

Accuracy and Bias in Newlywed Couples' Perceptions of Conflict Styles and the Association with Marital Satisfaction

Chris Segrin, Alesia Hanzal & Tricia J. Domschke

Styles of handling conflict are highly consequential to marital success. The behavioral model predicts that spouses' accuracy in perceptions of each other will be associated with marital quality, whereas the benevolent perception model predicts that benevolent perceptions, even when objectively inaccurate, will be associated with marital quality. To investigate the role of perceptions of marital conflict styles, 194 couples married for less than five years completed self- and partner-reports of conflict styles and marital satisfaction. Results indicated that spouses were both accurate (i.e., seeing the self the same as one's partner sees the self) and biased (i.e., seeing the partner the same as one sees the self) in their perceptions of each others' conflict styles. Little support existed for the accuracy model of perception and marital satisfaction, but more consistent support was obtained for the benevolent perception model in which more positively toned perceptions, regardless of their consistency with partners' self-perceptions, were associated with higher marital satisfaction. Results of actor-partner interdependence analyses revealed numerous actor effects for conflict styles and satisfaction, and partner effects for the styles of conflict engagement and withdrawal and partners' marital satisfaction.

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No marital communication process has generated more scholarly interest than conflict. In an effort to understand the remarkably high failure rate of marriages and the large number of distressed marriages, scientists and practitioners have focused

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substantial attention on efforts to understand the role and effects of conflict in marriage. As couples solidify their relationship and progress into marriage, conflicts usually increase (Crohan, 1996). People enter into marriage with predilections or styles for handling conflicts that are learned in the family of origin (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), and these communication patterns do not change substantially during the early years of marriage (Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002). How couples argue and disagree about issues appears to be more consequential to the success of marriage than what they argue about or the frequency of conflict (Noller & Feeney, 1998; Prado & Markman, 1999; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Certain styles for responding to conflict such as demand and withdrawal and contempt and criticism are particularly deleterious to marital well-being (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Gottman, 1994; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). Because conflict patterns are good predictors of marital satisfaction (e.g., Kurdek, 1994; Noller & Feeney, 1998; Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002), they play an important role in the ultimate success or failure of marriages.

Abundant evidence shows that marital conflict and distress are deleterious to both the mental of physical health of spouses. For example, marital distress is associated with an increased risk of anxiety disorders, mood disorders such as depression, and substance use disorders (Whisman, 2007). Marital conflicts play a causal role in producing depressive symptoms in spouses (Choi & Marks, 2008). Spouses' specific styles and tactics for engaging in conflict are linked to a variety of physical health outcomes. When spouses express negativity and hostility during conflict, exaggerated physiological responses in immune, cardiovascular, and endocrine domains follow (Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003; Whitson & El-Sheikh, 2003). Women prone to compliance during conflict with husbands subjugate their own concerns and increase the risk of mortality over a 10-year observation that was four times higher than that of wives openly expressing their concerns to husbands (Eaker, Sullivan, Kelly-Hayes, D'Agostino, & Benjamin, 2007). Because marital conflict styles are so consequential to both the mental and physical well-being of spouses, there is an obvious need to further explore the mechanisms by which spouses experience behaviors as positive or negative marital outcomes.

The present investigation examines the role of conflict styles and spouses' perceptions of each others' conflict styles in the early years of marriage. This investigation seeks to determine whether spouses agree on the extent to which they and their partner characteristically use certain communication behaviors during conflicts. The present study examines whether perceptual accuracy or bias in reports of spouses' communication behaviors during conflict is associated with marital satisfaction. The focus on accuracy and bias stems from competing predictions in the literature about the importance of seeing the communication behavior of one's spouse as that spouse sees it him- or herself, versus simply seeing the spouse's behavior in a positive light, regardless of how the spouse sees his or her own behavior.

Couples' Conflict Styles and Satisfaction

Conflict management styles have a reliable association with marital satisfaction (Gottman, 1994). For example, styles that involve the avoidance of conflict, competitiveness, or negativity are generally associated with lower levels of satisfaction (Canary, 2003; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). In contrast, more positively toned conflict styles are associated with greater happiness in marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Presumably couples use a variety of styles for handling conflicts at various points in the relationship, but with characteristic tendencies for enacting certain strategies that have implications for the quality of the relationship.

Research on conflict styles and marital satisfaction finds that husbands and wives differ in the tendencies to enact various conflict styles (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006) and the extent to which satisfaction with the relationship is affected by the partner's conflict management styles (Kurdek, 1995). Kurdek found that, in general, husbands' marital satisfaction was more consistently associated with wives' styles for handling conflict, than wives' satisfaction was affected by husbands' conflict resolution styles. Such findings indicate that the association between conflict styles and marital satisfaction is most appropriately (and informatively) analyzed at the dyadic level. As Canary (2003) aptly observed, "individuals in conflict are affected by the patterns of interaction they themselves help to create" (p. 541). Spouses' relationship conflicts are not only predicted by their own prior behaviors, but by the partners' behaviors as well (Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001). Although observational studies of particular conflict episodes routinely assess the conflict behaviors and satisfaction of both spouses, dyadic analyses of habitual conflict styles and couples' satisfaction are less common (see for example Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Kurdek, 1995).

In this investigation, the association between different conflict styles and couples' marital satisfaction is tested with the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The APIM allows for tests of both actor effects (the effect of a spouse's conflict style on his or her *own* marital satisfaction) and partner effects (the effect of a spouse's conflict style on his or her *partner's* marital satisfaction). Among the more useful aspects of the APIM are the estimation of actor effects while simultaneously controlling for partner effects (and vice versa) as well as the estimation of actor and partner effects while controlling for initial nonindependence on the antecedent variable, which in this case is the conflict style. Although the relationship between conflict styles and marital satisfaction has been extensively researched, dyadic-level analyses with such rigorous statistical controls are relatively scarce.

