the shared context and constitutive being. For an individual to be able to live into his or her constitutive relationship, he or she must embrace the relationship as a whole, including both the similarities *and* the differences which maintain a good relationship. In this case, complementary differences are just as important as similarities to “good” relationships as they help to provide richness and “spice” to a marriage. On the other hand, there can be similarities or differences that are potentially destructive to the marital relationship. Again, the focus is on the quality of the relationship, not on the how similar or different a couple might be.

A relational ontology also necessarily extends the understanding of “how” the married relate beyond just the individuals themselves. Indeed, while the abstractionist ontology speaks primarily of the two individuals involved in a marriage relationship, the

strong relationist considers a broader context than simply the couple itself (e.g., culture). The other "parts" of this context—for example, culture, history, spatial location, etc.—play as large a role in constituting the relationship as the individuals themselves play. Thus, understanding the reality of any marriage, for the couple's or the researcher's sake, would mean at least some understanding of the several parts that constitute the whole relationship. One particularly important part of a relational ontology is what Charles Taylor (1989) called "inescapable frameworks" (p. 3). These frameworks, according to Taylor, guide, usually implicitly, the decisions we make between right and wrong, but are not dependent on our personal "desires, inclinations, and choices" (p. 4). These deep, moral intuitions are part of the shared context of the couple and help to constitute the marriage relationship just as strongly as do the individuals in the relationship. This is because the couple is inseparable from these frameworks (they are "inescapable"), thus no decision is made by either individual without some sort of reference to the frameworks.

A relational ontology presupposes an understanding of individuals that is inextricably connected to (and affected by) the whole of human experience, which includes culture, history, and moral frameworks. Understanding those individuals who are married and how they relate requires understanding their deep relationship to context. An understanding like this helps to illuminate some of the values that should be maintained in developing a good marital relationship, values that can be very different than simply individual preferences. As Taylor says, some values are an inescapable part of the culture, thus they may even be *contrary* to individually held beliefs, yet still need to be embraced by the couple before a good marital relationship can develop. In other

words, from a relational perspective, a married couple cannot merely decide on their own "how" best to relate without understanding the inescapable moral frameworks which form the background of any relationship. A strong relationality encourages – even requires – this deep understanding, whereas a weak relationality only requires an understanding of the self-contained individuals along with their self-contained preferences.

Revisiting the question. By way of revisiting the question "What is a relationship?" it is important to keep in mind what I noted previously: both categories of ontology acknowledge the existence of both relationships and abstractions; the question is simply, which is fundamental. From an abstractionist, or weak relational perspective, what is real or fundamental is the abstracted and acontextual – objects do not share their being. Thus relationships are at best secondary to abstractions, such as self-contained individuals. In order for relationships to matter, that which happens "outside" of the individual must be incorporated to the inside before it matters. But the important object of investigation in this case remains the self-contained individual, not the relationship itself. On the other hand, relationality, or strong relationality, is "relational all the way down" (Slife, 2005, p. 159). Objects begin and end in relationship, they share their being with one another and with their context and cannot be fully understood *except* in relation to one another.

Before moving into the analysis of the literature, I would like to connect the absent status of divorce in marital research to the previous discussion on ontology. The primary focus of any research or intervention strategy from a weak relationality (abstractionist ontology) will assume at the outset that an individual is first and foremost

self-contained—abstracted from his or her context, including the context of the relationship. From this perspective, couples are composed of two self-contained individuals; their relationship is of a secondary nature, one that cannot be the ultimate, foundational focus from a weak relationality. Thus any scientific investigation from this perspective will focus on the individuals in relationship. The relationship will likely not be the focus. Yet divorce is the dissolving of the relationship. To research divorce is, in a sense, to research the relationship. This type of research may be unintentionally avoided if the researcher assumes a weak relationality; in this case, one is limited by one's ontological assumptions to attend first and foremost to the individual, not to the relationship, and thus not to divorce. One can see, then, how the discipline's ontological assumptions might lead them to unknowingly ignore divorce.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to the analysis of an important portion of the marital literature and its underlying ontological foundation. One explanation for the absence of divorce in marital research may be that researchers for the most part assume a weak relationality. I will analyze the work of one marital researcher – one who may represent an important portion of the field – and uncover his ontological assumptions. I will also take up the issue of whether he addresses divorce at a fundamental, ontological level.

