

Do event-contingent diaries about marital conflict change marital interactions?

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Received 6 April 2007; received in revised form 25 October 2007; accepted 22 November 2007

Abstract

Recent increase in the use of diary measures has prompted questions about the effect completing diaries has on participants. After extensive training, married couples completed event-contingent diaries about their couple disagreements for 15 days, focusing on emotional and behavioral aspects of marital conflict. Serving as a control for placebo effects of participation, the diary group ($n = 110$) and a non-randomized control group ($n = 57$) also completed brief daily checklists, with minimal training, over the reporting period. Before and after the reporting period, couples engaged in videotaped conflict-resolution tasks that were coded for conflict behaviors and emotions expressed. ANOVAs comparing groups indicated that completing event-contingent diaries for 15 days had no apparent effects on observed husbands' and wives' expressed emotions and behaviors during marital interactions. Parental reports on the brief daily diaries indicated minimal differences between the groups in global measures of marital functioning. At the same time, husbands' self-reports in the home indicated decreasing perceptions of marital quality over the recording period. Thus, although no differences in conflict tactics emerged based on observed marital interactions in the laboratory, certain self-reports of responding suggested potential reactivity effects.

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Keywords: Diary; Marital conflict; Reactivity

Introduction

Within marital research, questions of ecological validity concerning traditional methods of measurement (e.g., global self-report questionnaires, laboratory observations) have prompted researchers to develop new methods that capture events as they occur in context (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000; Green, Rafaeli, Bolger, Shrout, & Reis, 2006). A common criticism of questionnaire data is that participants must rely on recollection of events, feelings, and behaviors and that reliance on memory could affect the accuracy of the reports (Stone & Shiffman, 2002). At the same time, results based on laboratory observation may not generalize outside of the laboratory setting.

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One proposed methodological advance is the use of diary methods. Diary methods include a variety of strategies, also known as event experience sampling (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987), or ecological momentary assessment (Stone & Shiffman, 1994), that allow participants to record behaviors, emotions, and environmental factors as they occur in natural settings (Green et al., 2006; Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005). Recording events in this way decreases participants' reliance on memory, fostering reports that are more accurate. Diary methods also eliminate concerns about the generalizability of responses outside of the laboratory because participants document events in their natural contexts.

Recent increase in the use of paper and electronic diaries has called attention to the need for further study of the effects and quality of the data collected with diary methods (Green et al., 2006). Although diary measures provide unique information that cannot be captured in global self-report questionnaires and observational techniques, some worry that repeatedly filling out detailed assessments focusing on key emotional and behavioral dynamics could inadvertently affect the constructs researchers are trying to understand. Relatedly, the process of attending to significant details of interpersonal interactions may be seen as potentially therapeutic, that is, acting to change behavior. Being aware of and reporting on the detailed aspects of one's experiences could have the unintended effects of experiencing events differently, reacting to experiences differently, or habituating to experiences (Bolger et al., 2003). For example, using electronic diaries, Marco, Neale, Schwartz, Shiffman, and Stone (1999) failed to find support for their theoretically and empirically based hypotheses that coping predicted stress-related mood changes. In the discussion of their null findings, the authors suggested that the process of self-monitoring might have increased participants' awareness and altered cognitions, actions, and emotions over the response period, thereby undermining relations between coping and stress-related mood changes. Despite this concern, few studies have examined the possibility that diary procedures designed to increase the intensity and accuracy of reports about family events could influence participants' emotions, behaviors, and cognitions.

One recent study examined the effects that completing daily hand-held computer diaries had on behavioral and motivational reactivity related to drinking behaviors. Hufford, Shields, Shiffman, Paty, and Balabanis (2002) found that completing daily diaries had a small effect on participants' motivational reactivity, and no effect on their behavioral reactivity. In other words, participants showed no change in their reports of drinking behaviors, but they showed significant differences in readiness to change their behaviors. Although there was no control group in this study, raising concerns about internal validity, the results provide initial evidence that completing daily diaries has minimal effect on behavioral reactivity.

The effects of writing about stressful daily experience such as chronic pain have been examined within health psychology, suggesting limited reactivity to daily monitoring procedures. Aaron, Turner, Mancl, Brister, and Sawchuk (2005) examined reactivity to completion of electronic diaries about pain in patients with chronic temporomandibular disorder. They found that although the patients believed the daily diaries had effects, analyses from the diaries themselves showed no change over time in reported pain. In a randomized study of pain monitoring, Stone et al. (2003) found limited reactivity in terms of self-report experience of pain in patients who experience chronic pain. Stone et al. (2003) also examined, effects of different sampling densities (reporting 3, 6 or 12 times per day), finding minimal differences between groups.

The aim of the current study is to examine participant reactivity in the context of completing detailed and extensive daily diaries about marital conflict. In-home checklists and diaries have long been used in marital research to assess couples' daily interactions (Weiss & Perry, 1983) and as a therapy outcome measure (Margolin, 1990). We are not aware of any systematic study of behavioral reactivity in this context, although researchers have noted the possibility of participant reactivity (Margolin, 1990). If the process of closely monitoring one's behavior has the effect of changing behavior, cognitions, or emotions, researchers using diary methods must cautiously interpret data collected with these instruments.

Event-contingent diaries call the most attention to the elements of family events, including marital conflicts, and thus are most likely both to be useful for overcoming the limitations of retrospective report instruments (e.g., questionnaires) and to foster participant reactivity. Event-contingent diaries are especially useful in gaining information about clearly defined events as they happen naturally (Bolger et al., 2003). Using an event-contingent diary, participants are asked to complete the instrument following specific event(s) of interest. This methodology is especially informative if a researcher wants particular details of events, which might be missed or forgotten using questionnaire approaches (Bolger et al., 2003). On the other hand,

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