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## REPLY

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### Marriage at the Summit: Response to the Commentaries

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*This article serves as a response to the 13 commentaries on the target article, which introduced the suffocation model of marriage in America. This reply has four main sections. First, it presents an elaborated version of the suffocation model that was inspired by the commentaries. Second, it addresses three areas of significant disagreement that emerged as we digested the commentaries. Third, it examines the circumstances under which being instrumental for one's spouse's needs benefits the self. And fourth, it takes strides toward the development of a mathematically formal version of the suffocation model. It concludes with a discussion of the ways in which policymakers, clinicians, and individual Americans can capitalize upon the suffocation model to strengthen marriage and, in doing so, bolster personal well-being.*

We have spent the past month immersed in the ideas of eminent scholars who have thought carefully about the model of marriage we introduced in the target article. If there is an intellectual activity more scintillating out there, we cannot think of it. All 13 of the commentaries were deep-thinking and engaged treatises on the nature of contemporary marriage in America, with a particular focus on the strengths, limitations, and implications of our suffocation model. As a result of our delightful (albeit overwhelming) immersion in these commentaries, our understanding of contemporary marriage in America is far deeper than it was last month. For that, we are grateful both to *Psychological Inquiry* and to the 22 authors of the 13 commentaries.

Our initial plan was to offer a detailed response to least one of the points from all 13 of the commentaries, but we quickly learned that both time and length restrictions would not allow us to address so many topics with the level of depth they deserve. In the end, we realized that the commentaries stand on their own merits and that the best use of this response is to limit our focus to some of the major implications of the commentaries for the suffocation model. Specifically, we address four topics in this response. First, we present an updated

perspective on the suffocation model, which we developed as we digested the commentaries. Second, we address three cases in which we experienced significant disagreement with points raised in the commentaries. Third, we discuss the consequences for the self of facilitating one's spouse's need pursuit, a topic that we insufficiently addressed in the target article. Fourth, we begin to develop a mathematically formal version of the suffocation model, in part so we can present our ideas in the most precise and falsifiable manner possible and in part as an exhortation to relationships scholars to consider the benefits of incorporating mathematical formalism into the field's theoretical models.

#### **The Suffocation Model of Marriage in America**

Reading and digesting the commentaries gave us an entirely new perspective on how the suffocation model relates to existing models of marriage and relationship functioning. We had thought the model had carved out terrain well within the mainstream of conventional thinking, so it was enlightening to learn that the strongest reservations about our model came

from mainstream relationship scientists (particularly Nancy Collins, Brooke Feeney, Benjamin Karney, and Paula Pietromonaco)—members of our scholarly ingroup—rather than from scholars who are less strongly identified as such. Light and Fitzsimons's (this issue) analysis gave us some perspective on why some of the relationship science commentators might have raised strong objections:

The suffocation model's instrumental take on marriage is a fairly radical departure even from mainstream relationships research in the field of psychology. The primary emphasis in that literature has (understandably) been on relationship functioning as an end in and of itself. . . . Finkel and colleagues' view of marriage as part of the individual's repertoire of available means for pursuing a wide range of non-marital goals is decidedly not the norm in the field. (p. 92)

Immersing ourselves in the commentaries, especially but not exclusively those from relationship scientists, helped us refine some aspects of suffocation model. We present the model's key tenets in Table 1, which encompasses both the six tenets from the target article and two additional tenets that emerged as we refined the model. As formalized in *Tenet 1* (the instrumentality tenet), our endeavor to understand contemporary marriage in America began with the assumption that, to a large extent, Americans marry to facilitate their pursuit of important personal and interpersonal goals. Indeed, as married Americans' intimate social networks are shrinking (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2009), they increasingly rely on their spouse to help them fulfill a broader range of needs and goals than in the past. When we initially envisioned our target article, our working title was "The Freightened Marriage," as our semi-informed view was that Americans were asking more of their marriage than ever before and that there were perils in this trend. As we scoured the evidence relevant to this topic, however, we learned two things. First, many people had already advanced the argument that Americans have perilously freighted the institution of marriage. Second, and more important, this perspective is wrong.

### Elaboration of the Suffocation Model

It turns out that, as formalized in *Tenet 2* (the historical ascension tenet), Americans have not systematically freighted the institution of marriage over time. Rather, as depicted in Figure 3 in the target article, they have systematically altered the *ways in which* marriage is defreighted versus freighted. In reviewing the historical evidence, we learned that the *raison d'être*—the fundamental purposes—of marriage have changed throughout American history, yielding three different models of marriage (Burgess & Locke, 1945;

Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005). In the era of the *institutional marriage*, from the late 1700s until 1850, the *raison d'être* revolved around helping individuals meet their basic physiological and safety needs, including the needs to eat, to stay warm, and to be protected from violent attack. In the era of the *companionate marriage*, from 1850 until 1965, the *raison d'être* revolved around helping individuals meet their belonging and love needs, including the needs to love, to be loved, and to have a satisfying sex life. In the era of the *self-expressive marriage*, from 1965 to the present, the *raison d'être* revolved (and continue to revolve) around helping individuals meet their esteem and self-actualization needs, including the needs to respect oneself, to engage in self-expression, and to pursue personal growth.

**The ascent of Mount Maslow.** Much of the psychological terminology in the preceding paragraph, however, came from our own analysis rather than from the analysis of the historians and sociologists who have written about the history of marriage in America. At some point during our immersion into the relevant literature, we realized that the historical changes exhibited surprisingly strong parallels to Abraham Maslow's (1943, 1954/1970) famous hierarchy of needs, from the physiological needs at the bottom to self-actualization needs at the top (and through safety, belonging and love, and esteem needs along the way). We began to consider the possibility that conceptualizing the historical evidence from the perspective of Maslow's hierarchy might produce valuable new insights.

And it did, but not before we made one central tweak to the hierarchy: Rather than conceptualizing it in its standard form as a triangle, we conceptualized it as a major mountain, which we dubbed Mount Maslow. We leveraged this metaphorical tweak—mountain rather than triangle—to observe that just as deeper breaths are required to inhale the same amount of oxygen at higher relative to lower altitudes during a mountaineering expedition, greater investment in the quality of the relationship is required to meet the same amount of expectations of the marriage at higher rather than lower altitudes on Mount Maslow. Just as the thinner air at high altitudes places mountaineers at increased risk for inhaling insufficient oxygen, a process that can impair decision making and even yield life-threatening injury, Americans looking to their marriage to help them fulfill their higher altitude needs for esteem and self-actualization are at increased risk for insufficient investment in the quality of the relationship at high altitudes, a process that can undermine marital quality and even yield divorce. As such, and as formalized in *Tenet 3* (the altitude multiplier for oxygenation tenet), marriages require greater oxygenation—greater resource investment in the quality of the relationship—to meet

**Table 1.** *The Key Tenets of the Suffocation Model of Marriage in America.*

#	TA #	Name	Tenet
1	(1)	The instrumentality tenet	One central means through which Americans seek to fulfill their needs is through their marriage, especially as their access to nonspousal significant others has declined.
2	(2)	The historical ascension tenet	Since the nation's founding, the extent to which Americans look to their marriage to help them fulfill their lower needs has decreased, whereas the extent to which they look to their marriage to help them fulfill their higher needs has increased.
3	(3)	The altitude multiplier for oxygenation tenet	Just as the pursuit of higher needs frequently requires substantial insight into the self, looking to the marriage to help individuals fulfill their higher needs frequently requires that each spouse have substantial insight into the partner, and the development of such insight typically requires considerable communication and responsiveness over a sustained period of time.
4	N/A	The altitude multiplier for satisfaction tenet	If a marriage's oxygenation level is precisely sufficient to meet the expectations encompassed by spouses' marital dependence zones (Surface Area $\times$ Altitude), their satisfaction with the marriage will be a function of that oxygenation level weighted by altitude. This multiplier effect of higher altitudes reflects the intense rewards available at those altitudes.
5	N/A	The loss aversion tenet	As oxygenation increasingly exceeds the expectations encompassed by spouses' marital dependence zones (Surface Area $\times$ Altitude), satisfaction increases. As oxygenation increasingly falls short of these expectations, satisfaction decreases. However, each unit of deficiency decreases satisfaction more than each unit of excess increases it.
6	(4)	The normative deoxygenation tenet	Even as Americans increasingly look to their marriage to help them fulfill their higher needs, they have, on average, reduced their investment of time and psychological resources in their marriage.
7	(5)	The suffocation tenet	In conjunction, the resource imbalance resulting from the trends described in tenets 2, 3, and 6 <sup>a</sup> —insufficient investment to meet the emphasis on higher needs—has undermined spouses' marital quality and personal well-being (although those spouses who manage to invest sufficient resources experience especially strong marital quality and personal well-being).
8	(6)	The bolstering tenet	Spouses experiencing the adverse effects described in Tenet 7 <sup>a</sup> have three general options for ameliorating or reversing these consequences: optimizing their usage of the resources that are available, increasing their investment of time and psychological resources in their marriage, and asking less of the marriage in terms of facilitating their higher needs.

*Note.* Six of these eight tenets are reproduced verbatim from the target article TA. The TA # column contains the number assigned to that tenet in the TA. The N/A entries in that column apply to the two tenets that are formalized here for the first time (although the altitude multiplier for satisfaction idea pervaded the TA, it was not formalized as a tenet of the model in that article). All eight tenets are named for the first time in this reply.

<sup>a</sup>This number represents a change in the wording from the target article; we changed it to match the updated numbering structure.

a certain quantity of expectations if those expectations exist at higher than at lower altitudes on Mount Maslow.

To be sure, there are exceptions to the general tendency for the fulfillment of higher altitude needs to require greater oxygenation than the fulfillment of lower altitude needs. For example, it might take enormous relational investment to meet the psychological stability needs of a man who had experienced a psychologically damaging childhood, even though such needs reside at the safety needs altitude on Mount Maslow, second from the bottom. Stated otherwise, the correlation between need altitude and oxygenation requirements is not 1.0. The suffocation model perspective is simply that a given need's altitude and the oxygenation required to facilitate that need through the marriage are positively associated, probably strongly so. That is,

the fulfillment of higher altitude needs typically but not universally requires greater oxygenation than the fulfillment of lower altitude needs.

To summarize and sharpen the discussion thus far, and as presented in Table 2, the suffocation model has three inputs, or parameters. The first input is *expectations*, a term that refers to the degree to which individuals ask their marriage to help them fulfill an extensive versus a limited quantity of needs. Expectations are represented by the surface area of the marital dependence zone, a construct we introduced in the target article (e.g., see Figure 2 in that article). The second input is *altitude*, a term that refers to the degree to which individuals ask their marriage to help them fulfill needs that are located, on average, at higher versus lower altitudes. Altitude is represented by the vertical placement of the marital dependence zone on Mount Maslow. The third

**Table 2.** *The Suffocation Model's Three Inputs.*

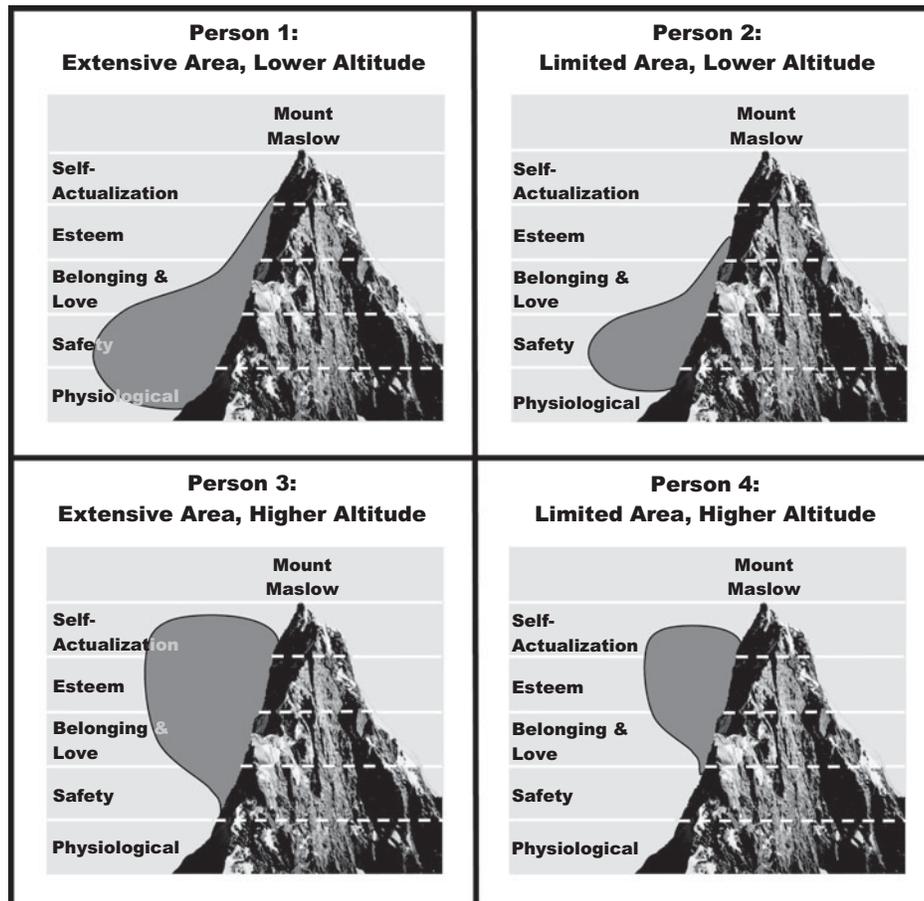
	Expectations	Altitude	Oxygenation
Definition	The extensiveness of the needs individuals look to their marriage to help them fulfill	The types of needs individuals look to their marriage to help them fulfill	The relationship-relevant resources available for helping the marriage meet the altitude-weighted needs encompassed by the marital dependence zone
Characterizing degree	Extensive vs. limited	High vs. low	Abundant vs. scarce
Graphical representation	Surface area of MDZ	Vertical location of the MDZ	Gray shading (as in Figure 7 in the target article)