Analysis

Having differentiated between abstractionism and relationality in marital relationships, the next step in addressing the absence of divorce in marital research is to go to the literature itself. Unfortunately, the marital research literature is too vast to cover in the time and space allowed for this project. Therefore, I have chosen one man's work –

that of John Gottman – to represent the major portion of this body of marital research. There are two reasons for which I feel justified in addressing the important ontological issues of this literature through his work: the depth and breadth of his research and his unusual concern with the issue of divorce.

Reasons for choosing Gottman.

The first reason is the depth and breadth of his research as a member of the community of marital research, which has established him as a significant player and influence in the field. Gottman has done research with over 3000 couples over a 30 year period of time. In that time, he and his colleagues have studied marriage from the physiological (e.g. Gottman & Levenson, 1992) and the psychological (e.g. Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000) perspective of marital satisfaction; they have done both short-term and long-term marital therapy outcome research (Gottman, 1999); and they have recently modeled their own theory of marriage mathematically (Gottman et al., 2002). He is one of the most prolific researchers in marriage and family therapy (Jencius & Duba, 2003). He has created a research and intervention program rich with his own creativity, including the "Gottman Method Couples Therapy," a program which certifies "Gottman Relationship Clinic" therapists across the country, and even internationally. Gottman has also written several books to popular lay clerics and the public (e.g., Gottman & Silver, 1999). Though his career is not without controversy (cf. Hafen & Crane, 2003), Gottman has been widely acknowledged by several scholars as one of the most influential researchers in the field of marriage and family therapy (Fincham & Beach, 1999; see also Cornelius, Alessi, & Shorey, 2007; Parra & Busby,

2006; Hicks, McWey, Benson, & West, 2004; Fincham, 2003; Stanley, Bradbury, & Markman, 2000).

The second reason for choosing Gottman has to do with one area in which he stands out among marital researchers: his concern with divorce. Unlike many researchers, Gottman has been particularly interested in divorce. In fact, he has expressed concern about the inadequacy of short-term follow-up in marital therapy research (e.g., Gottman, 1994) and the apparent ineffectiveness of marital therapy (e.g., Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Quite contrary to the claim that I made earlier – that marital researchers fail to address divorce – Gottman is one marital researcher who is constantly addressing divorce. He has even published a book entirely about predicting divorce (Gottman, 1994). Indeed, Gottman is one of the few who joins me in the claim that marital researchers and clinicians are not really dealing with the "crisis" of familial dissolution in the United States (Gottman, 1999).

As I am being critical of the field, I felt it important to choose to analyze the work of one who is both an integrated member and a critic of the field himself and judge just how far his criticisms go. Gottman is one of the few who tackles the question of divorce so explicitly, so it seems likely that he will be less inclined to make assumptions that inhibit the deep discussion of divorce in the larger discipline. In this sense, this analysis tests how prevalent abstractionism is in the discipline, even among those concerned with divorce.

In sum, the following analysis is intended to uncover the ontological foundation of Gottman's research. I will first introduce the foundation of Gottman's theorizing—individual affect—and discuss how it is used by Gottman. I will then analyze core

concepts which characterize the bulk of Gottman's research. First, I will analyze the three legs of Gottman's "core triad of balance," which help to illuminate his theoretical understanding of positive and negative affect. Next, I will analyze a core concept of Gottman's Sound Marital House theory, creating shared meaning. This analysis will demonstrate the ontological assumptions upon which Gottman has relied in constructing his major marital research program.

Introducing Gottman.

Gottman began building his research program with a decade of longitudinal research in the 1980s. After a scrupulous review of the marital literature (see Gottman, 1994), Gottman set out with some of his colleagues to demonstrate the connection between marital stability and positive or negative interactions. In 1992, he and Levenson published their longitudinal research, claiming that negative processes (both behavioral and physiological) lead to marital dissatisfaction, which in turn lead couples to consider divorce. Nearly all of Gottman's theorizing, research, assessment and therapeutic work with couples has been based on this idea that negative affect leads to divorce, extending into present times (e.g., Gottman et al., 2002). Indeed, affect (positive or negative) is the key to understanding Gottman's theory of marriage, called the "Sound Marital House" (Gottman, 1999). According to the Sound Marital House theory, the "two necessary 'staples' of marriages that work are (1) an overall level of positive affect, and (2) an ability to reduce negative affect during conflict resolution" (p. 105). Gottman has developed further explanations concerning how these two "staples" develop in marriage and how intervention strategies can be targeted in such a way as to foster these staples when they fail to develop.