An additional benefit of dyadic analysis is the ability to compare actor and partner effects for husbands and wives. As Gayle, Preiss, and Allen (2002) note, there is a stereotypical assumption in the communication literature that men use more withdrawal in conflict situations that arise in intimate relationships and that women use more demanding strategies in intimate relationships. The enactment of such conflict strategies is assumed to be detrimental to the partner's satisfaction with the relationship. A dyadic analysis provides information on whether husbands' withdrawal

for example is indeed differentially associated with their own versus their wives' satisfaction with the marriage.

Sillars, Canary, and Tafoya (2004) reviewed the literature and observed that "One of the most compelling and confounding features of intimate conflict is the tendency for individuals to construct profoundly different interpretations of the same interactions. Differences in perception are a basic, even defining feature of conflict" (p. 427). During conflicts, spouses do not often see eye to eye on the issues that are central to the conflict. However, it is unknown whether spouses share a common perception of how each other deals with conflicts (e.g., arguing, withdrawal), and how that perception impacts their relationship. Accordingly, one goal of this investigation was to evaluate the extent to which spouses have common perceptions of how the self and partner characteristically address their conflicts, and how their different conflict handling styles are associated with couples' marital satisfaction.

Perceptions of Conflict and Marital Satisfaction

There are at least two theoretical models that make differing predictions about the nature of couples' perceptions of each other's communication and how they predict marital success and happiness. For example, researchers operating out of a behavioral tradition have carefully examined the discrepancy between message intent and impact in distressed and nondistressed marriages (e.g., Schachter & O'Leary, 1985). The premise of the behavioral perspective is that spouses in distressed relationships often behave with a particular intent that is not concordant with its impact on the partner. Indeed, empirical findings indicate that people in distressed relationships often evaluate the intent of partners' messages and behaviors more negatively than how partners intended (Denton, Burleson, & Sprenkle, 1994; Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987). Accordingly, behaviorally oriented therapists often stress the importance of spouses accurately perceiving each other's behavioral intent, where accuracy is implied by impact matching intent. In this model, marital success and satisfaction are facilitated by perceptual accuracy or understanding between the spouses, notwithstanding the fact that people in distressed relationships might behave with genuine negative intention that is accurately perceived by partners (Burleson & Denton, 1997). The strong version of this theory goes so far as to predict that perceptual accuracy will be associated with positive marital outcomes, even when the perceptions are negative (Swann, de la Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). The "active listening" model of marital communication, in which spouses are taught to summarize each other's viewpoints during conflict, is also based on the premise that accurate perception of each other's communication is essential to marital success (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994).

A closely related, but differing theory on perceptions and marital success emerged from the cognitive behavioral tradition, drawing on principles from attribution theory. According to this perspective, it is the positively or negatively toned nature of attributions for a spouse's behavior that is tied to marital happiness or distress, not the accuracy or veridicality of those appraisals (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson,

1985). Research in this tradition shows that distressed couples make characteristically negative attributions for their partners' behaviors, and satisfied couples make characteristically positive attributions (Fincham & Bradbury, 1991). A related line of work on the sentiment override effect (Weiss, 1980) indicates that spouses often respond to each others' behaviors with a general sentiment toward the partner rather than the particulars of the partner's behavior. In a variety of different contexts, research findings support the sentiment override effect by showing that spouses in happy marriages respond positively to a wide variety of partner behaviors, and those in unhappy marriages do the opposite, even when the partner's behavior would appear to be positive in tone (e.g., Flora & Segrin, 2000; Hawkins, Carrère, & Gottman, 2002). Attribution theory therefore predicts that in some cases, *inaccuracy* in decoding a spouse's behavior could maintain, if not lead to, satisfaction (Noller & Feeney, 2002).

The role of perceptual accuracy in marital satisfaction has been explored in a number of investigations. One basic perceptual pattern documented in this line of research is the tendency to judge a partner's perspective as similar to that of the self (Sillars et al., 1994; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984). Spouses appear to make inferences about their partner's feelings and perspectives on issues such as finances, conflict, and leisure, using their own feelings and perspectives as a point of reference. Projecting self-perceptions onto partners seems like it could be a hindrance to achieving marital quality because it could easily lead to inaccurate appraisals and misunderstandings, and yet such perceived similarity is positively related to marital well-being (Acitelli et al., 1993). In fact, spouses' actual understanding (i.e., accurate perception) of their partner's marital ideals is largely unrelated to marital satisfaction (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001). What is more, in some cases understanding of a spouse's feelings can be negatively associated with the couple's satisfaction (Sillars et al., 1984). Therefore, another focus of this investigation was to test these competing theories of marital satisfaction in the domain of conflict styles. Is it the case that accurate perceptions or benevolent perceptions of each others' conflict styles are most predictive of a couple's marital satisfaction?

Accuracy and Bias in Perceptions of Marital Conflict

In marital relationships, perceptions of communication behaviors are often as consequential to the well-being of the relationship as the qualities that might be inherent in the behavior itself. For instance, seeing the spouse as similar to the self appears to be associated with more positive appraisals of the relationship overall (e.g., Acitelli et al., 1993; Lemay, Pruchno, & Field, 2006; Sillars et al., 1984). Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2006) review identified an assumption in the literature that family members tend to share perceptions of family conflict. Although this is a reasonable assumption, in the domain of marital conflict styles, there has yet to be a consensus on whether spouses typically agree on the extent to which each characteristically employs various styles of handling their conflicts. Potential agreement on conflict management styles is important given how consequential conflict management styles

are for the health of a marriage and how rampant perceptual biases (e.g., self-serving, actor–observer, false consensus) are in close relationships (e.g., Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000).