*Note.* MDZ = marital dependence zones.

input is *oxygenation*, a term that refers to the degree to which the relationship-relevant resources available for helping the marriage meet the altitude-weighted needs encompassed by the marital dependence zone are abundant versus scarce. Oxygenation encompasses not only the time and psychological resources spouses invest in their relationship but also dispositional relationship skills and interpersonal compatibility, as it is much easier for skilled partners who are compatible to meet each other's needs than for unskilled partners who are incompatible to do so. We underscore that oxy-

genation encompasses the resources spouses invest in *their relationship*, not the resources they invest outside the relationship (e.g., time spent earning money).

To illustrate how these three inputs interrelate, let us place historical change aside and consider the marital dependence zones of four hypothetical Americans alive today. As presented in Figure 1, we have generated these four marital dependence zones by crossing expectations (plentiful vs. limited), depicted in terms of surface area, with altitude (higher vs. lower). Person 1 and Person 3's *expectations* are relatively extensive,



*Figure 1.* Marital dependence zones for four hypothetical Americans today.

whereas Person 2 and Person 4's expectations are relatively limited. Person 1 and Person 2's expectations reside at a lower *altitude* on Mount Maslow, whereas Person 3 and Person 4's expectations reside at a higher altitude. Insofar as more oxygenation is required to meet both more extensive and higher altitude expectations, Person 3 should require the most oxygenation and Person 2 should require the least (for simplicity, oxygenation level is not represented graphically in Figure 1). Later, we revisit these four hypothetical Americans as we work toward a mathematically formal version of the model.

**Implications for relationship quality and personal well-being.** Maslow (1954/1970) noted that, relative to lower need gratifications, "higher need gratifications produce more desirable subjective results, i.e., more profound happiness, serenity, and richness of the inner life" (p. 99). As formalized in *Tenet 4* (the altitude multiplier for satisfaction tenet), the suffocation model suggests that a similar effect emerges when people look to their marriage to help them meet their needs. Specifically, the model suggests that, all else equal, having a spouse help one meet one's higher altitude needs (e.g., to self-express) produces greater psychological well-being, and better marital quality, than having a spouse help one meet one's lower altitude needs (e.g., to eat). Consistent with this possibility, the residualized-lagged (longitudinal) association of marital quality personal well-being has become stronger in recent decades (see Figure 6 in the target article; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007) as marital dependence zones presumably have ascended Mount Maslow.

To illustrate this "altitude multiplier for satisfaction" point, consider once again the four hypothetical Americans represented in Figure 1. Let us imagine that all four of these individuals experience precisely the amount of oxygenation required to meet the expectations encompassed by their marital dependence zone (Surface Area  $\times$  Altitude). In this case, even though Person 1 and Person 3 may have equally extensive expectations of their marriage (identical surface area), Person 3 will have a more satisfying marriage because having higher altitude needs met yields, in Maslow's terminology, "more desirable subjective results" than having lower altitude needs met. Similarly, and for the same reason, even though Person 2 and Person 4 may have equally extensive expectations of their marriage, Person 4 will have a more satisfying marriage.

In a rough sense, the expectancies encompassed by the marital dependence zone (Surface Area  $\times$  Altitude) are akin to the *comparison level* construct in interdependence theory—a "standard against which the member evaluates the 'attractiveness' of the relationship or how satisfactory it is" (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p. 21). All else equal, marriages in which

oxygenation (resources available) exceeds the expectations encompassed by the marital dependence zone (Surface Area  $\times$  Altitude) are more satisfying than those in which it does not. In our refined version of the suffocation model, we suggest that discrepancies between oxygenation and the expectations encompassed by the marital dependence zone (Surface Area  $\times$  Altitude) influence satisfaction, but not in a symmetric or constant way. As formalized in *Tenet 5* (the loss aversion tenet), and building on the loss aversion logic that negative deviations exert stronger negative effects than positive deviations exert positive effects (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), the suffocation model suggests that each unit that oxygenation is deficient in meeting the expectations encompassed by the marital dependence zone decreases satisfaction more than each unit that oxygenation exceeds these expectations increases it. In other words, all else equal, having too few resources than required to meet expectations decreases satisfaction more than having more resources than required increases it. If the marital dependence zone encompasses 100 altitude-weighted units of expectations, a 10-unit shortfall associated with the marriage having 90 units of oxygenation would decrease satisfaction more than a 10-unit excess associated with the marriage having 110 units of oxygenation would increase satisfaction.

**Normative trends relevant to the suffocation model.** Given the historical ascent of marriage on Mount Maslow (*Tenet 2*), the additional oxygenation required to meet marital expectations at higher altitudes (*Tenet 3*), the increasing satisfaction associated with meeting higher rather than lower altitude needs through marriage (*Tenet 4*), and the asymmetric influence of oxygenation deficiency versus excess on marital satisfaction (*Tenet 5*), it is important to understand normative trends over time in Americans' oxygenation levels. Unfortunately, the news here is, on balance, not great. As formalized in *Tenet 6* (the normative deoxygenation tenet), even though, all else equal, greater oxygenation is required at higher than at lower altitudes, American marriages appear to have scarcer rather than more abundant resources today than in previous decades. For example, contemporary Americans are, on average, investing less time in their marriage (Dew, 2009) and are, on average, experiencing greater life stress (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012) than Americans 30 years ago. According to the suffocation model, these trends help to explain why the average marriage today is struggling while the best marriages are flourishing. As discussed in the target article, divorce rates have stalled near an all-time high since the 1980s (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006)—Cherlin's (2009, p. 98) "high plateau" of around 45%—and mean satisfaction levels in established marriages are declining

somewhat (Marquardt, Blankenhorn, Lerman, Malone-Colón, & Wilcox, 2012).

A central goal of the suffocation model is to explain why the best marriages are better than ever while the majority of marriages are struggling. As formalized in *Tenet 7* (the suffocation tenet), the model suggests that the historical ascent of Mount Maslow yields spectacular outcomes for those marriages (and those spouses) that can flourish at these higher altitudes—marriages in which the partners have strong relationship skills, are compatible, and are willing and able to invest plenty of time and psychological resources in the relationship. However, it also suggests that it is more difficult to flourish at higher than at lower altitudes, especially given that Americans are, on balance, investing fewer resources in their marriage today than in the recent past. This bifurcation analysis, which was deeply embedded in the target article, contradicts Feeney and Collins's (this issue) assertion that “the suffocation model rests on the assumption that there is a looming crisis in modern marriage” (p. 109). The suffocation model view is that some marriages are extremely successful—more successful, on balance, than the best marriages in the past—but the average marriage is not doing especially well. In short, marriage in America is not in crisis and no crisis is looming, but, taken as a whole, the institution is not flourishing, either.

**Implications for intervention.** Given that the suffocation model is essentially a supply-and-demand model—the *supply* of oxygenation and the *demands* of the marital dependence zone (Surface Area  $\times$  Altitude)—it logically implies three general pathways through which struggling marriages can become stronger. As formalized in *Tenet 8* (the bolstering tenet), spouses can seek (a) to use their existing oxygenation resources more efficiently; (b) to bolster the oxygenation of their marriage by investing additional resources in the relationship; and (c) to reduce the expectations embedded in the marital dependence zone by decreasing its surface area, lowering its altitude, or both. Several of the commentaries elaborated upon these ideas in compelling and innovative ways (e.g., Aron & Aron, this issue; Conley & Moors, this issue; DePaulo, this issue).

**How the suffocation model differs from existing models of expectations in marriage.** Given that the surface area of the marital dependence zone represents the extent to which one's expectations regarding one's marriage are plentiful versus limited, we wish to comment briefly on how our model differs from existing models of expectations in marriage. As noted by Neff and Morgan (this issue), scholars have developed sophisticated models suggesting that the association of marital expectations with marital outcomes depends

upon factors such as whether spouses communicate with each other effectively versus ineffectively during conflict (McNulty & Karney, 2004) and whether spouses' expectations are measured as global dispositions versus as specific expectations regarding the partner's behavior (Neff & Geers, 2013). The suffocation model is entirely compatible with these existing models of expectations in marriage, but it suggests that the *amount* of expectations (extensive vs. limited) must be weighted by the *altitude* of these expectations (high vs. low) if we wish to consider how much oxygenation is required to meet marital expectations. It also suggests that the influence of these altitude-weighted expectations depend upon the marriage's level of oxygenation. For example, the quality of the responsiveness and communication required for a marriage to meet the expectations encompassed by a marital dependence zone of a given area typically must be better when the marital dependence zone is located at higher rather than lower altitudes on Mount Maslow.

The suffocation model also suggests that our understanding of the role of expectations on marital outcomes will be bolstered to the extent that we sharpen our insight regarding what it takes to oxygenate marriage. For example, in alignment with the suffocation model, it seems that communicating effectively (McNulty & Karney, 2004) is important, but other variables—such as time spent alone together, percentage of such time spent discussing topics relevant to the spouses' higher altitude needs, and so forth—are also likely to be crucial.

### The Circumscribed Role of Maslow's Theorizing in the Suffocation Model

Although the preceding discussion makes clear that Maslow's hierarchy of needs plays a crucial role in the suffocation model, reading the commentaries helped us realize that we had underspecified some aspects of Maslow's theorizing—and how his theorizing informs the suffocation model. In general, Maslow's (1943, 1954/1970) theory of human motivation is sweeping and innovative. That said, we disagree with some aspects of it—including the views that all needs other than self-actualization represent “deficiency needs” and that the content of a person's core essence is largely present at birth—and the suffocation model is not intended as a variant or a derivation of his theory. Rather, we have incorporated three key features of Maslow's theory into the suffocation model because they help to impose psychological coherence upon the historical changes in American marriage and because they provide insights that were crucial as we were developing the model. In particular, we have incorporated (a) the structure of the hierarchy, with physiological needs at

the bottom, followed by safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization needs; (b) the assumption that “the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need” (Maslow, 1943, p. 370); and (c) the belief that people derive greater psychological well-being from satisfying higher rather than lower needs. Although these ideas are challenging to test, and our intent is to adopt them in a heuristic or probabilistic sense rather than in an absolute sense, the best evidence to date is broadly consistent with them, especially when distinguishing the physiological and safety needs at lower altitudes from the belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization needs at higher altitudes (Hagerty, 1999; Sirgy, 1986; Tay & Diener, 2011).

A systematic review of Maslow’s theorizing in general, or of his hierarchy of needs in particular, is beyond the scope of the present article, but it is important to clarify some confusion regarding Maslow’s ideas that emerged in one of the commentaries. For example, our reading of Karney’s (this issue) perspective on Maslow’s ideas is that it differs profoundly from our own—and from Maslow’s own perspective. When expressing his disagreement with the suffocation model claim that Americans look to their marriage to help them meet their physiological needs less today than in the past, Karney (this issue) observed that “married people live significantly longer than unmarried people” (p. 116) and that “the amount that individuals consume depends on whether they are eating alone or with others, such that people eat more when dining with family and friends” (p. 116). When expressing his disagreement with the suffocation model claim that Americans look to their marriage to help them meet their safety needs less today than in the past, he observed that “by the time they reach retirement age, continuously married individuals have accumulated significantly more wealth than those who remained unmarried” (p. 116).