Positive and negative affect for Gottman and his colleagues is not as simple as how one claims to feel. Indeed, one of the purposes of Gottman's research program was to go beyond self-report data (Gottman, 1994). For this reason, Gottman proposed what he called the "core triad of balance" (Gottman, 1993b, p. 70). Gottman has stated that "every relationship is a system that develops its own balance or stable steady states, with respect to the ratio of positivity and negativity in behavior, perception, and physiology" (Gottman, 1999, p. 33). He operationalized positive and negative affect as behavior, perception, and physiology and claimed that the balance of positivity and negativity between the three elements would determine marital stability; hence the core triad of balance (Gottman, 1993b). The amount of research devoted to this core triad lends some evidence to its significance for Gottman and his colleagues (e.g., Gottman & Notarius, 2000, 2002; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Gottman, 1993a), which includes separate projects addressing interactive behavior (e.g., Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman, 1993a; Gottman & Levenson, 1999b; Driver & Gottman, 2004), physiology (Levenson & Gottman, 1985; Levenson, Cartensen, & Gottman, 1994), and perception (Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002; Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000).

It is important to understand the three elements of the core triad and their relation to one another, as their relation reveals the nature of affect according to Gottman's theorizing. This section explores these three elements, each in turn, and uncovers the ontological foundation of Gottman's understanding of affect. The question which outlined our discussion of ontology ("What is a marriage relationship?") will be an implicit guide as the core triad reveals what Gottman believes about the "where" and the

"who" of the marital relationship. As each of the elements are defined and explained, the ontological assumptions made by Gottman should become clear. Behavior will be discussed first, followed by physiology and finally, perception. A brief concluding statement on the core triad will then transition into a discussion of the core triad in the context of the Sound Marital House.

Core Triad of Balance

Interactive behavior. The manner in which Gottman researches and discusses behavior reveals an underlying weak relationality. In researching behavior, Gottman generally has couples interact for about fifteen minutes (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1992). He records this interaction and then codes and analyzes each of the couple's behaviors using the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF; see Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). The SPAFF is intended to "[integrate] non-verbal and physical cues, voice tone, and speech content to identify specific affects" (Jones, Carrere, & Gottman, 2005). By integrating these several cues, a single behavior is then identified as either positive or negative, or exhibiting positive or negative affect. Both his use of the SPAFF and his classification of behaviors as positive or negative reveal Gottman's underlying abstractionism.

An example will help to illustrate how, by using the SPAFF, Gottman routinely abstracts behaviors from the larger context which gives them meaning. The SPAFF is used to identify very specific behaviors, such as belligerence (Gottman, 1994). According to the SPAFF, belligerence is considered a manifestation of negative affect. In order to find belligerence, one is required to look for the following cues: "the jaw…thrust forward and mouth open as if the speaker is daring the other person to hit him or her on the

jaw…finger pointing…cruder language…[and] the rising inflection of the challenging question" (p. 300). While attending to several observable cues might seem to constitute somewhat of a context of behavior, the SPAFF fails to attend to a larger context, which may prove of great importance. For example, it may be that an individual is simply *inclined* to "thrust forward" his or her jaw and habitually point a finger in process of making an important point during an intense discussion, though he or she is not being belligerent. Knowing about this inclination (part of the context beyond the interview) might lead an observer to different conclusions concerning the jaw being "thrust forward" and the "finger pointing." By using the SPAFF, Gottman sees certain behaviors as belligerent regardless of the larger context. But we see that this larger context (in the example above) gives the behavior a different meaning than belligerence. For Gottman to use the SPAFF to classify negative behaviors (such as belligerence), he is of necessity abstracting behaviors from their meaningful context, thus manifesting abstractionist assumptions.