Kenny and Acitelli (2001) developed a conceptual model for the appraisal of accuracy and bias effects in perceptions that occur in close relationships. This model, which is a special version of the APIM, is tested in the present study and depicted in Figure 1. As evident from the Figure 1, the model involves assessing both spouses' self-appraisals of, in this case, their conflict styles. In addition, spouses provide perceptions of partners' conflict styles. For example, one model would include the husband's self-report of his withdrawal, his partner-report of the wife's withdrawal, the wife's self-report of her withdrawal, and the wife's partner-report of the husband's withdrawal. Accuracy effects are evident when one spouse's self-perceptions are predictive of the partner's partner-perception. Accuracy effects are sometimes referred to as “understanding” because such effects imply that spouses see partners in a way that is similar to how partners see themselves. Bias effects occur when spouses' self-perceptions are predictive of partner-perceptions. Bias effects are sometimes referred to in the literature as “assumed similarity” because this effect indicates that spouses have a tendency to rate partners similar to how they rate themselves. Across a range of issues that would be salient in marriage such as closeness, sex, and equity, Kenny and Acitelli found evidence of both accuracy and bias effects. One of the key purposes of the present investigation is to determine whether spouses are accurate and/or biased in perceptions of each other's conflict styles.

The Current Study

The purpose of the present investigation was to evaluate the nature of accuracy and bias effects in perceptions of marital conflict styles and associations with the well-being of the relationship. Prior research indicates that married couples can be both

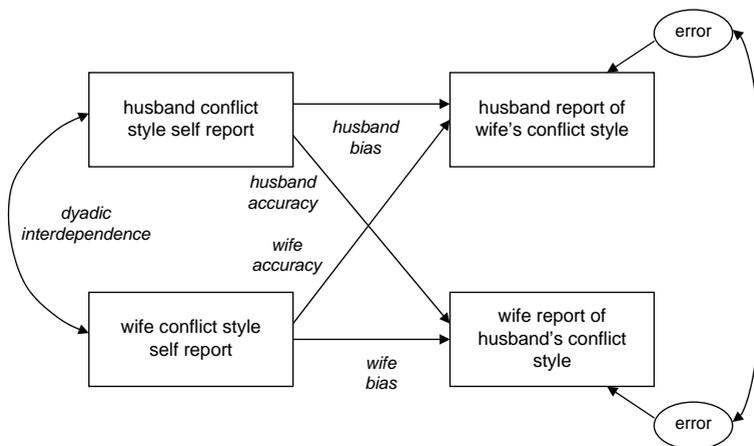


Figure 1 Conceptual model of accuracy and bias effects.

accurate and biased in perceptions of each other. However, these perceptual phenomena have yet to be evaluated in the domain of marital conflict styles. Therefore, the first research question asked:

RQ1: Are spouses accurate or biased (or both) in their perceptions of each other's styles of communicating during conflicts?

The literature on perceptual accuracy and marital interaction provides competing predictions about the nature of perceptions and marital well-being. If the accuracy model is correct, then minimal discrepancy between the husband's self-appraisal of conflict styles and the wife's appraisal of the husband's conflict styles (and vice versa) should be associated with high satisfaction. If the benevolent perception model is correct, then more positive perceptions of the spouse (e.g., "she rarely withdraws from conflict," "he frequently proposes positive solutions") should be predictive of satisfaction, regardless of that spouse's actual self-reported style. Therefore, the second research question asked:

RQ2: Are accurate perceptions or benevolent perceptions (or both) of communication during conflict associated with marital satisfaction?

The final research question examined the extent to which there are dyadic effects for conflict styles in predicting marital satisfaction. Specifically, the third research question asked:

RQ3: How are spouses' styles of communication during conflict associated with their own (actor effect) or their partner's (partner effect) satisfaction with the marriage?

This question will be addressed with a series of APIM analyses that simultaneously evaluate the role of each spouse's conflict styles in predicting both their own marital satisfaction and that of their partner.

These research questions and predictions were evaluated in a sample of newly married couples for several reasons. First, conflict interactions are more consequential in early marriage than later in marriage. Couples with truly destructive conflict styles are likely to be taken out of the married population by divorce after five to seven years of marriage. For example, destructive conflict behaviors such as yelling, insulting, expressing contempt, and stonewalling all increase the likelihood of divorce during the early years of marriage (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002). Those remaining married couples are more likely to have figured out how to effectively and appropriately manage conflicts. Second, conflict styles appear to be imported into marriage and are evident immediately. Therefore, identification of corrosive conflict patterns early in marriage has important implications for identifying phenomena evident premaritally and predictive of important marital outcomes.

Finally, marital conflict communication styles were assessed through self- and partner-reports from each spouse. Self- and partner-reports allow for appraisals of characteristic tendencies to use various communication tactics in conflict interactions. There is considerable empirical evidence showing that married couples' reports

of conflict styles are generally consistent with their actual communication behaviors in conflict interactions observed in a lab setting (Hahlweg, Kaiser, Christensen, Fehm-Wolfsdorf, & Groth, 2000; Heavey, Larson, Zumtobel, & Christensen, 1996; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). Also, when couples discussed desired changes in relationships in a home setting, ratings of partner support and undermining in the interaction were highly correlated with ratings of partner support and undermining in general, and with independent coders' ratings of these constructs from observation of the interaction (Foster, Caplan, & Howe, 1997). Although self- and partner-reports of conflict styles are not a substitute for behavioral observation, there is sufficient reason to believe that they are reflective of actual communication behaviors enacted by spouses in their marital conflicts.

