

# An ecological model of mediators of change in Couple Relationship Education

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Couple Relationship Education (RE) seeks to enrich couples' relationships, and assist them to manage stressful life events [1]. In the current paper we present an ecological model of couple relationships intended to guide the practice of RE, analyze the mediators of RE effects, and suggest future research needs to assess moderators and mediators of RE effects in order to enhance the impact of RE.

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Couple Relationship Education (RE) seeks to enrich couples' relationships, and assist them to manage stressful life events [1]. The evidence on the efficacy of RE is mixed but suggests there are positive effects for at least some couples, but the moderators and mediators of RE effects are unclear [2\*]. This paper presents an ecological model of couple relationships, which is intended to guide the offering of RE. The paper reviews evidence on the mediators of the effects of RE, and relates these findings to the ecological model. As the most relevant research spans the past 12 years we cover 2003–2015 inclusive.

## An ecological model of relationships to guide Relationship Education

Figure 1 presents an ecological model of couple relationships. The relationship outcomes refer to couple relationship satisfaction and stability. Couple interaction refers to the behaviors, thoughts and feelings of the partners when together. For example, there is a well-replicated association between negative couple communication and low relationship satisfaction [3]. Context refers to relatively stable characteristics of the environments where couples

live that influence relationship outcomes. For example, culture influences relationship standards, which are beliefs about what makes for a good couple relationship [4]. Relationship satisfaction can be seen as the extent to which a relationship meets each partner's standards, and the extent to which standards are shared by both partners [5].

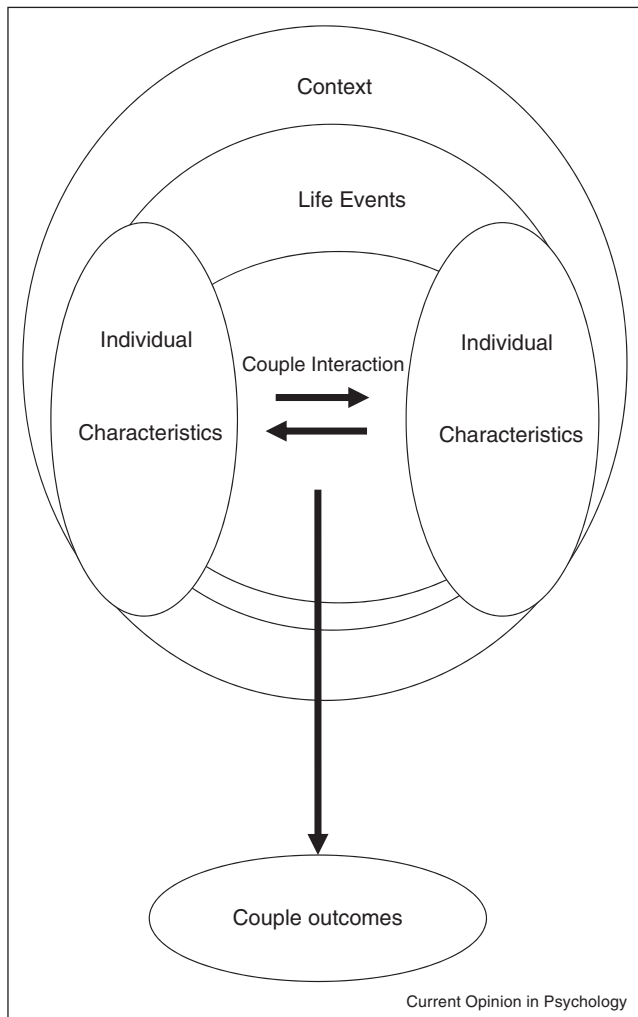
Life events refer to circumstances that impinge upon a couple or individual partners. In particular, high rates of stressful life events predict deteriorating couple relationship satisfaction [6,7]. More specifically, low satisfaction is associated with both chronic stressors (e.g. reported experience of racial prejudice [8]), and acute stressors (e.g. self-reported daily hassles [6]). Individual characteristics refer to stable historical and personal factors that each partner brings to a relationship. For example attachment insecurity (the tendency to be anxious about — or avoid — emotional closeness), is associated with low relationship satisfaction [9].