Even to call behaviors "negative" is itself a form of abstracting, as it assumes that that behavior will have the same "negative" function in a differing context. Doing so without considering the context wherein the behaviors occur might neglect instances in which the behaviors are actually *beneficial* (and thus, positive) to maintaining the relationship, but Gottman consistently fails to take these contexts into account. For example, defensiveness is another behavior that Gottman considers "negative." He defines it as "any attempt to defend oneself from a perceived attack" (p. 44). And yet, it may be that during one of Gottman's interview sessions, a woman is being wrongly accused by her husband of having an affair. It is possible that her *lack* of defensiveness

indicates to her husband her guilt. In other words, the relationship might turn sour because the husband mistakes her lack of defensiveness as evidence of the affair. In this case, *lack* of defensiveness would be considered the negative behavior, while defensiveness may have been considered positive. But Gottman abstracts defensiveness by calling it negative, neglecting the larger context which might give a positive meaning to defensive behavior.

Physiology. We see abstractionism in another of Gottman's indicator of positive or negative affect: physiology. As with behaviors, Gottman claims that there are positive and negative physiological indicators; in other words, some specific physiological states are supposed to indicate a propensity toward negative affect in marital interactions, and thus, toward divorce. However, as I will show, the states are literally self-contained states that individuals are supposed to carry from context to context, an indication of abstractionism.

This occurs especially in Gottman's laboratory. Couples are brought into the lab and hooked up to machines that measure their physiology for 20 minutes. Fifteen of those minutes are spent interacting, while the first 5 are spent in silence where base rates were taken. (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1985; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Bringing individuals into a lab is considered an abstractionist practice, as it removes individuals from their context, and the couples here are treated as though their physiology is the same in the lab as it is at home. For example, Gottman claims that, during the resting period, husbands who "had heart rates 17 bpm higher" and wives who had "faster flowing blood" were more inclined toward divorce than husbands with lower heart rates and wives with slower blood, respectively (Gottman, 1999, p. 75). Gottman has removed these

individuals from the context of everyday life while claiming they maintain a constant physiology. Yet one could easily envision more than one couple, whose everyday life is stressful or demanding, resulting in naturally higher heart rates for the men and faster flowing blood for the women. Indeed, if everyday life is more stressful for a couple, bringing the couple together might actually *lower* the husband's heart rate significantly, though it is still unusually high. But the experimental procedures used by Gottman cannot account for this context. Instead, the physiological state of the husband and the wife are assumed to be relatively unchanging from one context (e.g., at home or at the office) to the next (the lab), indicating an abstractionist tendency to abstract physiology from its context.

It is true that physiology itself is not understood by Gottman entirely acontextual; indeed, it is synchronized with the individual's interactive behavior (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). In other words, the physiologies of an individual are paired with the synchronous behaviors of that same individual and together signify whether that individual is experiencing a positive or a negative affective trend. According to Gottman, negative affect is not *merely* a higher heart rate, abstracted from the context of human behaviors; the higher heart rate is synchronized with the negative behaviors which are manifest in the couple interaction. But while this synchronous approach to studying physiology may seem more contextual and less abstractionist, the small context—that of physiology and behavior—is still abstracted from the larger context. Indeed, both behavior and physiology are investigated by Gottman acontextually. Synchronizing an individual's decontextualized behavior with his or her private, self-contained physiology is to essentially situate the experience of negative affect within the individual. In other

words, an individual's negative affect is a product of that individual's behavior and physiology. In essence, Gottman investigates what he believes is an acontextual, abstracted individual.

Though it may seem at times that Gottman considers the married couple as a context, it is important to point out that the individual who is understood abstracted from his or her context is the self-contained individual. Thus for Gottman, the couple is composed of two self-contained individuals. In other words, couples begin and end as individuals, indicating a weak relationality. Physiology and behavior both are contained within the "skin" of the individual. Even the concept of "interactive behavior" implies two separate entities acting and then reacting, or individuals "acting on each other from the outside" of one another (Slife, 2005, p. 158). Individuals, for Gottman, are not constitutive of one another, as they would be from a strong relationality; they are not "relational all the way down." In other words, Gottman is here assuming a weak relationality. Understanding the third element of the core triad sheds further light on this fact.

Perception. This leg of the core triad deals specifically with how "spouses…perceive and interpret positive and negative actions of one another" (Gottman, 1999, p. 68). What perceptions are and how they develop over time is an important indicator of Gottman's weak relational assumptions. As we have already seen, Gottman considers individuals to be fundamentally self-contained; that is, abstracted from their context. Perceptions, for Gottman, exist within this abstracted self, or as he himself states, "in the mind" of the individual (Gottman, 1999, p. 72). Thus they belong to an abstracted, independent self such as that which is characteristic of a weak relationality. Furthermore,

perceptions play a role in “driving emotional expressions, behavioral interactions, and satisfaction in marriage” (Carrere et al., 2000, p. 42). This is not a contextual individual, for it is an abstracted perception, from within, which drives his or her action, rather than a response based on the context.