Yes, it is true that, all else equal, married people tend to live longer and to accumulate more wealth than unmarried people and that people tend to eat more when socializing over a meal than when eating alone. Yet our understanding is that all of these findings are irrelevant to the sorts of needs Maslow was talking about when discussing physiological and safety needs. Maslow was not talking about longevity, wealth, and gluttony so much as breathing, freezing, and starving. In his seminal article, for example, Maslow (1943) illustrated his prepotency point by observing that “a person who is lacking food, safety, love, and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than for anything else” (p. 373). Studies examining, for example, whether one finishes one’s French fries or orders dessert are, to our understanding, irrelevant to Maslow’s discussion of physiological needs because participants in such studies have almost uniformly met those needs. Indeed, Karney (this issue) seems to ac-

knowledge this general point later in his commentary, when he observes that “the survival benefits of intimate relationships accrue only when those relationships are satisfying and fulfilling” (p. 117). Unless we are misunderstanding his point, Karney is arguing that the survival benefits of contemporary marriage generally do not derive from having spouses meet each other’s physiological needs, which is exactly our view. However, such benefits could emerge by, for example, having spouses meet each other’s belonging and love needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which is also consistent with our view.

Maslow was not optimally clear about the distinction between temporary and longer term need activation. Much of his theorizing revolved around state-level processes. For example,

It is quite true that man lives by bread alone—when there is no bread. But what happens to man’s desires when there *is* plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled? *At once other (and ‘higher’) needs emerge* and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still ‘higher’) needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency. (Maslow, 1943, p. 375, emphasis in original)

However, Maslow (1943) also addressed how one’s life circumstances alter the influence of a given type of need on a person’s motivation *in general*. For example, “the physiological needs, along with their partial goals, when chronically gratified cease to exist as active determinants or organizers of behavior” (p. 375), and “just as a sated man no longer feels hungry, a safe man no longer feels endangered” (p. 379). These assertions received compelling support in a recent study of 123 countries and 61,000 participants, which revealed that, at the country level and “as hypothesized by Maslow (1954), people tend to achieve basic and safety needs before other needs” (Tay & Diener, 2011, p. 363).

This component of Maslow’s theorizing—that one’s stable life circumstances influence which needs generally tend to be active versus dormant—was especially influential in our development of the historical ascension tenet of the suffocation model (Tenet 2). In the decades and centuries following America’s Declaration of Independence in 1776—as the nation became wealthier, regulating institutions (including police forces) became stronger, and laws increasingly protected people against starvation and homelessness—more and more Americans experienced higher chronic levels of satisfaction of their physiological and safety needs. According to the suffocation model, and in accord with Maslow’s theorizing and Tay and Diener’s (2011) evidence, this change was

a major impetus behind the transition from the institutional to the companionate model of marriage.

Shifting our focus from the bottom of the hierarchy to the top, we note that Maslow defined self-actualization in various ways during his decades of theorizing about the construct, and this variation can yield confusion. From the perspective of the suffocation model, *self-actualization* refers to

an episode, or a spurt in which the powers of the person come together in a particularly efficient and intensely enjoyable way, and in which he is more integrated and less split, more open for experience, more idiosyncratic, more perfectly expressive or spontaneous, or fully functioning, more creative, more humorous, more ego-transcending, more independent of his lower needs, etc. (Maslow, 1962/1968, p. 97)

Maslow argued that “most people (perhaps all) tend toward self-actualization” and that “in principle at least, most people are *capable* of self-actualization” (p. 158, emphasis in original). In addition, consistent with the suffocation model perspective, Maslow argued that facilitative social contexts are “absolutely necessary” for people to experience success in their pursuit of self-actualization (p. 161). In short, self-actualization is an aspirational state that virtually all people pursue and that, with the help of significant others and a supportive cultural milieu, many Americans reach, even if few generally persist in that state.

Maslow did not make claims about the normative content of people’s self-actualization needs because an essential feature of his theory is that this content varies from one person to the next. Indeed, he characterized the drive toward self-actualization in terms of “the desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is” (Maslow, 1954/1970, p. 46). He elaborated as follows:

The specific form that these needs will take will of course vary greatly from person to person. In one individual it may take the form of the desire to be an ideal mother, in another it may be expressed athletically, and in still another it may be expressed in painting pictures or in inventions. At this level, individual differences are greatest. (p. 46)

As such, we agree with Feeney and Collins (this issue) and Holmes and Murray (this issue) that the content of self-actualization frequently involves close personal relationships. With regard to the suffocation model, the relevant point is that contemporary Americans, relative to the Americans of yesteryear, look to their marriage more to facilitate their self-actualization pursuits—both those that pertain to close personal relationships and those that do not—and less to facilitate their low-altitude pursuits. Light and Fitzsimons (this issue) get it exactly right when they suggest that “a

1750-era man may have sought a wife to procure the children needed to run the farm, while a 2013-era man may seek a wife to procure the children needed to fulfill his vision of himself as a family man” (p. 92).

### Summary: The Suffocation Model

In short, the suffocation model incorporates select insights from Maslow’s theorizing to develop an expansive, interdisciplinary perspective on marriage. It focuses on three inputs: expectations (extensive vs. limited), altitude (high vs. low), and oxygenation (abundant vs. scarce). These three inputs interrelate in complex ways to determine relationship well-being, with downstream implications for personal well-being.

The discussion thus far has focused on the suffocation model *per se*. Before pivoting to a discussion of the consequences it has for the self to fulfill one’s spouse’s goal pursuit—a topic we did not adequately address in the target article—we first address three major areas of disagreement we had with the commentators regarding the core content of the model.

### Three Areas of Significant Disagreement With the Commentators

In general, we found the insights presented in the commentaries enormously stimulating, and we felt that the authors engaged accurately and productively with the suffocation model as we had presented it in the target article. There were, however, three instances in which the commentaries contained statements or perspectives with which we had significant disagreement or that we felt mischaracterized what we said. Given how central these cases are to our primary goals in developing the suffocation model, we address them with in-depth responses.

#### The Suffocation Model and Sociodemographic Variation

Although the suffocation model addresses major changes in marriage across America’s history, it is not a model of sociodemographic variation within specific historical eras. It is a general model that emphasizes the extensiveness and altitude of what people expect from their marriage and the abundance versus scarcity of relationship-relevant resources available for meeting those expectations. That said, scholars can capitalize upon these general principles to explain the striking differences in marital outcomes across sociodemographic groups.

A few of the commentaries voiced reservations about this approach of building a model of marriage that relies upon general principles rather than sociodemographically moderated principles. For example,

Feeney and Collins (this issue) asserted that the lack of central emphasis on social class as a core feature of the suffocation model is “a critical oversight given the important role that social class plays in predicting marital outcomes” (p. 109). Pietromonaco and Perry-Jenkins (this issue) asserted that “the differences inherent in American marriages as a function of gender, social class, race, and ethnicity . . . reflect deep and complex differences in the function and structure of marriage, differences that are marginalized in the current analysis of American marriage” (p. 53). As a result, Pietromonaco and Perry-Jenkins argue, the suffocation model

provides a narrow view of needs in marriage and misses a crucial piece of the picture: namely, that the ways in which marriage is conceived, enacted, and valued differs profoundly for men and women and across social class, racial and ethnic groups as well as across the life course. (p. 53)

These scholars went so far as to “propose that *any theory* of people’s needs in marriage, particularly in America, cannot simply average across these key demographic characteristics because they are inextricably tied to what people seek from marriage” (p. 54, emphasis added).

As we respond to the critique that our decision not to embed sociodemographic variation into our model’s DNA rises to the level of “a critical oversight,” resulting in a model that “misses a crucial piece of the picture,” it is important to bear in mind exactly what we said about such variation in our target article, particularly in the section entitled “Sociodemographic Variation in the Suffocation of Marriage.” We argued that the historical trajectories in marriage’s *raison d’être* likely trended in the same direction across socioeconomic groups. For example, based on the available evidence (Burgess & Locke, 1945; Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005), it is unlikely that people in any sociodemographic group have, on average, descended Mount Maslow over time, looking to their marriage predominantly to help them fulfill self-actualization needs in 1800, love and belonging needs in 1900, and physiological needs in 2000. We also noted that the rate of the temporal ascent of Mount Maslow has likely varied over time across sociodemographic groups (e.g., Amish people may have ascended at a slower rate on average than the population as a whole). Finally, we noted that recent decades have brought sharp increases in income and wealth inequality that have demanded more of poor and middle class Americans without rewarding them with commensurate compensation. Based on the available economic evidence, we dated this rise in inequality to around 1980, and we attributed to this inequality the sharp di-

vergence in marital outcomes between the wealthy and the poor that began around that time.<sup>1</sup>

In short, we argued that the historical trajectories in what people are looking for from their marriage trend in the same direction across all sociodemographic groups, but the availability of the sorts of resources required to oxygenate the marriage vary tremendously across socioeconomic groups. Many Americans who are relatively well-to-do have such resources in abundance, whereas many Americans who are poor lack an adequate supply. As such, from the perspective of the suffocation model, the effect of poverty on marital outcomes is mediated strongly through dynamics related to oxygenation but only weakly through dynamics related to what people seek from their marriage. That is, this effect of poverty—including stressors such as lack of money to pay the heating bill or repair the car—is mediated strongly through a lack of investment in the marriage, such as insufficient time together, or through an ineffective use of that time, such as using it to fight about money rather than to engage in constructive problem solving. There is variability in the extent to which poor people experience a successful versus an unsuccessful marriage, and we suggest that this variability is driven by the extent to which they manage to keep their marriage well oxygenated despite their hardships—or, failing that, the extent to which that are able to reduce the extensiveness or lower the altitude of their expectations so the expectations align more closely with the oxygenation resources.

From this perspective, the reasons why poverty exerts adverse effects on marital outcomes are, to a large extent, similar to the reasons why a high-powered lawyer whose workaholic tendencies cause her to invest insufficiently in fostering a high-quality marriage or to become angry with her husband for requesting that she support him more effectively experiences adverse marital outcomes. Or consider an empirical example from the middle of the income spectrum: Air traffic controllers tend to withdraw from their spouse much more when they experience high rather than low levels of stress at work (Repetti, 1989), an effect that is likely to undermine oxygenation resources available for the marriages of highly stressed workers. To be sure, effectively oxygenating a marriage is far more difficult

<sup>1</sup>The changes in inequality are stark. According to the U.S. Congressional Budget Office (2011), which provides nonpartisan analysis for the U.S. Congress, the share of overall income of the top 1% of earners in America approximately doubled between 1979 and 2007, and this increase came at the expense of the bottom 80% of earners. Income was unchanged for the remaining Americans in the top quintile, but it dropped 2 to 3 percentage points for Americans in each of the bottom four quintiles. As a proportion of income, this 2- to 3-point drop was especially severe for Americans in the lower quintiles. For example, the incomes of the lower middle-class Americans in the second quintile (the 21st–40th percentiles) dropped from 10% to 7%, a substantial decline in this 28-year period.

to the extent that external stressors on the marriage are strong—a state of affairs that is linked to poverty—but this point is independent of the extensiveness or the altitude of expectations Americans bring to their marriage. In short, poverty is one factor among many that undermines how much people are willing and able to invest in their marriage, and, to a large extent, all of these variables harm marital satisfaction by rendering the marriage insufficiently oxygenated.

So, does the suffocation model neglect sociodemographic variation? In an important sense it does. Its explanatory principles and core tenets do not focus on such variation. In an equally important sense, though, it does not. Even without any emphasis on such variation on the independent variable side of the equation, the suffocation model facilitates the generation of targeted, falsifiable predictions regarding the dependent variable side of the equation—regarding sociodemographic variation in marital *outcomes*.

With regard to such variation, the debate that has emerged in this issue of *Psychological Inquiry* has revealed an exciting, but all too rare, scientific opportunity: Independent teams of scholars have advanced opposing and falsifiable predictions regarding an important phenomenon. Although data regarding sociodemographic variation in the perceived *raison d'être* across American history do not exist, both our target article and Pietromonaco and Perry-Jenkins' commentary cite the definitive article that examines possible sociodemographic variation in the perceived *raison d'être* today. Specifically, Trail and Karney's (2012) landmark study asked more than 6,000 Americans to report the extent to which they believe that each of 11 marital characteristics is important for a successful marriage (0 = *not important*; 1 = *somewhat important*; 2 = *very important*). These scholars recruited a stratified random sample that oversampled low-income and non-White populations, amassing robust samples of low-income participants (under 200% of the federal poverty limit [FPL]), moderate-income participants (200–400% FPL), and high-income participants (over 400% FPL).<sup>2</sup> They also recruited a random sample of welfare recipients (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). Trail and Karney examined how much Americans from these widely divergent income categories believed that each of the 11 marital characteristics was important for a successful marriage. The suffocation model prediction is that any income-related differences in the extent to which Americans view a certain reason for marriage as important are likely to be small and relatively unimportant in explaining sociodemographic variation in marital outcomes, whereas the Pietromonaco and Perry-Jenkins (this issue) perspective, as illustrated in the preceding

quotes, is that such differences are likely to be large and important in explaining variation in marital outcomes.