Method

Participants

Married couples were recruited for this study using two different methods. The first method solicited couples' participation through marriage licenses filed in Pima County Arizona within the past five years. Using information provided in these court records, 204 recruitment letters were sent out explaining the nature of the study and inviting couples to participate with a postage paid postcard that they could return. Eight of these letters were returned as undeliverable and of the 196 who received the letters, 24% actually participated in the study. Although this response rate is low, it is comparable to response rates in the published literature where sampling is based on mailings to those who filed for marriage licenses (e.g., Johnson et al., 2005; Kurdek, 1991). Couples recruited through court records were given two \$10 gift cards for retail stores in exchange for participation. The second recruitment method sampled married couples by referral from students at a large Southwestern university. Students were offered extra credit if they referred a couple to the study married within the last five years and in their first marriage. The students referred 246 couples to the study, and 75% actually participated.

Out of all the returned questionnaires, 15 were discarded because only one spouse completed the survey, the data from one same-sex couple were deleted as that was outside the scope of the investigation, two couples' data were deleted because they had been married over five years, and 33 couples' data were deleted because at least one spouse had been married previously. Consequently, the final sample included 194 couples (35 recruited from marriage licenses, 159 recruited through university students) in their first marriage, who had been married for less than five years. Couples had been married on average 1.61 years ($SD = 1.45$). Husbands' mean age was 27.72 ($SD = 5.08$) and wives' was 26.04 ($SD = 4.36$). Collectively, this sample was 2% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 3% Asian or Pacific Islander, 3% Black, 14% Latina/o, 76% White, and 2% other/unknown. The majority of these couples (78%) had no children, and among the 43 couples who did, 30 had only one child. Husbands had on average 15.21 years of formal education ($SD = 2.34$) and 83% held

a full-time job. For wives, the average number of years of formal education was 15.73 ($SD = 2.10$), and 60% were employed full time.

Measures

Conflict resolution styles. The 32-item Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994) assesses self- and partner-reports of how frequently (1 = “never,” 5 = “always”) each of four different styles of conflict resolution are used. The conflict styles were derived from observational research of couples’ communication behaviors in conflict interactions (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). First, husbands and wives were asked to report how frequently *they* use positive problem solving (e.g., focusing on the problem at hand), conflict engagement (e.g., exploding and getting out of control), withdrawal (e.g., reaching a limit, shutting down, and refusing to talk any further), and compliance (e.g., not being willing to stick up for myself). These measures are hereafter referred to as self-reports. Additionally, husbands and wives were asked to report how frequently *their spouses* use the same styles when dealing with arguments and disagreements. These measures are referred to as partner-reports. What Kurdek (1994) characterized as the “conflict engagement” dimension is best understood as an appraisal of negativity, belligerence, and verbal aggressiveness. The CRSI was selected for use in this study because it was explicitly designed to provide data on both self- and partner-reports and thus lends itself well to the type of accuracy and bias analyses conducted in this investigation. The CSRI has strong psychometric qualities, demonstrating concurrent associations with relationship commitment (Kurdek, 1997), and empathy (de Wied, Branje, & Meeus, 2007), and prospective prediction of changes in relationships satisfaction and relational dissolution (Kurdek, 1995, 1996, 1998). Cronbach’s alphas in this study for *self-reports* for husbands’ and wives’ conflict engagement, positive problem solving, withdrawal, and compliance were .79, .76, .79, .84 and $\alpha = .80, .71, .73,$ and .78, respectively. Reliabilities of *partner-reports* from husbands were $\alpha = .86, .87, .82,$ and .80 for conflict engagement, positive problem solving, withdrawal, and compliance, respectively. Corresponding reliabilities for partner-reports from wives were $\alpha = .89, .86, .80,$ and .84. A confirmatory factor analysis of the four-factor structure proposed by Kurdek (1994) indicated an adequate fit to the data from husbands’ self-reports, $\chi^2/df = 1.46$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .05, as well as wives’ self-reports, $\chi^2/df = 1.50$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .05. A confirmatory factor analysis of husbands’ partner reports, $\chi^2/df = 1.89$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .07, and wives’ partner reports, $\chi^2/df = 1.91$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .07, also provided support for the proposed four-factor solution.

Marital satisfaction. The six-item Quality Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983) is a global evaluative assessment of marital quality and happiness. The six items assess the nature of the marriage and quality of the relationship (e.g., my relationship with my partner is very stable). All items were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale, with five items anchored at 1 = “very strong disagreement” and 7 = “very strong agreement,” and the sixth anchored with 1 = “very unhappy,” 7 = “perfectly happy.” High scores on all items indicated a quality marriage. Cronbach’s α was .93 for husbands and .96 for wives. A confirmatory factor analysis of this scale indicated that

the proposed univariate structure fit the data reasonably well, $\chi^2/df=1.79$, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .06 for husbands and $\chi^2/df=1.98$, CFI = .78, RMSEA = .07 for wives. Because scores on marital satisfaction were negatively skewed, the distribution of these scores was reversed, log transformed, and then reversed back to preserve the original direction of the scaling.

Demographic data. Participants completed a number of demographic items, such as sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, employment, and several scales not relevant to the present report.

Procedure

Once couples agreed to participate through one of the two recruitment methods, they received a packet in the mail. The packet contained a cover letter with instructions, consent forms, two surveys, and two prepaid envelopes. Questionnaires were only identified by code number and no names were recorded on any of the instruments. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaires independently and to use the pre-paid envelope that was provided to individually mail their completed survey and signed consent form back.

Results

Because all of the predictions in this investigation involve tests of association between and among various conflict styles and marital satisfaction, a correlation matrix of all variables included in these tests is presented in Table 1. These correlations were conducted separately for wives (upper portion of correlation matrix) and husbands (lower portion of correlation matrix).