Of course, perceptions do not simply arise on their own, independent of a context, and Gottman recognizes this. They arise, claims Gottman, after a period of positive or negative behavioral interactions (Gottman et al, 2002). But while these behavioral interactions occur between individuals, one cannot deny the private, abstracted nature of the perceptions: they exist inside the mind. Self-contained perceptions are the ultimate effect of the behavioral interactions. For example, if a couple has distressing behavioral interactions, distress maintaining perceptions are the consequence (Gottman, 1999). In other words, the behavioral interactions are internalized before they affect the relationship through the individuals’ perceptions. So while perceptions might originate in the context of behavioral interactions, perceptions are understood by Gottman as fundamentally abstracted from the context of the behavioral interaction. This is a weak relational position, or an abstractionist position.

Conclusion. To summarize the abstractionism underlying the core triad: couples’ behaviors are understood abstracted from the larger context of their everyday environment (e.g., typical behaviors); the physiology of the individual, in connection with behaviors, is understood to be abstracted from its everyday environment (e.g., high stress environment), as well as from the context of the couple; and perceptions, which both drive and are driven by the other two core elements, are private, self-contained expressions, abstracted from the context of the spouse. Given this understanding of the

core triad, then, affect is meant by Gottman to be a self-contained, acontextual expression and perception of positivity or negativity. The "who" expressing and perceiving the affect (through the core triad) is self-contained, abstracted from his or her spouse; likewise, both spouses are abstracted from the "where," or the larger context of their everyday environment. In sum, Gottman's definition of affect is an abstractionist definition.

Sound Marital House Theory

As the foundation of Gottman's theorizing, the core triad has proven important in revealing many of Gottman's ontological assumptions. Understanding the core triad also helps one understand his Sound Marital House. The Sound Marital House is Gottman's comprehensive theory of the marital relationship, which details the key elements of establishing a healthy marriage (Ryan, Gottman, Murray, Carrere, & Swanson, 2000). As I have already stated, the Sound Marital House is founded upon the two necessary "staples" mentioned above: "(1) an overall level of positive affect, and (2) an ability to reduce negative affect during conflict resolution" (Gottman, 1999, p. 105). In other words, a successful marital relationship is built and sustained when the core triad is balanced in the more positive sphere. The core triad permeates Gottman's Sound Marital House, thus it can be concluded that abstractionism also underlies most of the Sound Marital House. However, there is one particular concept—creating shared meaning—that seems at first glance to be based on more relational assumptions. In analyzing this unique concept, Gottman's conception of "how" couples relate is better illuminated.

Creating Shared Meaning. In calling meaning "shared," Gottman seems to allude somewhat to more relational assumptions. To consider meaning shared almost implies that it cannot be held by one spouse independent of the other. In other words, meaning

which is shared does not seem abstracted from one or the other individual, and therefore seems more relational. As stated above, the self-contained individual of Gottman's core triad is an essentially private individual. There are no *shared* behaviors, only exchanged, private behaviors; there are no *shared* perceptions, only private perceptions. That the couple can even *share* meanings seems to suggest a more underlying relationality than much of his theorizing.

But this does not mean that sharing cannot occur from an abstractionist ontology. Recall that a weak relationality emphasizes commonalities. If Gottman is consistent in viewing individuals as self-contained, then sharing meaning may just be another way to say that the couple has a common (private) understanding of meaning. And the fact that a shared meaning needs to be *created* from Gottman's perspective suggests just that. From a weak relationality, a relationship must be built by individuals who come together and "share" their commonalities (that is, find common ground). This is essentially what "creating shared meaning" is for Gottman: it "involves honoring and meshing each spouse's *individual* life dreams, narratives, myths and metaphors" (Gottman, Ryan, Carrere, & Erley, 2002, p. 161, emphasis added) to create a "new culture that has never existed before" (Gottman, Driver, & Tabares, 2002, p. 389). In other words, it is up to the two abstracted individuals to mesh their individual abstractions (dreams, narratives, metaphors, and myths) in order to *create* a shared culture that will "deepen and strengthen the foundation [affect] of their marital friendship" (Gottman, 1999, p. 106). If Gottman were truly assuming a strong relationality, the *creation* of a shared meaning would not be necessary; it would already exist.