We reproduce the relevant Trail and Karney results in Figure 2. The x-axis presents the 11 marital characteristics, ordered from the ones respondents indicated were least to most important for a successful marriage. Although the importance ratings for some of the characteristics statistically differed by income—which is hardly surprising with a sample of more than 6,000 participants—focusing on such effects in the present discussion would be to see a tree but miss the forest. And the forest is this: Figure 2 depicts four lines, each representing one of the income groups, that are virtually on top of one another. Statistically corroborating this visual evidence, the six bivariate profile correlations (Pearson's *r*) one can calculate by comparing any one profile to any other profile range from .983 to .998, with a mean of .992. In addition, auxiliary analyses revealed that neither race nor gender moderated these income effects in any substantive way.

Considering all 11 of Trail and Karney's (2012) marital characteristics addresses the general question of whether the qualities that Americans deem important for a successful marriage differ in any notable way as a function of income (or race or gender). However, these characteristics vary in the extent to which they align with specific altitudes on Mount Maslow. Of the 11, two provide reasonably compelling operationalizations of middle-altitude needs for belonging and love ("being able to communicate effectively" and "supporting each other through difficult times"), and one provides a reasonably compelling operationalization of high altitude needs for self-actualization ("understanding each other's hopes and dreams"). Consistent with the suffocation model, and as illustrated toward the right of Figure 2, participants rated these three qualities as crucial for a successful marriage—as three of the four most important characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Panel A of Figure 3 depicts the importance ratings for these three characteristics as a function of income. As is clear from the graph, the extent to which Americans evaluate these middle- and high-altitude needs as important for marriage is virtually identical across income levels.

Trail and Karney (2012) reported one additional finding relevant to whether income moderates what Americans are seeking from their marriage. Specifically, participants reported their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with this statement: "A happy, healthy marriage is one of the most important things in life." If seeking happiness from one's

<sup>2</sup>To put a dollar value (USD) on these categories, the FPL in 2012 was, for example, \$14,937 for a childless couple or \$23,283 for couple with two children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>That the remaining characteristic in the top four was "spending time together," a reasonably compelling operationalization of oxygenation, is consistent with the possibility that not only do Americans look to their marriage to help them meet relatively high altitude needs but also that they realize that doing so requires spouses to invest resources in the quality of their relationship.

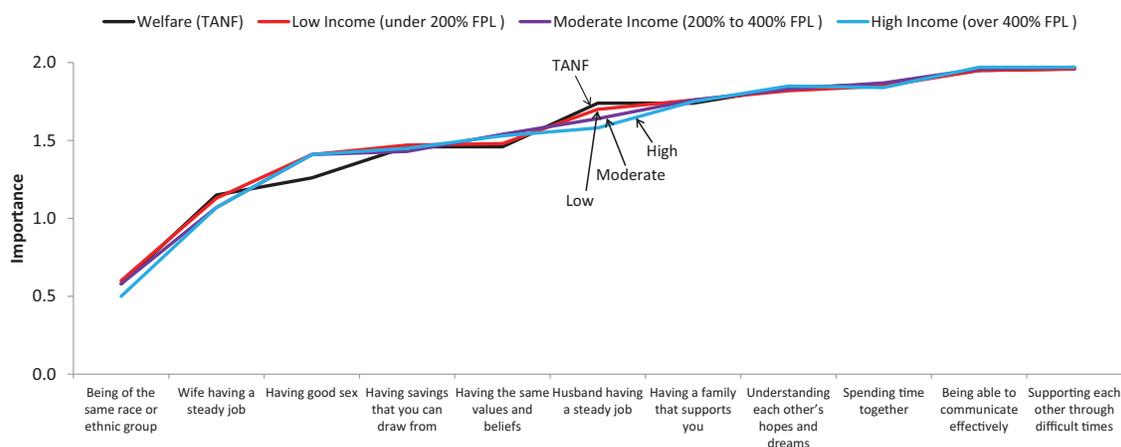


Figure 2. The remarkable consistency across socioeconomic groups in what characteristics are important for a successful marriage (adapted from Trail & Karney, 2012). Note. TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; FPL = federal poverty level. All six of the correlations ( $r$ ) that can be calculated by comparing any one profile to any other profile exceed .98, and the average correlation ( $r$ ) exceeds .99. The scale ranged from 0 to 2 (0 = not important; 1 = somewhat important; 2 = very important). In both the color and the black-and-white versions of this figure, it is difficult to distinguish among the four lines because they are virtually on top of one another—because the four income groups are virtually identical in what they view as important for a successful marriage (see main text for elaboration). © John Wiley and Sons. Reproduced by permission of John Wiley and Sons. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online).

marriage is an indulgence that is available only to the wealthy—because the poor are so focused on achieving financial stability through marriage, for example—then one would expect that high-income people should agree more strongly with this statement than low-income people. In reality, as illustrated in Panel B of Figure 3, all four income groups highly valued marital happiness, and there was negligible (and nonsignificant) variation across them.<sup>4</sup> These findings suggest that the association of poverty with marital outcomes is unlikely to be mediated (in a substantive way) by differences across sociodemographic groups in what they believe is important for a successful marriage.

Before concluding this discussion of sociodemographic variation, we wish to offer a broader comment about the role of such variation in social science. In his discussion of contemporary marriage in

American, Cherlin (2009) observed that the variables of class, race, and gender function as “the holy trinity of social science,” noting that it is “an article of faith among my colleagues that these three basic divisions in American society must be emphasized in all studies” (p. 158). Although he recognizes, as do we, that such variables are often strong predictors of important marital outcomes, he disagrees, as do we, with the view (voiced by Pietromonaco and Perry-Jenkins, this issue) that any theoretical model that focuses on general variables rather than sociodemographic variation is inherently flawed. There are many interesting and important variables to study, which means that there is room for at least *some* models to focus on variables other than class, race, and gender. Indeed, we share Cherlin’s (2009) view that many scholars “exaggerate the differences in American family life across educational, racial, and ethnic lines. Americans have much in common. . . . From the poorest to the most affluent, young adults seek companionship, emotional satisfaction, and self-development through marriage” (p. 174). He concludes that “the poor and near-poor have the same standards for marriage as the more educated and affluent,” and he laments that, “too often we view the poor as if they have a different set of values than other Americans do” (p. 179). The data from Trail and Karney (2012), as summarized in Figures 2 and 3, provide strong support for his assertions.

In short, the suffocation model is not inherently a model of sociodemographic variation, but it is a model that scholars can use to explain such variation. Indeed, even without building such variation into the model’s DNA, it is our hope that the suffocation model will

<sup>4</sup>Pietromonaco and Perry-Jenkins (this issue) and Neff and Morgan (this issue) discussed the work of Edin and colleagues in addressing the topic of sociodemographic variation in what Americans seek from their marriage (Edin, 2000; Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). In contrast to the Trail and Karney (2012) research, however, Edin’s research focuses exclusively on low-income mothers, so it does not allow for any comparisons across sociodemographic groups. To be sure, her research does suggest that such mothers seek financial resources from marriage, and it is plausible that such considerations are stronger than among wealthier women, but it does not undermine the suffocation model perspective that such women are also looking to marriage for help with meeting higher altitude needs. Indeed, consistent with this perspective, Edin and Kefalas’s (2005) conclusion is that “the most fundamental truth these stories reveal is that the meaning of marriage has changed. . . . Now, marriage is primarily about adult fulfillment, it is something poor women do for themselves” (p. 136).

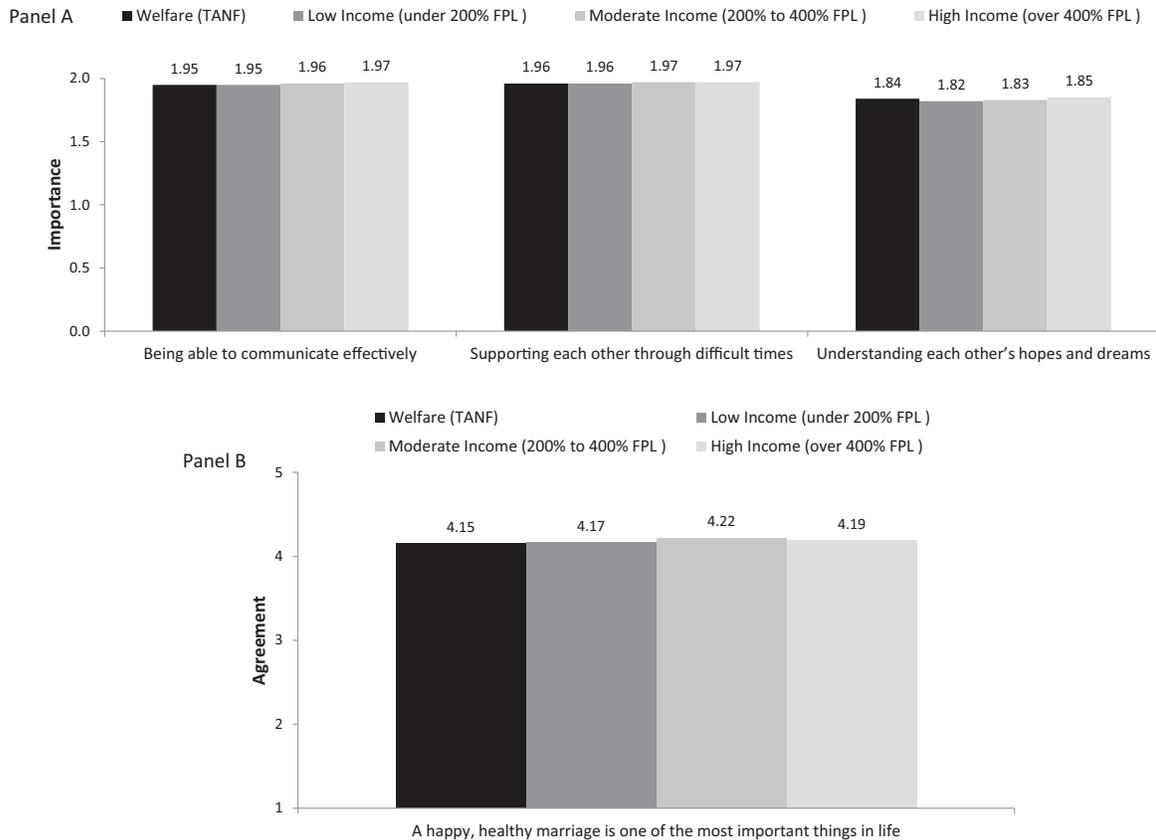


Figure 3. A focused illustration of the consistency of marital priorities across socioeconomic groups with regard to middle- and higher-altitude needs (adapted from Trail & Karney, 2012). Note. TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. FPL = federal poverty level. Panel A: “Being able to communicate effectively” and “supporting each other through difficult times” are the best available operationalizations of belonging and love needs, and “understanding each other’s hopes and dreams” is the best available operationalization of self-actualization needs.” The scale ranged from 0 to 2 (0 = not important; 1 = somewhat important; 2 = very important). Panel B: The scale ranged from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The y-axis in each panel includes the full scale range because of the theoretical debate pertaining to the absolute level of or importance or agreement with these items across income levels. © John Wiley and Sons. Reproduced by permission of John Wiley and Sons. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

prove to be every bit as effective at explaining sociodemographic variation in marital outcomes (e.g., satisfaction) as models that build such variation into their DNA.

### The Challenge of Supporting One’s Spouse’s Higher Altitude Goals

Feeney and Collins (this issue) object to the suffocation model tenet that it is frequently challenging for spouses to facilitate the pursuit of each other’s high altitude needs and goals. Given that we had partially predicated the logic underlying this tenet on work conducted by Feeney and Collins (2014), we were puzzled by this objection, and we were able to generate two possible explanations for the differences between their perspective and our own.

One explanation is that the differences are really quite small, a possibility that is reasonable to the extent that Feeney and Collins (this issue) created a caricature

of our perspective and then objected to that caricature rather than to the reality of our model. For example, they assert that “the suffocation model depicts modern marriage as an endlessly needy child” and that it characterizes the support of one’s spouse’s high altitude needs as “an endlessly difficult endeavor” and “hugely effortful,” not to mention as requiring “enormous and unrelenting investment of time and energy” (p. 107). We did not use such language in our target article, and we do not believe that it accurately represents our model. As such, it is possible that if Feeney and Collins (this issue) had represented our perspective on the challenges of supporting a spouse’s high-altitude needs accurately, they would have largely agreed with it.