Accuracy and Bias Effects in Perceptions of Conflict Styles

To determine whether couples exhibited accuracy and bias effects in their perceptions of conflict styles, a series of structural equation models was used to estimate standardized regression coefficients in accordance with the conceptual model described by Kenny and Acitelli (2001). For these analyses, the dyad was treated as the unit of analysis. Each model included data from both the husband and wife, and each included both their self-report and partner-report, as illustrated in Figure 1. One model was calculated for each of the four conflict styles assessed in this study. Actor and partner effects were tested for significance based on unstandardized regression coefficients as recommended by Kenny et al. (2006), but for ease of interpretation, standardized regression coefficients are presented. Results of these analyses appear in Table 2.

As evident from Table 2, there was consistent evidence of accuracy effects for all conflict styles for both spouses. In other words, husbands' perceptions of their own conflict styles were significantly predictive of their wives' partner-reports of conflict styles, and vice versa. These standardized regression coefficients ranged from $\beta = .21$ to $.55$ (all $p < .001$), suggesting a substantial accuracy effect in spouses' perceptions.

Table 1 Correlations among Conflict Styles and Satisfaction for Husbands and Wives

	Conflict engage-self	Positive problem- solving-self	Withdrawal - self	Compliance - self	Conflict engage - partner	Positive problem- solving-partner	Withdrawal -partner	Compliance -partner	Marital satisfaction
Conflict engage-self	–	–.46	.32	.04	.57	–.43	.47	.20	–.31
Positive problem- solving-self	–.29	–	–.44	–.17	–.27	.62	–.19	–.18	.29
Withdrawal-self	.40	–.39	–	.25	.33	–.33	.19	.05	–.22
Compliance-self	–.04	–.18	.20	–	.21	–.18	.14	.08	–.20
Conflict engage-partner	.53	–.19	.36	.27	–	–.49	.43	–.13	–.35
Positive problem-solving- partner	–.31	.56	–.27	–.27	–.49	–	–.42	–.13	.36
Withdrawal-partner	.36	–.21	.30	.22	.36	–.47	–	.28	.31
Compliance-partner	.07	–.22	.07	.22	.01	–.27	.32	–	.03
Marital satisfaction	–.28	.29	–.28	–.15	–.32	.38	.29	–.20	–

Note. Correlations for husbands are below the diagonal and correlations for wives are above the diagonal. Coefficients greater than or equal to $r = .14$ are statistically significant at $p < .05$, and values greater than or equal to $r = .18$ are statistically significant at $p < .01$.

Table 2 Accuracy and Bias Effects in Couples' Perceptions of Their Conflict Styles

Conflict style	Interdependence	Accuracy effects		Bias effects	
	Husband self → wife self (<i>r</i>)	Husband self → wife partner	Wife self → husband partner	Husband self → husband partner	Wife self → wife partner
Conflict engagement	.36*** (-.03)	.41*** (.00)	.51*** (.01)	.35***	.43***
Positive problem-solving	.41*** (-.02)	.21*** (.02)	.31*** (.01)	.44***	.53***
Withdrawal	.09 (.02)	.55*** (.00)	.36*** (.01)	.27***	.14*
Compliance	.02 (.01)	.41*** (.01)	.38*** (.00)	.22***	.07

Note. Table values are standardized regression coefficients, unless otherwise indicated. Values in parentheses are average coefficients derived from pseudocouple analyses in which husbands and wives' data were paired with that of a randomly selected other spouse.

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Although participants exhibited accuracy in perceptions of their spouse's conflict resolution styles, there was also strong evidence of bias effects. The regression coefficients on the two rightmost columns of Table 2 illustrate that spouses were inclined to rate their partner's conflict handling styles as similar to their own (e.g., people with high self-reported conflict engagement also reported that their partner was high in conflict engagement). Kenny and Acitelli (2001) refer to these as bias effects because the perceiver assumes similarity with the self. The only case in which there was no evidence of bias effects was for wives' reports of compliance. There was no association between wives' self- and partner-reports of compliance, $\beta = .07$, *ns*. However, for the remaining seven of the eight bias effects, both husbands and wives exhibited significant bias effects, $\beta = .14-.53$, all $p < .05$.

Finally, the degree of interdependence within the couple is evident in the husband self-report ↔ wife self-report conflict resolution style correlation, as these are dyads with distinguishable members. Clearly, there was evidence of significant interdependence for conflict engagement, $r = .36$, $p < .001$, and positive problem solving, $r = .41$, $p < .001$, but not withdrawal, $r = .09$, *ns*, or compliance, $r = .02$, *ns*. Further, it is noteworthy that the magnitude of the bias effects are noticeably lower for those conflict styles for which there is no interdependence.

In some cases, dyads can appear to be similar not because they truly are but rather because both members respond to various measures in a stereotypic fashion. For some variables, there are culturally normative responses. These tend to make dyads appear more similar than they truly are. For example, if most people would provide high scores to the positive problem solving style of conflict resolution and low scores for withdrawal, that could create the appearance of similarity in a dyad as both

partners' scores would be comparable across the various items. One method of assessing the extent to which this phenomenon, known as stereotypic accuracy (Kenny et al., 2006), exists is to conduct pseudocouple analyses. This method randomly pairs each person with someone who is not the actual spouse. The logic of pseudocouple analysis is that if there are culturally normative responses that create higher perceived similarity than what is truly the case, there should be significant dyadic indexes of nonindependence even between dyads that are randomly generated. Although pseudocouple analysis would have no bearing on bias effects, as those are calculated entirely within the individual, in this context they provide an estimate of the stereotypic accuracy effect in couples' nonindependence in conflict styles and their accuracy effects.

Pseudocouple analyses were conducted for each conflict style, reestimating the dyadic correlation and accuracy effects reported in Table 2. Following the recommendation of Little and Rubin (1987), the pseudocouple analysis was conducted five times, with five different random pairings of spouses. The correlations and standardized coefficients that appear in Table 2 in parentheses are the averages of the coefficients derived from the five pseudocouple analyses. As evident from Table 2, none of these coefficients from the pseudocouple analyses differed significantly from zero.