An important implication of the ecological model is that the association of couple interaction with relationship outcomes can be moderated by context, life events, and individual characteristics. As an example of the influence of context, withdrawal from communication is reliably associated with low relationship satisfaction in couples from Western cultures [3], but withdrawal has been argued to serve a culturally highly valued function of avoiding conflict in Chinese culture [10]. As an example of the influence of life events, negative communication predicts deteriorating relationship satisfaction when couples discuss minor life stresses, but similar negative communication predicts increased satisfaction when discussing major life stresses [11\*]. As an example of the influence of individual characteristics, people with a history of depression tend to be particularly sensitive to criticism, and such criticism might be particularly impactful on relationship satisfaction for these people [12].

## Relationship Education

Relationship Education (RE) most often targets the couple interaction component of the ecological model, based on the assumption that provision of critical relationship knowledge and skills will enhance couple relationships [1]. The Positive Relationship Education Program (PREP) is the most widely researched RE program [13]. The founders of PREP used research established correlates of relationship satisfaction to develop the content [14\*]. PREP has multiple foci but aims to disrupt negative interaction cycles, and to prompt and reinforce

Figure 1



An ecological model of influences on couple relationship coping with life events.

positive interpersonal behaviors, to enhance relationship satisfaction.

There are two other evidence-based RE programs that have been replicated in randomized controlled trials to be produce sustained improvement in couple satisfaction: *Couple Commitment And Relationship Enhancement* (Couple CARE) [15], and *Couples Coping Enhancement Training* (CCET) [16]. These two programs have a number of content areas in common with PREP, such as skills training in positive communication and conflict management.

There also are significant variations in content between the three evidence-based RE programs. For example, in PREP the most time is devoted to prevention of destructive conflict, as that is argued to be central to the prevention of relationship problems [17]. Dyadic coping with life

stress is the largest component of CCET, which is where spouses share thoughts and feelings about stresses external to the relationship, and develop a conjoint approach to managing the stress [18]. Dyadic coping receives little attention in PREP, but Couple CARE includes some of this content. In Couple CARE the development of each partners' relationship self-regulation (RSR) (capacity to implement self-change to enhance the relationship) is a distinctive core focus that is not in the other programs.

### Mediators of change in Relationship Education

As noted previously, all evidence-based RE has a significant focus on enhancing couple communication [1]. Perhaps for this reason most research has investigated changes in couple communication as a mediator of RE effects. Findings on changes in communication as a mediator of RE effects are inconsistent. Williamson *et al.* [19\*] found RE decreased couple's negative communication but that decrease was unrelated to couple's relationship satisfaction after RE. In a 5.5-year follow-up of 39 newlywed couples who received PREP, an expected association was found between declines in husbands' negativity and sustained relationship satisfaction, but wives' increased positive communication predicted a paradoxical increase in marital distress, while decreases in wives' negative behaviors were unrelated to later marital outcomes [20]. Baucom *et al.* [21] partially replicated this finding in a 5 year follow-up study of 77 couples who received PREP, finding deteriorating satisfaction in the couples who showed the largest increase in positive communication after PREP.

Stanley *et al.* [22] failed to replicate the paradoxical effects for changes in communication reported by Baucom *et al.* [21], but reported the more expected pattern that future relationship satisfaction was predicted by reduction in wives' and husbands' negative communication. A 2-year follow-up study of 109 couples attending CCET also showed expected results whereby wives' increase in positive communication, and the husbands' decrease in negative communication, predicted better relationship outcomes after RE [23].

In addition to changes in couple communication, some other potential mediators of RE have been proposed [13]. Couple CARE increases RSR, and high RSR predicts positive relationship satisfaction trajectory for at least 4 years after receiving RE [24]. The CCET program increases dyadic coping [25], and couple satisfaction 2 years after RE is predicted by increases in dyadic coping [26].

In summary, RE usually produces changes in the targeted couple interaction processes of communication, dyadic coping and RSR. There are inconsistent findings as to whether communication changes mediate RE effects, and

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