The second explanation is that that Feeney and Collins (this issue) objected not only to their caricature of our model but also to the reality of our model. That is, perhaps their view of how difficult it is to support a spouse’s high-altitude needs truly differs from our own. If so, this is a fascinating disagreement, one

that cuts to the heart not only of the suffocation model but also of relationships science more generally. As such, we consider it carefully.

This discussion revolves around Tenet 3 of the suffocation model, which we reproduce here:

Just as the pursuit of higher needs frequently requires substantial insight into the self, looking to the marriage to help individuals fulfill their higher needs frequently requires that each spouse have substantial insight into the partner, and the development of such insight typically requires considerable communication and responsiveness over a sustained period of time.<sup>5</sup>

The logic underlying this tenet is that it is much harder to gain insight and understanding regarding one's own higher order needs (e.g., self-actualization) than regarding one's own lower order needs (e.g., hunger), and our intuition is that this challenge is, if anything, even harder when the target of the insight and understanding is the spouse rather than the self. In addition, even if one develops insight and understanding regarding the spouse's high-altitude goals, such as to become a novelist, the optimal methods of support for the pursuit of those goals will vary considerably depending upon other higher altitude characteristics of the spouse. Some spouses will flourish when left alone, others will flourish when showered with affection, and still others will flourish through a near-constant discussion of ideas. As noted in the target article, although procuring sufficient food was frequently a great challenge circa 1800, having a deep understanding of the partner's unique psychological makeup was generally much less relevant. For the most part, food provision was food provision, an assertion that, we suggest, does not generalize to higher altitude support provision. Indeed, we observed in our target article that higher altitude needs

tend to be much more partner specific than lower altitude needs. Whereas many individuals can help one meet one's physiological and safety needs, few can help one meet one's esteem and self-actualization needs. In particular, higher altitude needs require, to a much greater extent, that the partner understands one's distinctive qualities. (Finkel et al., this issue, p. 13)

<sup>5</sup>To be sure, the ideas underlying this tenet came up many times throughout the target article, and our wording was not identical across cases. We used stronger language in some cases than in others, including in this sentence from the abstract (Finkel et al., this issue, p. 1): "Asking the marriage to help them fulfill the latter, higher-level needs typically requires sufficient investment of time and psychological resources to ensure that the two spouses develop a deep bond and profound insight into each other's essential qualities." Perhaps a more precise variant of this sentence would have jettisoned "typically requires" in favor of a focus on how, according to the suffocation model, bond strength and mutual insight are strongly and positively *associated with* the fulfillment of higher altitude needs (much stronger than the association of bond strength and mutual insight with the fulfillment of lower altitude needs).

Our perspective has deep roots in marriage scholarship. For example, in a landmark volume that predated the self-expressive era, Burgess and Wallin (1953) discussed how much more difficult it had become to find a compatible spouse in the companionate era than in the institutional era. Regarding the institutional era, these scholars observed that

the behavior in marriage of husband and wife is in the main patterned and controlled not by their individual wishes or characteristics but by fixed traditions, customs, mores, and a unified family and community opinion which virtually compels uniformity to the standards and expectations of the group. (p. 26)

They elaborated as follows:

In the old-time rural community, marriage was definitely related to the family as an economic enterprise. The division of labor after marriage was specific and fixed. The husband was the head of the household and ran the farm. The wife had charge of the housekeeping, the flower and vegetable gardens, and the poultry. (p. 29)

In contrast, regarding the companionate era, Burgess and Wallin (1953) observed that mate selection becomes "a much more complicated and complex undertaking," requiring that

young people have the social experiences which increase their understanding of their feelings, emotions, and personality needs in relation to those of the opposite sex. . . . The objective is no longer to marry someone of the desired social status but to select the person because of compatibility of temperament, congeniality of interests, common ideals, and like values—in short one who fulfills one's personality needs. (p. 28)

In considering why selecting a suitable mate is so much more difficult in the companionate than in the institutional era, we examine three arguments that Burgess had developed 14 years earlier, in his landmark volume with Cottrell (Burgess & Cottrell, 1939). First, marital quality had become much more influenced by *compatibility* considerations: "Since personality differs from individual to individual, a particular combination of traits highly favorable to adjustment for one personality may be entirely unsuited to another." Second, Americans had increasingly come to look to their spouse to meet their needs across a much *broader array of domains*: "Since a personality is a composite of role patterns, a marriage which is favorable to the functioning of one part of the personality may not be favorable to that of another part." Third, the needs Americans looked to their spouse to help them fulfill had become more susceptible to *developmental changes* over time, which made them something of a

moving target: "Since personalities are not static but are in the process of development, a combination favorable to the functioning of the personality at one time may not be so for a later period in that personality's development."

We suggest that the emergence of these new challenges with the transition from institutional to companionate marriage, which are relevant not only to mate selection but also to having a successful marriage with him or her, have accelerated since Burgess's era. That is, although challenges related to compatibility, domain diversity, and developmental change are plenty complicated when individuals look to their marriage to help them fulfill their belonging and love needs, they become even more complicated when individuals layer on top of these challenges the expectation that their marriage will help them fulfill their esteem and self-actualization needs. After all, those needs are especially idiosyncratic (Maslow, 1962/1968), and, we argue, they require particularly deep insight between the spouses.

Our reading of Feeney and Collins's perspective, as advanced across their exemplary collaborative research program since 2000, is that it is entirely consistent with our own perspective. For example, they have argued that "three major ingredients are necessary for the provision of responsive care and support": the possession of "relevant skills and abilities," the availability of "adequate emotional and material resources," and "the motivation to provide care" (Feeney & Collins, 2001, p. 974). In elaborating upon these three necessary ingredients, they emphasize that "individuals must be able to respond flexibly to a wide range of needs as they arise"; that "caregivers must have adequate knowledge about how to provide the appropriate type and amount of support that is needed"; that "adequate time and a relaxed atmosphere are necessary"; that "the caregiving role often involves a good deal of responsibility as well as a substantial amount of cognitive, emotional, and sometimes tangible resources"; and that "if caregivers are not sufficiently motivated, they may provide either low levels of care or ineffective forms of caregiving that are out of sync with their partner's needs" (p. 974). In sole-authored work, Feeney (2004) has argued that

responding to need is more complex than simply being supportive of one's partner. It involves the provision of the type and amount of support that is dictated by the situation and by the partner's needs. . . . Therefore, in its optimal form, caregiving includes sensitivity, responsiveness, and flexibility in responding to attachment needs. (p. 632)

Given Feeney and Collins's perspective that providing effective support requires refined skills and abilities, emotional and material resources, and the mo-

tivation to provide care, we were surprised by how strongly they argued in their commentary for the perspective that "many of the behaviors that we suggest as being important for promoting thriving are very simple to enact, such as providing encouragement, not unnecessarily interfering, communicating about life opportunities, celebrating successes, and so on" (Feeney & Collins, this issue, p. 107). Our reading of this perspective is that the support-provider's behavior—high versus low encouragement, high versus low celebration of successes, and so forth—is frequently the only major input in determining whether the support-giving exchange was successful.

This perspective differs from our understanding of Feeney and Collins's broader research program, and it differs sharply from the suffocation model perspective, especially to the extent that the needs in question are higher rather than lower altitude needs. Specifically, our model asserts that people vary considerably in both the sorts of support they wish to receive from others (a partner effect) and the nature of the support they wish to receive from one member of their social network rather than another (a relationship effect). Throughout the section of their commentary emphasizing how often it is "very simple" to support a partner's higher altitude needs, Feeney and Collins appear to view both of these types of effects as unimportant. Their analysis implies that providing high versus low amounts of support (e.g., encouragement) is the primary driver of variation in successful support provision—regardless of who the partner is or the nature of the individual's relationship with the partner.

One of the central components of the suffocation model is that partner and relationship effects tend to become increasingly important as one ascends Mount Maslow. That is, sensitively attending to the idiosyncratic needs of *this particular partner* and to the unique relational dynamics between *these two individuals* becomes more important. In contrast, the use of normatively effective support behaviors becomes less important. If an individual skins her knee, almost anybody can provide helpful support by giving her a Band-Aid. Easy. However, to the extent that the skinned knee also triggers the sorts of psychological needs that emerge at higher altitudes, even this simple case becomes more complicated. As an example that is consistent with Feeney and Collins's (2014) superb program of research on individual differences in attachment orientations, some people who have just skinned their knee will also want nurturance, perhaps in the form of gentle backrubs and words of love, whereas others will recoil from such treatment, at least until the pain has subsided. From the perspective of the suffocation model, unless one has insight into the injured individual's interpersonal preferences in such contexts, and the extent to which those preferences apply to the self (e.g., she may prefer nurturance from her mother but distance

from her husband), it is no simple matter to determine whether or how to provide emotional support.

According to the suffocation model, providing support in this skinned-knee example is easy by comparison to providing support for a spouse's high altitude need fulfillment. Regarding esteem needs, for example, what is the best way for a husband to support a wife who is battling a deep sense of worthlessness or a husband who is ashamed of his erectile dysfunction? Regarding self-actualization needs, what is the best way for a husband to support a wife who is struggling to achieve the type of relationship with Jesus she desires or for a wife to support a husband who has been unable to finish his first novel due to writer's block? We share Feeney and Collins's (this issue) view that that some approaches to these issues are normatively better than others (e.g., words of affection will normatively be more constructive than words of contempt). However, according to the suffocation model, cookie-cutter, off-the-shelf solutions are not going to be equally effective in all cases, and the effectiveness of such solutions becomes quite modest at higher (vs. lower) altitudes on Mount Maslow. Indeed, some normatively constructive responses are precisely the wrong course of action under some circumstances (e.g., when the wife's words of affection make the husband feel even more ashamed about his erectile dysfunction, as he experiences her support as pity and would have preferred teasing). Spouses are likely to be most effective at providing support not only to the extent that they have a deep understanding of both the partner's needs (e.g., to self-actualize through writing fiction) and the challenges associated with meeting them (e.g., writer's block), but also to the extent that they can discern the best way to help the partner conquer these challenges (e.g., nightly brainstorming sessions). According to the suffocation model, such insight—which is much less relevant when seeking to help the spouse meet his or her needs for food and shelter—is bolstered by the investment of time and psychological resources in this quality of the marital relationship.

In considering the importance of partner effects, we recall the story that the late Caryl Rusbult, a towering figure in the annals of relationship science, liked to tell when discussing her work on the *Michelangelo phenomenon*, which refers to a set of interpersonal processes through which “close partners sculpt one another's selves, shaping one another's skills and traits and promoting versus inhibiting one another's goal pursuits” (Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009, p. 305). She talked about a boyfriend she had in her 20s who liked to call her his “California cutie.” Rusbult, who was undeniably attractive and a Californian, recognized that he meant it as a compliment and that many women would have been delighted to have garnered such an affectionate nickname. But she disliked

it. In her conceptualization of her ideal herself, she was elegant, intellectual, and irreverent, a conceptualization that she found difficult to reconcile with the California cutie label. This example illustrates a more general point: Individuals' higher altitude goals are idiosyncratic, which means that supporting them with normatively positive behavior is very far from a sure-fire way of helping them make progress on those goals.

### Micro- and Macrolevel Processes in the Suffocation of Marriage

Karney (this issue) argues that the suffocation model exclusively or excessively blames individual Americans or individual couples whose marriages are struggling as a result of the insufficient oxygenation for what they are expecting from their marriage. For example, in referring to our Mount Maslow analogy, he asserts that

what is misleading about the analogy is the implication that couples themselves are to blame for their lack of oxygen. This perspective overlooks the extensive evidence that social changes well beyond the control of any individual couple have greatly altered the environment in which modern couples find themselves. (p. 118)

He also suggests that, because our model assigns exclusive or excessive blame to individual Americans or couples, it is “naïve, and unfair to couples that are working so hard” (p. 118).

We have two objections to Karney's analysis. First, although we agree that exclusively or excessively blaming individual Americans or couples whose marriages are struggling would be naïve and unfair, not to mention inaccurate, we disagree with the suggestion that the suffocation model does any such thing. Second, we believe that Karney's analysis runs the risk of tilting the emphasis too far in the opposite direction, assigning so much blame to societal factors that it threatens to strip agency from individual Americans and couples whom we believe to be far from powerless to improve their marriage despite challenging societal circumstances. Our view is that either extreme—assigning almost all the blame either to individual Americans/couples or to societal factors—is naïve and unfair. We elaborate upon these two objections in turn.