It is also important to emphasize that shared meaning is created, according to Gottman, by the abstracted, self-contained individuals, independent of any sort of inescapable moral framework such as those discussed above. In other words, the creation of shared meaning originates from inside the individuals. No background of context or culture (wherein frameworks exist) is taken into account. Indeed, it is a *new* culture that belongs exclusively to the couple, as Gottman says, "a couple's *unique* blend of meaning, symbol systems, metaphors, narratives, philosophy, goals, roles, and rituals" (Ryan, Gottman, Carrere, & Swanson, 2000, p. 356, emphasis added). This is a couple ultimately abstracted from its culture, abstracted from the inescapable moral frameworks characteristic of a relational ontology.

One of the "inescapable frameworks" of a relational ontology is the valuing of the relationship itself. In other words, preventing divorce would be valued from a strong relationality, whether it is valued by the couple or not. One can easily see where this value is missing from Gottman's account of creating shared meaning: the purpose of creating shared meaning is to assure each individual that his or her "personal life dreams and aspirations come true" (Gottman et al., 2002, p. 301). If a couple "share" the life dream of being divorced, for no other reason than its convenience, nothing – not even a cultural value – stands in the way of the couple divorcing. In fact, divorcing would be the only logical thing for this couple to do, from Gottman's perspective. Thus we see that valuing the relationship (an inescapable relational framework) holds little ground to the "personal life dreams" (or abstractions) of the couple. In conceptualizing "creating shared meaning," Gottman is implicitly valuing the well-being of the individual over and above the well-being of the relationship. And what is more, shared meaning is meant to cycle

back into the foundation of the Sound Marital House, helping to create the positive affect characteristic of the Sound Marital House. In order to maintain the well-being of the individual, divorce might be the solution. If the relationship is not valued over individual affect, then Gottman's research is glaringly missing one of the inescapable frameworks of a strong relationality: valuing the relationship.

In sum, the manner in which Gottman has conceptualized his notion of "creating shared meaning" is underlain with abstractionist assumptions. From his perspective, married individuals begin as self-contained individuals and relate to one another weakly. In other words, they build their relationship on common abstractions, and where common abstractions do not exist, they are created based on the values of two self-contained individuals, without reference to the inescapable moral frameworks of the relationship in its strong relational form.

Conclusion: The Absence of Divorce

In the preceding analysis, I have argued that an abstractionist ontology pervades the research and theorizing of John Gottman, a key representative of the marital literature. Understanding Gottman's underlying ontology may help us better understand why divorce is largely neglected by the greater body of marital research and literature. I have already hinted that abstractionism—or weak relationality—might be the reason for this neglect. Gottman's own weak relationality helps to reinforce this conclusion. Recall that from a weak relational perspective, individuals begin and end as self-contained beings. To understand marriage from this weak relationality means that one's research or theorizing focuses primarily on the *individuals* in relationship; the relationship itself is necessarily secondary. Another way to put it is the well-being of the relationship (its

preservation or dissolution) is secondary to the well-being of the individuals involved. Thus it is entirely possible that researchers have made secondary the well-being of the relationship for the sake of preserving the well-being of the individual. If that is the case – and it seems to be – then the *dissolution* of the relationship, divorce, will only ever be a legitimate recourse toward preserving the well-being of the individual.

For Gottman, marital stability takes a back seat to individual affect. His only genuine connection to divorce as a phenomenon is to theorize that when affect is good, divorce is avoided, and when affect is bad, divorce will occur (Gottman, 1994). There is no attempt to prevent divorce per se, no valuing of the marital relationship itself, except to encourage married individuals to increase their positive affective experiences. Marriage becomes a means to another (individualistic) end. But this seems to be a thin defense of marriage, for one can easily imagine a couple who decides to *divorce* as a means of increasing their positive affective experiences. Even Gottman has said that sometimes divorce is necessary to preserve the well-being (read, positive affect) of the individual (Gottman, 1994). In spite of all his talk about divorce and hoping to "solve this crisis" (Gottman, 1999, p. 4), Gottman is not, at bottom, fundamentally concerned about it. Instead, he is more concerned about the personal, private affect of the married individuals.