Accurate vs. Benevolent Perceptions of Conflict Styles and Marital Satisfaction

Competing models of perception and marital satisfaction predict that either benevolent or accurate perceptions will be most closely associated with marital satisfaction. The benevolent perception model predicts that the more positively one spouse views his or her partner, regardless of the partner's own perception or actual behavior, the more satisfied the individual will be. This prediction was therefore tested by correlating each spouse's partner-reported conflict style with each spouse's marital satisfaction. The results of these analyses appear in Table 3. It is evident from Table 3 that seven of the eight spouses' partner-reports of conflict styles are

Table 3 Correlations between Partner-Reported Conflict Styles and Spouses' Marital Satisfaction

	Marital satisfaction	
	Husband	Wife
Husband partner report		
Conflict engagement	-.32***	-.27***
Positive problem solving	.38***	.13
Withdrawal	-.29***	-.17*
Compliance	-.20**	.14 ^a
Wife partner report		
Conflict engagement	-.19**	-.35***
Positive problem solving	.24**	.36***
Withdrawal	-.29***	-.31***
Compliance	.12	.03

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, ^a $p = .05$.

significantly correlated with their *own* marital satisfaction. These correlations were positive for positively toned conflict styles (i.e., positive problem solving) and negative for the more negatively toned conflict styles (e.g., conflict engagement, withdrawal). The majority of these correlations were in the $r = .20-.40$ range in absolute value. What is more, each spouse's partner reports of conflict styles were also correlated with their *partner's* report of marital satisfaction. These too were positive in direction for the more positively toned conflict resolution styles and negative for the negative conflict styles. However, the magnitude of these correlations was somewhat lower, generally in the $r = .15-.30$ range, and with several nonsignificant coefficients. The results support the prediction that perceptions of a spouse's tendency to engage in constructive conflict handling styles and avoid dysfunctional conflict styles are associated with both their own, as well as partners' marital satisfaction.

A competing model of relational perceptions and satisfaction predicts that accurate perceptions will be predictive of marital satisfaction. To test this hypothesis an index of accurate perception was first created by calculating the absolute value of the difference between the husband's partner-report and the wife's self-report (and vice versa) for each conflict style. With this index, accurate perception would be indicated by a value close to zero, where the husband's partner report = the wife's self report. Alternatively, if husbands' partner reports are grossly above or below wives' self-reports, the score is positive in value. The higher the absolute value of this difference, the more "error" there is in one spouse's partner-report, relative to his or her partner's self-report. The accurate perception model would predict that these accuracy coefficients would be negatively associated with each spouse's marital satisfaction, i.e., the closer to zero, the higher the level of marital satisfaction. A series of correlations tested this prediction and the results appear in Table 4. There were virtually no significant correlations between the absolute value of the

Table 4 Correlations between Absolute Value of Partner–Self Differences in Conflict Styles and Spouses' Marital Satisfaction

	Marital satisfaction	
	Husband	Wife
Husband partner–wife self		
Conflict engagement	–.10	–.05
Positive problem solving	–.09	.11
Withdrawal	–.01	–.10
Compliance	.05	–.04
Wife partner–husband self		
Conflict engagement	–.04	.18*
Positive problem solving	–.07	–.08
Withdrawal	.01	.05
Compliance	–.11	–.09

Note. * $p < .05$.

partner-report—self-report difference scores and either spouse's marital satisfaction. The only exception to this pattern occurred for the wife partner-report—husband self-report conflict engagement correlation. The closer these two values were, the more wives were satisfied with the marriage. All other correlations were in the $r = .00-.10$ range and were not significant. These results do not provide any compelling support for the accurate perception model of marital satisfaction.

Conflict Styles and Couples' Satisfaction

The final set of analyses explored the relationship between spouses' self-reported conflict styles and marital satisfaction, as well as that of the partner. These associations were tested with the APIM, treating the dyad as the unit of analysis. For each analysis, both the husband's and wife's conflict styles and marital satisfaction were entered into the model. The couple's conflict styles and the error terms for marital satisfaction were correlated, as recommended by Cook and Kenny (2005). The APIM estimates regression coefficients for spouses' conflict styles and marital satisfaction, as well as those of a partner, while simultaneously controlling for potential interdependence in conflict styles. One model was calculated for each of the four conflict styles measured in this investigation. Once again, significance testing was based on unstandardized regression coefficients but for ease of interpretation standardized regression coefficients are presented. Results of these analyses appear in Figures 2–5.

The APIM for conflict engagement (Figure 2) revealed significant actor effects that were negative in direction, $\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$ for wives and $\beta = -.22$, $p < .01$ for husbands. The more spouses exhibit negativity and belligerence in their conflicts, the less satisfied they are with their marriage. The model revealed a significant partner effect for wives, also in a negative direction: wife \rightarrow husband, $\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$. The corresponding partner effect for husband \rightarrow wife was statistically significant, $\beta = -.16$, $p < .05$. This effect indicates that wives' reports of conflict engagement were negatively associated with husbands' reported marital satisfaction, and vice versa.

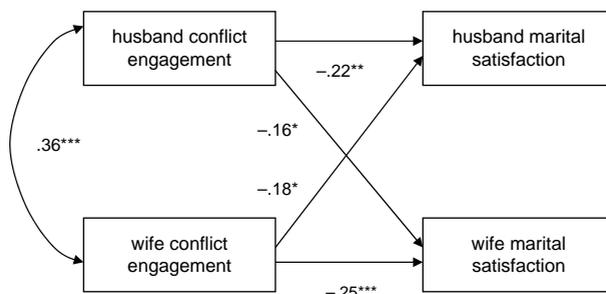


Figure 2 Actor partner interdependence model for conflict engagement and marital satisfaction. Values are standardized regression coefficients.