First, where does the suffocation model place the blame for marriages that are struggling?<sup>6</sup> It suggests

<sup>6</sup>It is important to bear in mind that a central feature of the suffocation model is that the best marriages today are better than the best marriages of yesteryear. The present discussion regarding the assignment of blame focuses exclusively on that subset of marriages that are struggling, a group that encompasses the average marriage.

that there is plenty of blame to go around. Or, stated more optimistically, it suggests that changes in both microlevel and macrolevel processes have strong potential to bolster marriage and that there is no reason to focus exclusively on only one of these sets of processes. Regarding macrolevel processes, as we observed in our target article (Finkel et al., this issue),

income and wealth inequality across sociodemographic groups has soared since around 1980, and many poor individuals today are experiencing particularly high levels of stress and particularly low levels of spousal time. . . . To the extent that poverty exacerbates stress and reduces couples' flexibility in planning couple time, shifts in the distribution of wealth have likely taken a toll on lower-income Americans. After all, spousal time is a strong predictor of marital quality, but economic changes likely have made it harder for poor people to find such time. (p. 34)

To provide an especially clear illustration of how the target article addresses the role of macrolevel economic processes in making marriage difficult, we reproduce a two-paragraph excerpt from that article (Finkel et al., this issue):

Although a straightforward implication of this discussion is that spouses are well served by carving out additional time and psychological resources for each other, it is important to note that doing so is not always simple. Some couples can make such changes relatively easily by, for example, replacing television time with date-night time, replacing independent leisure activities with shared leisure activities, or sending their children away to summer camp. However, a major roadblock for many couples is that their stress levels or economic circumstances make it extremely difficult to carve out additional time, psychological resources, or money to invest in the marriage.

Indeed, socioeconomic discrepancies in marital outcomes appear to be driven largely by the greater economic and social challenges confronting low-income Americans rather than by diminished valuation of marriage among the poor (Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Trail & Karney, 2012). Many couples, especially low-income couples, might struggle to invest additional resources in their marriage not because they lack the will, but rather because they lack the resources. For such individuals, family-friendly public policy and business practices, such as on-site childcare and flexible work arrangements, might be the single most effective way of helping them invest in their marriage. Indeed, even among middle-class, dual-earner couples, such practices appear to be effective at helping to foster marital well-being (Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziemba, & Lyness, 2006). (p. 29)

In short, the suffocation model emphasizes the importance of macrolevel processes, especially regarding

the oxygenation side of the model. But even this discussion underappreciates how deeply macrolevel processes are embedded in the model's DNA. The suffocation model is, at its core, a model of macrolevel changes, not only in the reduction of oxygenating resources but also in the ascent of Mount Maslow in the first place. For example, all of the target article's relevant figures—Figures 2–5 and 7–12—depict normative, macrolevel dynamics. Scholars of the major historical trends in American marriage, such as Burgess and Locke (1945), Coontz (2005), and Cherlin (2009), never intended to imply that the changes in what Americans are asking of their marriage occurred independently of other members of the population. Rather, their view is that macrolevel norms have shifted and that specific individuals or couples tended to be swept up in these societal shifts. That is also the view of the suffocation model.

So, given our agreement with Karney (this issue) that macrolevel processes profoundly influence marital dynamics, including in ways that frequently undermine marital quality and increase the likelihood of divorce, we now turn to our second objection to his analysis, which is that it insufficiently appreciates the ability of individuals and couples to make changes that can increase the quality of their marriage. Specifically, in discussing the insufficient oxygen that many American marriages are confronting today, Karney (this issue) argues that “the cause of this problem is not that couples have climbed too high but rather that their atmosphere has become polluted” (p. 118). His reference in the second half of this quote to the atmosphere becoming polluted involves precisely the sorts of issues we discussed in the target article paragraphs we just reproduced, so we certainly have no objection there. But we are puzzled by the first half: “the cause of this problem is not that couples have climbed too high.” *Why must it be either/or?*

More important, we are alarmed by the implication that the beliefs and behaviors of individual Americans and couples are irrelevant to understanding marital success versus failure. If individual Americans and couples, particularly those with low income and wealth, are powerless to influence their marital outcomes, what shall we, as relationships scholars, tell them about their options for improving their marriage? It has to be something better than “You're screwed,” but can it also be better than “Vote and hope”?

Yes, it must be. To be sure, it is incumbent upon relationships scholars to call attention to the macrolevel changes that can bolster marital quality, including the sorts of changes we emphasized in our target article (e.g., on-site childcare and flexible work arrangements). But it is equally incumbent upon relationships scholars to call attention to micro level changes that can bolster marital quality. Given that *Psychological*

*Inquiry* has greater potential of reaching practitioners who work at the micro level (e.g., clinical psychologists) rather than the macro level (e.g., policymakers), we focused quite a bit of attention on microlevel processes in our target article.

In particular, the target article focused on what individuals and couples can do to maximize the quality of their marriage in present-day America, as it currently exists. Our analysis, including our discussion of the three general pathways through which Americans can improve their marriage, was that Americans are very far from powerless. To be sure, wealthier Americans have more options for strengthening their marriage than poorer Americans do (a romantic getaway to Antigua can work wonders for a marriage's oxygenation level), and macrolevel social policies oriented toward making marriage easier for poorer Americans are likely to be effective in strengthening their marriages. However, even in America's current socioeconomic and political climate, we remain optimistic that poorer Americans are capable of improving their marriages, and the suffocation model offers a buffet of promising avenues through which they, and their wealthier counterparts, can do so. As noted previously, several of the commentaries, including those by Aron and Aron (this issue), Conley and Moors (this issue), and DePaulo (this issue), provide innovative additions to the list of options available to them.

That said, Karney's commentary, along with Neff and Morgan's (this issue), caused us to think more deeply than we had done when preparing the target article about the issue that marital interventions targeted toward the poor have a generally unimpressive track record. Our sense is that marital interventions derived from the suffocation model, especially those targeted toward the poor, would benefit from considering Chen and Miller's (2012) *shift-and-persist* model of the circumstances under which low socioeconomic status *does not* predict worse health outcomes. The shift-and-persist approach

balances adaptation to stress by shifting oneself (accepting stress and adjusting oneself to it through emotion regulation strategies such as reappraisals), while at the same time persisting in life (enduring adversity with strength by finding meaning and maintaining optimism). This combination of approaches is adaptive specifically for dealing with adversity. (p. 137)

In deriving marital interventions from the suffocation model, we suggest that Plan A should be to help marriages succeed at Mount Maslow's summit. That is, the interventions should seek to help couples oxygenate their marriage sufficiently to allow the spouses to meet extensive expectations for belonging and love,

esteem, and self-actualization. Succeeding along these lines has the potential to bring the marriage into that rarefied category of contemporary marriages that are, on balance, more fulfilling than the best marriages of prior eras. However, many marriages simply will not be able to flourish at such lofty altitudes because, for example, the spouses lack sufficient time or psychological resources to invest in the marriage. In such cases, the suffocation model logically implies a strong Plan B, which functions to a large extent as a marital variant of Chen and Miller's (2012) shift-and-persist model. Specifically, Plan B interventions emphasize (a) accepting the limitations on oxygenation and adjusting to them through reappraisal and (b) enduring the current circumstances by finding meaning and maintaining optimism.

For example, a poor couple in which the wife works two daytime jobs and the husband works the graveyard shift might be encouraged to adopt a sober assessment of what they can expect from their marriage, at least while their children are young. They might be encouraged to recognize that the marriage's ability to support the spouses' higher altitude needs will be extremely limited for the next several years, and, consequently, to reduce expectations along those lines for the time being. They might be encouraged to focus instead on the importance of sustaining a well-functioning household—with plenty of food and safety from threats (lower altitude needs)—so they can raise well-adjusted children. The goal of such an intervention would be to help them find meaning and maintain optimism through a period during which their marriage is enduring substantial neglect—while helping them construe the current marital situation as temporary. Such an emphasis can help the spouses bear in mind that they will have more time for each other when, for example, the children get older. At that time, the marital dependence zones can begin to ascend Mount Maslow again, perhaps opening the door to Plan-A-style interventions.

### Summary: Three Areas of Disagreement

The suffocation model accounts for sociodemographic variation in marital outcomes, works within mainstream perspectives on relationship processes to discern how much effort is required for spouses to facilitate each other's higher altitude needs, and recognizes the crucial roles played by both microlevel and macrolevel processing in contributing to the suffocation of marriage in contemporary America. With these clarifications in hand, we transition to a discussion of the circumstances under which facilitating one's spouse's need fulfillment exerts positive versus negative effects on the self.

### When Being Instrumental for One's Spouse's Needs Benefits the Self

One recurring theme in the commentaries, especially in those written by scholars most closely aligned with relationship science, is that the target article insufficiently appreciated the rewards associated with facilitating one's spouse's need fulfillment. This concern, which is compellingly voiced by Feeney and Collins (this issue), Holmes and Murray (this issue), and Patrick (this issue), is perhaps best articulated by Neff and Morgan (this issue):

The authors [of the target article] suggest that supporting a partner's self-actualization goals is associated with a host of potential costs, including feelings of inadequacy regarding one's support provision skills and resentment resulting from sacrificing one's own needs in favor of the partner's needs. Yet the authors neglect to review the burgeoning literature demonstrating the tremendous benefits associated with caregiving behaviors. Daily diary work indicates that individuals experience decreases in negative mood on days in which they provide support to a partner; in fact, providing support is more clearly linked to enhanced daily mood than receiving support (Gleason, Idia, Bolger & Shrout, 2003; Gleason & Iida, in press). Likewise, a recent study examining the relative contributions of giving versus receiving support to longevity revealed that providing emotional support to a marital partner predicted lower mortality risk . . . (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003).

We welcome the opportunity to expand on this facet of the suffocation model. In the target article (Finkel et al., this issue), we observed that

the support-provider may find that helping the spouse achieve his high-level goals helps her achieve an optimal balance between her own personal and her relational concerns (Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008). Individuals strive to achieve a balance between autonomy and interdependence in their close relationships (Hull, Meier, & Ortyl, 2010), and they are frequently able to do so, even when making sacrifices for the partner (Gaine & La Guardia, 2009). (p. 21)

Although this discussion was in the right ballpark, it insufficiently recognized the benefits associated with facilitating one's spouse's need fulfillment.

That said, we believe that the commentaries might have, in some cases, gone too far in the other direction. Facilitating one's spouse's need fulfillment can be fulfilling and energizing, but it can also be frustrating and resource depleting. One major direction for future research is to develop a deeper understanding of the circumstances under which providing support is beneficial, neutral, or harmful for the self.

As noted by Holmes and Murray (this issue), Clark and Grote (1998) have observed that "behaving in such a manner as to meet a partner's needs—something which often may involve performing undesirable activities, foregoing desired opportunities, or giving up money, time, or goods . . . will often tend to be either negligibly or even positively associated with relationship quality" (p. 2). Clark and Grote's explanation for this observation is that the costs can be offset because the behavior "involves adhering to communal norms" (p. 2), which have been operationalized within marriage in terms of agreement with the following text:

The way marital relationships should operate is that each person should pay attention to the other person's needs. Each person should give a benefit to the other in response to the other's needs when the other has a real need that he or she cannot meet by him- or herself. Each person should do this to the best of his or her ability so long as the personal costs are reasonable. When one person does something for the other, the other should not owe the giver anything. (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010, p. 945)

As expected, this research showed that greater adherence to communal norms predicts higher marital satisfaction (Clark et al., 2010). However, here is a case where the devil is in the details. For example, in the preceding operationalization of communal norms, adherence to such norms is mutual—both spouses are, presumably, equally communal toward each other. In addition, the phrase "so long as the personal costs are reasonable" is pretty elastic. We agree with Clark et al. (2010), and with the authors of the relevant commentaries, that facilitating one's spouse's need fulfillment can be beneficial for the self within a well-functioning marriage in which the two spouses are equally communal and the personal costs are reasonable. Even under these optimal circumstances, however, it seems unlikely that enduring support-related costs is uniformly linked to positive outcomes for the self. The link between support provision and outcomes for the self are likely to be complexly moderated, and we discuss three potentially promising moderators here.

### Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Motivation for the Support Provision

First, in accord with the argument developed by Patrick (this issue), and as mentioned in the target article, support provision is likely to yield good outcomes for the self to the degree that it is intrinsically motivated, but it is likely to yield poor outcomes for the self to the degree that it is extrinsically motivated (Clark & Grote, 1998; Kogan et al., 2010; Le & Impett, 2013). For example, Gaine and La Guardia (2009) demonstrated that the extent to which individuals' support for their partner's higher altitude needs predicted

their relationship well-being was moderated in the hypothesized manner by the extent to which their behavior was intrinsically motivated.