I do not mean to accuse Gottman himself of being insensitive to the issue of divorce. Indeed, as I have said, divorce seems to be one concern that drives much of his research and writing (e.g., Gottman, 2002, 1999, 1994). In fact, one cannot help but sense more relational undertones in Gottman's literature which he directs to lay audiences (e.g., Gottman & Silver, 1999). Even Gottman's "love lab" in Seattle is one way in which he is

attempting to be more contextual, and therefore more relational, about marriages. It may just be the case the Gottman is not careful about his ontology, at times assuming a strong relationality in his practice and in his writing to lay populations. What I am suggesting is that the absence of divorce may just be due to the ontological assumptions upon which his scientific *research* is based.

Given that divorce is not a primary concern from an abstractionist perspective, this might also be a strong indication as to why it seems to be missing in so many other places in marital research. If a researcher of the caliber and popularity of Gottman, who seems to talk so much about divorce, is only truly talking about it as an afterthought – or even as a means toward individual well-being – then it should come as no surprise that divorce is missing from the larger body of marital research. In a time when marriage is so important, yet so fragile, marital researchers have every reason to be concerned with divorce. However, given their ontological foundation, which implicitly guides their approach to marriage, marital researchers cannot adequately conceptualize divorce nor make significant contributions toward preventing divorce. Ontologically, the well-being of the individual is valued above the relationship, thus making divorce secondary to many other aspects of marriage. If divorce is truly to be a priority among marital researchers, abstractionism is not the best ontology to adopt.

Implications

Fortunately, abstractionism is not the only ontological option. The alternative ontology presented in this thesis—relationality—shows promise as a very viable alternative. As stated previously, valuing the relationship is an inescapable moral framework that underlies a relational approach. This value would make the marital

relationship the center of research and therapy, changing the discipline in significant ways. While social scientists seem immensely concerned with the detrimental effects of divorce on divorced individuals and their children, these same social scientists are ignoring divorce at a fundamental, ontological level. To assume a relational ontology would mean researchers would take the marital relationship serious at the outset. Marriage would not be considered a means to the individual's well-being, nor would the individual be valued over the marital relationship; the focus would be first and foremost the relationship. By assuming a relational ontology, divorce would of necessity be of primary consideration, for divorce is the severing of the marital relationship. If divorce is truly to be a concern, and thus a priority among marital researchers, relationality might be a legitimate solution.

But the implications of a strong relationality are not limited to researching divorce. For example, researchers and therapists from this approach would acknowledge the role that the couple's context plays in their marital relationship. As a consequence, a more ethnographic approach might be taken towards research. Understanding and learning about couples and their marriages would extend beyond the couple and into their culture, including their life at home and at work, with family and friends – all the situations and contexts that give meaning to the relationship. This sort of approach to research would illuminate the complexity of marriage both on the level of the couple as well as the cultural level, enabling the sort of perspicacity that is restricted by more reductive methods.

Therapists might also benefit from a more ethnographic approach in therapy. This might mean intense observation of the couple in context, where therapists, rather than

bringing couples into their office, would go to the homes or offices of the couples to get a sense of the context of their marriage. It may necessitate “house calls” when couples are in the heat of battle, where therapists would process with the couple *in* context, with all the nuances that give meaning to the couple and their good and bad times together.

Conflict itself would be approached differently from a relational ontology, in contrast to how it is presently viewed in the marital literature. It is generally agreed that conflict occurs over disagreements and that differences are seen as inhibiting of good relationships, explaining why conflicts need to be resolved. From a relational ontology, the differences between people are integral to the relationship; that is, they are part of the identity – the context – of the relationship. Thus differences would be embraced from a strong relationality and disagreement and conflict would be seen in a more positive light: as an opportunity to learn and understand more about the other – and the relationship as a whole – and grow closer together.

Above all, a strong relationality would necessitate an emphasis on the *marital* in marital therapy and research. No longer could individuals be the focus of research and therapy, as is the case for Gottman and a host of his colleagues in the field. Marital therapy and research would be about the marriage. In this way, the discipline can begin to take seriously the issue of divorce and begin to truly defend marraige.

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