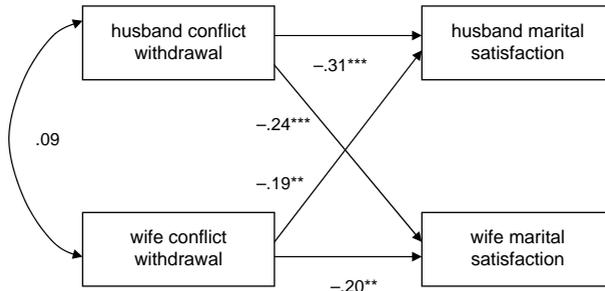


Figure 3 Actor partner interdependence model for conflict withdrawal and marital satisfaction. Values are standardized regression coefficients.

Like conflict engagement, the analyses for conflict withdrawal (Figure 3) revealed significant actor effects and significant partner effects. People’s reports of conflict withdrawal were associated with lower reported satisfaction with the marriage, $\beta = -.31, p < .001$ for husbands and $\beta = -.20, p < .01$ for wives. At the same time, people’s reports of conflict withdrawal were negatively associated with their spouse’s reported marital satisfaction: wife \rightarrow husband $\beta = -.19, p < .01$ and husband \rightarrow wife $\beta = -.24, p < .001$.

The results for positive problem solving (Figure 4) revealed a significant actor and partner effect emanating from wives, but only an actor effect for husbands. In other words, wives’ positive problem solving was significantly and positively associated with both their own, $\beta = .27, p < .001$, and their husband’s, $\beta = .19, p < .05$, marital satisfaction. In contrast, husbands’ reports of positive problem solving were associated with their own, $\beta = .21, p < .01$, but not their wives’ reports of marital satisfaction.

Finally, there were actor effects but no partner effects for compliance and marital satisfaction (Figure 5). Husbands’ and wives’ compliance was negative related to marital satisfaction, $\beta = -.15, p < .05$ and $\beta = -.19, p < .01$, respectively. However, husbands’ and wives’ self-reported compliance was unrelated to partners’ marital satisfaction.

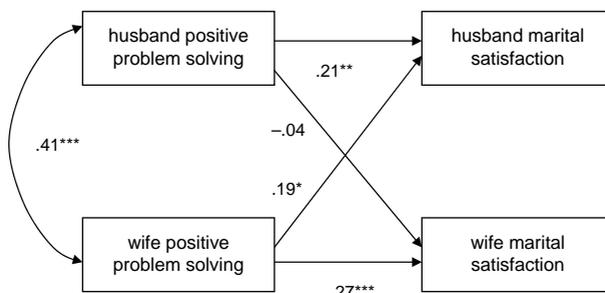


Figure 4 Actor partner interdependence model for positive problem solving and marital satisfaction. Values are standardized regression coefficients.

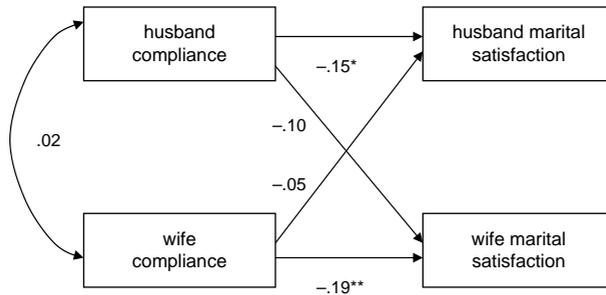


Figure 5 Actor partner interdependence model for compliance and marital satisfaction. Values are standardized regression coefficients.

Discussion

This investigation evaluated spouses' accuracy and bias in perceptions of each other's marital conflict styles. Various theoretical models evident in the literature predict positive outcomes for marriage as a function of accuracy in perception, whereas others predict that benevolent perceptions are most important, even if these perceptions reflect distortions of reality. Results revealed that husbands and wives were both accurate and biased in their perceptions of each other's conflict styles. Husbands and wives tended to be in agreement with each other about the extent to which they characteristically used various conflict styles. Although regression coefficients index a linear relationship and not absolute agreement, the significant effects at least suggest that spouses are aware of partners' relative tendencies toward the various conflict styles when using the partner's self-reports as the criterion. At the same time, spouses were biased toward seeing the partner's conflict styles as similar to their own. Despite the fact that couples exhibited accuracy effects in perceptions, the data did not support the accurate perception model of marital satisfaction. Rather, findings were more consistent with the benevolent perception theory. The more positively people viewed a spouses' conflict styles (e.g., "he rarely explodes and gets out of control," "she rarely shuts down and refuses to talk"), the happier they were with the marriage. Further, numerous partner effects were documented, illustrating that people's self-reported conflict styles are associated with the satisfaction of a partner.

Accurate and Biased Perceptions of Conflict Styles

The results of this investigation provide substantial support for both accuracy and bias effects in spouses' perceptions of each others' conflict styles. Although it may seem intuitively implausible that people could be both biased and accurate in their perceptions, there are other instances in the literature where spouses and intimates appear to be both accurate and biased in their perceptions (Boyes & Fletcher, 2007; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Matthews, Del Priore, Acitelli, & Barnes-Farrell, 2006). Accuracy effects indicate that spouses share an understanding in that the husband's report of his wife's conflict behavior is significantly predictive of her report of her

own behavior, and vice versa. Bias effects in marital perceptions traditionally take the form of assumed similarity (Sillars et al., 1994). Just as husbands and wives were both accurate, both were biased as well. A new marriage is a social context ripe for biased perception driven by assumed similarity. In fact, spouses might actually be motivated to present their self perceptions as comparable to the perceptions of their partner, even in domains where that similarity need not be essential to the health of the relationship. Such a simultaneous pull for biased and accurate perception is consistent with the concepts of integration and reaffirmation from the dialectical perspective (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), both of which describe ways in which people sometimes simultaneously tolerate and honor opposing forces in their personal relationships.