It is important to clarify here that nothing in the suffocation model implies that support provision tends to be extrinsically motivated. We disagree with Patrick's (this issue) assertion that "the first two tenets of the suffocation model imply that relationship maintenance is extrinsically motivated because relationships, in this case marriage, serve the separable outcome of meeting needs across Maslow's hierarchy" (p. 100). For starters, what is the alternative to believing that people get married as a means of meeting their needs (including belonging and love needs)? That people do not expect anything at all from their marriage? If so, then how do people make marriage decisions? Under such circumstances, it seems that all partners—pretty or ugly, smart or stupid, philosopher or investment banker—would be equally appropriate as any other partner, which is, to our knowledge, inconsistent with all scholarly perspectives on marriage.

It seems that Patrick (this issue) might have construed our instrumentality analysis differently than we intended it. Perhaps the best integration of her thinking and our own is that spouses represent need fulfillment from their marriage as extrinsic to the extent that the *means* of need fulfillment—the specific activities that make the marriage need-fulfilling—are extrinsically motivated. In contrast, spouses represent such need fulfillment as intrinsic to the extent that the means are intrinsically motivated. From this perspective, there is no reason why a woman who looks to her husband to help her feel loved, to gain the confidence she needs to earn a promotion at work, and to help her achieve deeper insight into her core essence must view her interaction with him related to these needs as extrinsically motivated. For example, she may find that taking wilderness adventures with him—which involves plenty of deep conversations, opportunities for overcoming obstacles, and introspection—helps her fulfill her higher altitude needs while nonetheless being an intrinsically valuable experience in its own right.

### The Effectiveness of the Support Provision

A second promising moderator, as noted by Clark and Grote (1998) and others, pertains to the effectiveness of the support: Support provision is likely to yield good outcomes for the self to the degree that it yields the intended salutary effects for the partner, but it is likely to yield poor outcomes for the self to the degree that it does not. For causal evidence along these lines, consider a laboratory experiment that manipulated whether participants' efforts to provide emotional support to a fellow student were effective rather than ineffective (Finkel et al., 2006, Study 4). In this study, participants were led to believe that they had been ran-

domly assigned to play the role of support provider, and they were placed into a one-to-one situation in which another student (actually a research confederate) expressed a deep sense of unhappiness during her 1st year away at college. The participants' task was to try to help the confederate make progress on solving this problem, and random assignment determined whether the confederate was receptive versus unreceptive to their efforts to help. Even though this interaction lasted only 6 min, and even though the manipulation did not influence participants' mood or sense of self-efficacy, participants who had interacted with an unreceptive confederate were significantly more psychologically depleted by the experience than were participants who had interacted with receptive confederate.

It seems likely that experiencing parallel dynamics within marriage yields parallel outcomes. If a man aspires to complete his first novel and his wife exerts herself to help him succeed in that aspiration, her efforts may yield positive outcomes for herself if her efforts are ultimately successful, but they are likely to yield negative outcomes for her if they are unsuccessful. One interesting question revolves around the extent to which his gratitude for her efforts can buffer against her experiencing adverse effects as a result of her support being unsuccessful. Our intuition is that his gratitude can successfully buffer against such adverse effects, but only for a limited period. She may experience positive outcomes, even in the absence of his actually doing any writing, if he makes her feel how grateful he is for her support. But this benefit of providing unsuccessful goal support may fade over the course of months or years as she may come to resent exerting herself to support a goal she increasingly believes he is unlikely ever to achieve. Discerning the interplay among, and the temporal dynamics surrounding, the efficacy of support provision, the recipient's gratitude, and the provider's outcomes represents an intriguing direction for future research.

### Abundant versus Scarce Resource Availability During the Support Provision

A third promising moderator pertains to the current availability of support-relevant resources: Support provision is likely to yield positive outcomes for the self in climates of abundance, but it is likely to yield negative outcomes for the self in climates of scarcity. When a wife is well rested, experiencing low levels of stress, and not currently confronting her own existential crisis, she is in a strong position to support her husband through his existential crisis. In addition, there is a good chance that she will experience positive self-oriented outcomes as a result of providing such support. In contrast, when she is exhausted, highly stressed, or preoccupied with her own urgent needs, she is in a much weaker position to support her husband, and she is at

elevated risk for experiencing negative self-oriented outcomes as a result of providing such support.

This issue is central to the logic of the suffocation model. Resources available for investment in the relationship are finite, and demands upon those resources frequently exceed the current oxygenation level (i.e., the currently available resources), especially as marital dependence zones ascend Mount Maslow. In the target article, we discussed how it is difficult for spouses to be supportive, not to mention to derive positive outcomes from being supportive, when both of them are stressed or overwhelmed. We quoted a woman discussing a challenge confronting many dual-earner couples in the United States (Warner, 2013): "I think a big issue is that we both want to be taken care of at the end of the day, and neither of us has any energy to take care of the other. . . . When you're absolutely exhausted, it's hard to be emotionally generous." Such climates of scarcity make it more difficult to experience positive self-relevant outcomes from providing support.

### Summary: Being Instrumental

In short, there is little doubt that facilitating one's spouse's need fulfillment can exert positive effects on the self, but there is equally little doubt that doing so can also exert negative effects on the self. From the perspective of the suffocation model, determining *the circumstances under which* such facilitation exerts positive versus negative effects is crucial in understanding which marriages are likely to flourish rather than falter. The three moderators we discussed in this section—intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation for the support provision, the effectiveness of the support provision, and abundant versus scarce resource availability the support provision—are drawn from what is likely to be a robust population of influential moderators.

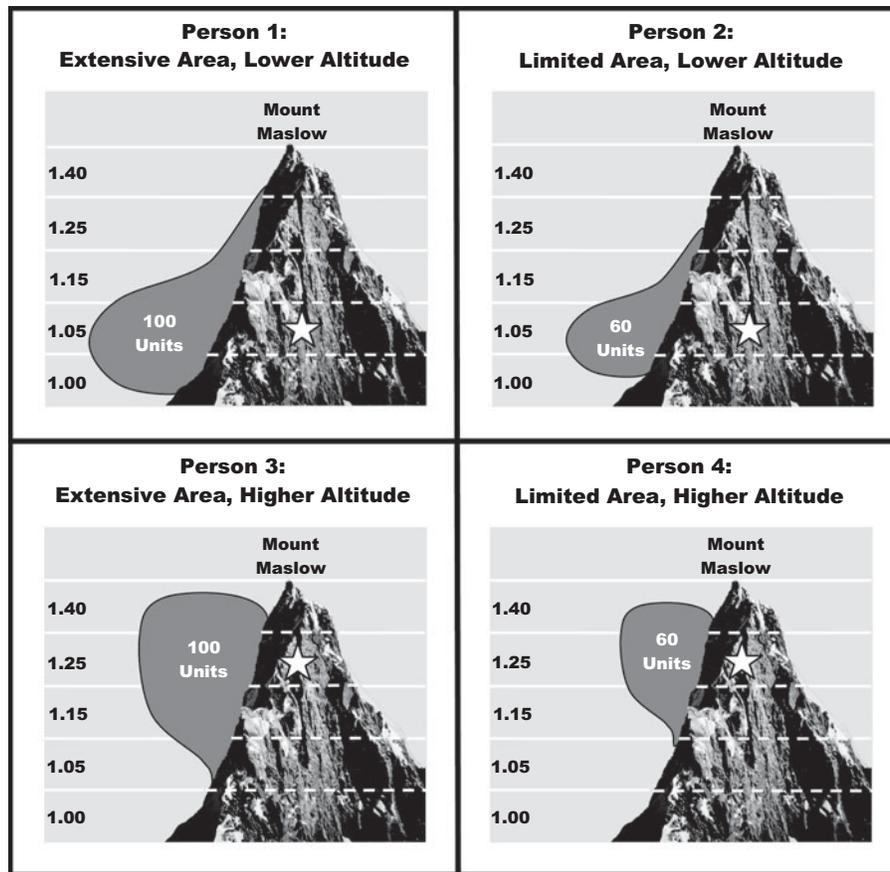
### Toward a Mathematically Formal Version of the Suffocation Model

When considering the commentaries, we developed a new way of thinking about the suffocation model, one that focuses more explicitly on the inputs and weighting functions that form the model's DNA. This new approach does not involve any major changes to the model but rather a more precise way of conceptualizing it, one that lends itself to mathematical formalism. Although we do not develop a formal version of the suffocation model in the present article, we take initial, preliminary steps in that direction. (We caution that this section is somewhat technical.)

Given that a particular marital dependence zone tends to span a broad range of altitudes on Mount Maslow (e.g., see Figure 1), it is necessary, when determining its overall altitude, to calculate a measure of central tendency. One sensible measure of central tendency, and the one we use in the present discussion, is the *centroid*, which refers to the point at which a cardboard cutout of the marital dependence zone would balance on the tip of a pencil. The suffocation model conceptualizes centroids—not to mention marital dependence zones and the Mount Maslow idea more generally—as useful metaphors or approximations rather than as strict representations of arithmetic precision, as the current state of the literature does not allow for anything resembling precision along these lines.<sup>7</sup> The centroid is simply intended to convey a general sense of the vertical "midpoint" of the marital dependence zone—how high or low the zone is on Mount Maslow. As with any measure of central tendency, it glosses over important information about the overall distribution of the marital dependence zone. Nonetheless, it is useful in providing a point estimate of the vertical location of a given marital dependence zone.

With this discussion in hand, we illustrate the suffocation model's three inputs—expectations, altitude, and oxygenation—with numerical examples, revisiting the four hypothetical contemporary Americans from Figure 1. In Figure 4, we reproduce the four panels from Figure 1, this time adding numerical estimates for (a) the surface area of the marital dependence zone and (b) altitude weightings. Figure 4 also includes graphical representations (stars) of centroid location. The surface area of Person 1 and Person 3's marital dependence zones is relatively extensive (100 units), whereas the surface area of Person 2 and Person 4's marital dependence zones is relatively limited (60 units). The altitude of Person 1 and 2's centroids is relatively low (in the safety region of Mount Maslow, second from the bottom), whereas the altitude of Person 3 and 4's centroids is relatively high (in the esteem region of Mount Maslow, second from the top).

<sup>7</sup>For example, although there is altitude-relevant variability within each need category (e.g., among the physiological needs, the need to breathe is lower, or more prepotent, than the need to eat), nobody knows, for example, how much lower the highest need in a given category is from the lowest need in the category immediately above it. Addressing such issues is an important direction for future research on human motivation. Indeed, doing so may provide valuable contributions toward the integration of the suffocation model with Holmes and Murray's (this issue) perspective on the foundational importance of the need to feel loved. Perhaps this need resides at the very bottom of Maslow's "belonging and love" rung, below, for example, the need to love others.



*Figure 4.* Working toward a mathematically formal version of the suffocation model. *Note.* As in Figure 1, the five zones on Mount Maslow represent, from bottom to top, physiological, safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization needs. The surface area of the marital dependence zone is presented in white font within the zone itself. The centroid of the zone is represented by the white star on Mount Maslow. The numerical values at the left of each panel represent speculative altitude weightings—the altitude multiplier for oxygenation (see Tenet 3). The oxygenation required to meet the expectations of the marital dependence zone is determined by the Surface Area  $\times$  Centroid Altitude interaction term. As such, and as elaborated in the main text, Person 1 requires 105 units of oxygenation, Person 2 requires 63 units, Person 3 requires 125 units, and Person 4 requires 75 units. If we assume that the altitude multiplier for satisfaction (see Tenet 4) happens to be equal to the altitude multiplier for oxygenation, then marital satisfaction for a precisely oxygenated marriage is determined by the Marital Dependence Zone  $\times$  Centroid Altitude interaction term. As such, Person 1 experiences 110.25 units of satisfaction, Person 2 experiences 66.15 units, Person 3 experiences 156.25 units, and Person 4 experiences 93.75 units.

### The First Altitude Weighting: Discerning How Much Oxygen Is Required

According to the suffocation model, the amount of oxygenation required to meet the expectations individuals place upon their marriage is determined by the Expectations (Surface Area)  $\times$  Altitude (Centroid Height) interaction effect—or, stated otherwise, by an altitude-weighted function of the extensiveness of expectations. The model suggests that the weighting is larger at higher altitudes, which means that more oxygenation is required to meet the same quantity of expectations at higher than at lower altitudes. Although the present state of the literature does not allow for anything resembling a precise estimate of this weighting func-

tion, for the sake of the present illustration, we provide an example of what this function might be. As presented at the left of each panel in Figure 4, we suggest that centroids in the physiological zone have a weighting of 1.00—that is, they require no adjustment for altitude. For the sake of this example, we hazard that the centroids in the four altitude zones up the mountain—safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization—have weightings of 1.05, 1.15, 1.25, and 1.40, respectively. The weightings represent an initial attempt to put numerical precision on the suffocation model's Tenet 3 assertion that "looking to the marriage to help individuals fulfill their higher needs frequently requires that each spouse have substantial insight into the partner, and the development of such

insight typically requires considerable communication and responsiveness over a sustained period of time” (the altitude multiplier for oxygenation tenet). These weightings are best viewed as extremely rough *priors* rather than as model-implied or empirically derived values; as the field advances, we can begin to sharpen these estimates.

The preceding analysis suggests that our four hypothetical Americans should differ in the level of oxygenation—the amount of relationship-relevant resources available—required for their marriage to provide what they are seeking from it. Specifically, the Expectations  $\times$  Altitude interaction yields weighted marital dependence zones of 105 units for Person 1 (100 units of area  $\times$  a weighting of 1.05), 63 units for Person 2 (60  $\times$  1.05), 125 units for Person 3 (100  $\times$  1.25), and 75 units for Person 4 (60  $\times$  1.25).

### **The Second Altitude Weighting: Discerning the Satisfaction Level of a Precisely Oxygenated Marriage**

According to the suffocation model's Tenet 4 (the altitude multiplier for satisfaction tenet), when the level of oxygenation in the marriage is precisely equal to the amount required to meet the altitude-weighted expectations of the marital dependence zone, marital satisfaction is an altitude-weighted function of that quantity of expectations. In other words, the altitude weighting influences not only how much oxygenation is required to meet the expectations individuals place on their marriage but also the level of satisfaction they experience upon meeting those expectations. This double duty for altitude weighting is a central component of the suffocation model's analysis of the bifurcation of marriage over time: As marriage has ascended Mount Maslow throughout American history, more and more marriages have fallen short of spouses' expectations, but the payoffs for reaching their expectations have become greater and greater.

Future research is required to discern the extent to which Tenet 4's satisfaction weighting function—the weighting of the marital dependence zone by the altitude of the centroid in predicting satisfaction—has different values than the weighting function depicted in Figure 4. As discussed previously, those values represent the weighting of the marital dependence zone's surface area by the altitude of the centroid in predicting how much oxygenation is required. However, let us consider examples in which the two weighting functions—Tenet 3's altitude multiplier for oxygenation and Tenet 4's altitude multiplier for satisfaction—are identical and in which oxygenation is precisely equal to the amount required to meet the expectations encompassed by the weighted marital dependence zone. In that case, the Weighted Marital Dependence

Zone  $\times$  Altitude interaction yields marital satisfaction of 110.25 for Person 1 (105 weighted units  $\times$  a weighting of 1.05), 66.15 units for Person 2 (63  $\times$  1.05), 156.25 units for Person 3 (125  $\times$  1.25), and 93.75 units for Person 4 (75  $\times$  1.25). These values speak to a broader truth, which is that, when oxygenation is precisely equal to the amount required to meet the expectations encompassed by the marital dependence zone, the suffocation model predicts positive main effects of both expectations and altitude, and a positive Expectations  $\times$  Altitude interaction effect.

### **When Oxygen Levels Exceed or Fall Short of the Expectations Encompassed by the Marital Dependence Zone**

From this perspective, it might seem that Americans should always bring extensive and high-altitude expectations to their marriage. However, such a conclusion problematically neglects the facts (a) that achieving an oxygenated marriage becomes increasingly difficult as the expectations in the weighted marital dependence zone increase (Tenet 3) and (b) that each unit of insufficient oxygenation exerts stronger negative effects on marital satisfaction than each unit of excess oxygenation exerts positive effects (Tenet 5).

To illustrate this point, let us imagine that the marriages of all four individuals in our example achieve an oxygenation level of 80, then Person 2 (who requires 63 units) and Person 4 (who requires 75 units) will have their needs met, but Person 1 (who requires 105 units) and Person 3 (who requires 125 units) will not. According to the suffocation model (particularly Tenet 4: the altitude multiplier for satisfaction tenet), Person 4 will be more satisfied than Person 2 because she looked to her marriage to provide a greater overall amount of need fulfillment (75 vs. 63 units), and the marriage was sufficiently provident, yielding the previously calculated satisfaction levels of 93.75 units and 66.15 units, respectively (plus any increment they might receive from the excess units of oxygenation; see below). In addition, Person 1 will be more satisfied than Person 3 because, as noted in Tenet 4, Person 1's 25-unit shortfall [(Surface Area  $\times$  Altitude) – oxygenation level] will reduce satisfaction less than Person 3's 45-unit shortfall.

However, comparing marital satisfaction across these two pairs—that is, comparing either Person 2 or Person 4 to either Person 1 or Person 3—is challenging because it requires assumptions that are enormously speculative in light of the field's current knowledge level. For example, although Tenet 4 (the loss aversion tenet) suggests that falling a unit short of weighted expectations hurts more than falling a unit above helps, it is not clear how strong this discrepancy is (1.5:1? 2:0? 3:1?) or whether its strength varies as a function of altitude (e.g., does each unit of shortfall harm satisfaction

more at lower than at higher altitudes?). Even more fundamentally, it is not clear what happens with excess oxygenation. For example, if a marriage provides 110 units of oxygenation and a spouse's altitude-weighted marital dependence zone encompasses 100 units of expectations from the marriage, what happens to those extra 10 units of oxygenation? Does the spouse increase the extensiveness and/or altitude of the marital dependence zone so she can meet 10 additional units of need through her marriage? Does she reduce her investment in the marriage so it is oxygenated at 100 units rather than 110, perhaps investing some of the time and psychological resources she saved on cultivating her relationship with her sister? Our best guess at this point is that excess oxygenation is an unstable state, as spouses either (a) employ those excess resources to meet more extensive or higher altitude needs within the marriage or (b) reallocate those excess resources away from the marriage. That said, given that excess units of oxygenation afford spouses flexibility and additional avenues for need fulfillment, we suggest that their existence is positively linked to spouses' marital quality and personal well-being (although each additional unit promotes such outcomes less strongly when oxygenation is already sufficient to meet the expectations of the altitude-weighted marital dependence zone than when oxygenation is insufficient to do so).

These are not the only fascinating complications that warrant attention, and we briefly mention several others. There might be a dimension orthogonal to oxygenation that taps variation in the extent to which people are effective at *allocating* resources in a strategic manner that optimizes need fulfillment. In addition, given that *both members* of a marriage bring expectations to the marriage and that both can oxygenate the marriage, it will be important to discern how expectations and resource contributions interrelate across partners. It will also be important to understand *within-person fluctuations* over time in both the extensiveness and altitude of expectations and the amount of oxygenation-relevant resources invested in the marriage, and to understand how these fluctuations interrelate across partners. To the extent that future research can address these and related issues, the field will have a substantially stronger understanding of marriage, and it will be well its way to a fully formalized version of the suffocation model.

### **Summary: Toward a Mathematically Formal Model**

In short, conceptualizing the three inputs as parameters, and discerning precisely how they interrelate, puts us on a path toward the development of a mathematically formal version of the suffocation model.

Developing that model represents an important direction for future research. Indeed, most of the influential theories of relationships in personality and social psychology today are arguably underspecified in terms of mathematical formalism. Our sense is that working to impose mathematical rigor on our theories will go a long way toward helping us refine them.

### **Discussion**

As we come to the conclusion of this issue of *Psychological Inquiry*—of a 15-article exploration of the suffocation model in particular, and of contemporary marriage in America in general—we touch upon two final topics. First, we highlight a few of our favorite ideas from the commentaries that we did not have an opportunity to address previously. Second, we underscore ways in which policymakers, clinicians, and individuals can perhaps use the suffocation model to increase the extent to which marriages bolster spouses' personal and relational well-being.

### **The Bliss of *Psychological Inquiry***

Writing the target article and this reply has been a great joy, as has immersing ourselves in the commentators' fascinating ideas. Our major regret is that we were not able to engage more thoroughly with the authors of the various commentaries. For example, we wish we had been able to engage with Patrick (this issue) about the role that mindfulness can play in helping people discern what they will versus will not ask of their marriage. We wish we had been able to engage with Conley and Moors (this issue) about the ways in which monogamous people can learn effective relationship strategies from polyamorous people. We wish we had been able to engage with Light and Fitzsimons (this issue) about their various ideas pertaining to the implications of adopting an instrumentality perspective on marital processes and about their new data demonstrating that people who perceive their partner as instrumental for their personal goals experience greater sexual passion for the partner. We wish we had been able to engage with DePaulo (this issue) about the dangers of investing extensive resources in one's marriage in light of the possibility that the relationship will ultimately break up and take those resources with it. We wish we had been able to engage with Baumeister and MacKenzie (this issue) and with vanDellen and Campbell (this issue) about the implications for marriage of the rising tide of narcissism in American culture. We wish we had been able to engage with Amato (this issue) about the extent to which the three models of marriage (institutional, companionate, and self-expressive) co-occur within contemporary Americans, and the consequences of

holding distinct constellations of these three models. We wish we had been able to engage with Aron and Aron (this issue) about the role that mental health processes play within the suffocation model. We wish we had been able to engage with Holmes and Murray (this issue) about ways to integrate the suffocation model with the relationships literature investigating the need to belong. Perhaps most important, despite the significant disagreements discussed earlier, we wish we had been able to focus more extensively on those aspects of the commentaries by Pietromonaco and Perry-Jenkins (this issue), Feeney and Collins (this issue), and Karney (this issue) that helped to advance our understanding of marriage in America. These examples are just a start; our full wish list extends to the horizon and beyond.

### The Optimization of Marriage

According to the suffocation model, the way to maximize the quality of one's marriage is to look to the top of Mount Maslow. Marriages at that altitude can be spectacularly fulfilling, beyond what was normatively available in previous eras. The problem is that sustaining a successful marriage at that altitude requires very high levels of oxygenation. As such, Americans seeking a high-altitude marriage must invest substantial resources—particularly quality time and psychological energy—in the quality of their relationship. Ideally, the two spouses will have reasonably strong interpersonal skills and be compatible in the first place.

To maximize the number of marriages that can succeed at that altitude, policymakers can change laws and rules to increase how much time and other resources are available to individual Americans, particularly those who are resource poor. In addition, with or without help from clinicians, individuals and couples can seek to develop strategies for helping them stretch whatever resources are available as far as possible, either by changing the way they spend these resources (e.g., trading television time for card-playing time, eating at home more frequently to save money for weekly date nights) or by learning procedures that can increase the chances that the specific activities spouses are spending together are oxygenating for the marriage (e.g., the Marriage Hack; Finkel et al., 2013).

These strategies notwithstanding, and as noted previously, not every couple will succeed at achieving sufficient oxygenation in their marriage. In addition, many couples will be successful during some time periods but not during others. In cases where resources are not adequate to meet the expectations encompassed by extensive, high-altitude marital dependence zones, the logic of the suffocation model implies a very good Plan B. In such cases, it is likely that marriages can be improved, with salutary downstream implications for personal well-being, by reducing the extensiveness of expectations of the marriage, the altitude of these

expectations, or both. Given that such changes reduce the amount of oxygenation required, they also reduce the extent to which the marriage falls short of spouses' expectations. In contrast to the high-altitude approach described in the previous paragraph, this approach is not one that will make the marriage spectacularly fulfilling. But it is likely to make it stronger than it would have been with more extensive, higher altitude expectations, assuming equal levels of oxygenation resources available.

### Conclusion

Contemporary American marriages are radically different from those circa 1800 and even substantially different from those circa 1950. A major component of these changes is that Americans are seeking the fulfillment of different goals from their marriage. As they have decreasingly looked to their marriage to help them fulfill their lower altitude needs and increasingly looked to their marriage to help them fulfill higher altitude needs, the potential for experiencing a truly great marriage has increased. At the same time, fulfillment of these higher altitude goals tends to require a particularly large investment in the quality of the marriage, and the majority of Americans are struggling to invest enough for the marriage to be able to meet their higher altitude expectations. As such, although the best marriages today are stronger than the best marriages in previous eras, the average marriage today is worse than the average marriage in previous eras. Our hope is that the suffocation model can provide a deeper insight into this bifurcation in marital outcomes than has existed heretofore—and that it will inspire the development of new interventions that can strengthen marriages and, consequently, happiness.

### Note

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