Gagné and Lydon (2004) explained how people in close relationships can simultaneously exhibit biased and accurate perceptions. They theorize that people are subject to at least two different motivations when making relationship evaluations. First, people have a need to objectively and accurately understand relationships. This type of perception is data driven and relatively impartial. At the same time, people have self-esteem needs. Self-esteem needs motivate people to make enhancing perceptions of their relationships. Because these motivational states are independent, their attendant biases can operate simultaneously. The simultaneous operation of accurate and biased perception can be illustrated with a scenario closely related to an example provided by Boyes and Fletcher (2007). Assume that a hypothetical husband in this investigation rated his conflict engagement as 5 and his positive problem solving as a 1, on a five-point scale. Assume that this husband's wife rated her own conflict engagement and positive problem solving both as 3 on the same scale. Finally, assume that the wife rated *her husband's* conflict engagement and positive problem solving as 4 and 2, respectively. Clearly, this hypothetical wife is biased in the appraisal by consistently pulling ratings of her husband's conflict styles in the direction of self-ratings, relative to how he rated himself. However, it is equally evident that there is at least some degree of accuracy in her evaluations in that they are collectively tracking changes in his self-reports. Indeed, he rated himself highest on conflict engagement and lowest on compliance, just as she rated him. A pattern of ratings such as this over multiple conflict styles would actually yield a perfect correlation between the husband's self-ratings and the wife's partner-ratings. This would be the case so long as the relative ranking of each conflict style was consistent between the self- and partner-reports. This is, in effect, how the spouses in the present investigation perceived each others' conflict styles. They exhibited a tendency to confirm each others' self-reports while simultaneously being biased toward rating partners' conflict behaviors similar to how they rate their own conflict behaviors.

The observed accuracy effects provide substantial evidence for the validity of self-reports of marital communication behaviors. Representativeness is a concern that has always plagued observational research. When self-reports that assess information on characteristic communication patterns are sought as an alternative, questions of validity naturally arise. In the domain of marital communication there is perhaps no greater standard against which to compare self-reports than the spouse's

partner-report. The fact that these two accounts were so robustly consistent for participants' conflict styles bodes well for the utility of self-reported measures of marital communication patterns.

Accurate vs. Benevolent Perceptions of Conflict Styles and Marital Satisfaction

In the literature, theorists have articulated varying points of view on the importance of accurate perceptions for marital success and happiness. Some argue that accurate perceptions of each others' perspectives and behaviors are vital to marital satisfaction (e.g., Swann et al., 1994). However, other theories are based on the premise that marital satisfaction is fostered by holding idealized views of the spouse, even when they are distortions of reality (Miller, Neihuis, & Huston, 2006; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). In the domain of conflict styles, the results of this investigation provide support for the benevolent perceptions theory of marital satisfaction. When spouses' partner reports of conflict styles were correlated with their marital satisfaction, 12 of the 16 correlations were significant. The higher people rate spouses' tendencies to use constructive conflict styles and the lower they rate their tendencies to engage in destructive conflict styles, the more satisfied they are with the marriage. For example, the lower wives rated their husband's tendency toward conflict engagement (which was really a measure of belligerence and negativity) and withdrawal, the happier the wives were with the marriage, regardless of how the husband rated his own tendencies toward conflict engagement and withdrawal. What is more, it is not just the wives who seemed to benefit from these benevolent perceptions, their husbands were also happier. The exact same pattern was evident when husbands had more benevolent perceptions of wives' conflict communication behaviors—both husbands and wives were happier with the marriage.

If accurate perceptions were associated with satisfaction, the absolute difference between one spouse's self-rating and the other's partner-rating should be negatively associated with marital satisfaction. In this case 0 indicates identical perceptions between the two spouses and values greater than 0 indicate an increasing degree of disagreement between the spouses. However, this variable was not predictive of satisfaction in 15 of the 16 correlations. Where there was a significant correlation for wife partner–husband self-reports of conflict engagement, the correlation was weak in magnitude.

In the domain of marital conflict communication, it appears that the benevolent perception theory has strong support, but there is little support for the accurate perception theory of marital satisfaction. These findings have paradoxical implications for understanding the role of conflict communication behaviors in marital happiness. Although perfect understanding and agreement are sometimes regarded as an ideal, in some cases, couples might be happiest if they simply overlook some of the negative communication behaviors and perhaps exaggerate their recollection of the positive behaviors. Other investigations show that the association between relationship satisfaction and accurate versus idealized perceptions of the spouse varied as a function of whether the perceptual issue is inherently positive or negative to the spouse or relationship (Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005; Simpson, Orina, & Ickes, 2003).

Because many conflict tactics investigated in this study are inherently negative, this would be a communication context in which idealized perceptions (versus accurate) are probably in the relationship's best interests. Another theoretical implication of these findings concerns the potentially central role of conflict management to feelings about a marriage. Kenny and Acitelli (2001) argued that people are more likely to have accurate views of matters that are not central to the relationship (e.g., a partner's hobby) and not threatening. In contrast, matters central to the relationship are more prone to biased views, and often require some enhancement in order to maintain satisfaction with the relationship (Neff & Karney, 2005). Because communication styles are so central to the quality of a relationship, happily married couples are probably motivated to enhance memories of their partner's good nature when disagreements arise. These findings suggest that perhaps one component of marital happiness is overlooking at least some of the negativity that might be inherent in a partner's communication, while simultaneously enhancing mental representations of the partner's more positively toned communication behaviors.

Conflict Styles and Marital Satisfaction

Finally, these data revealed significant actor effects for all four of the self-reported conflict styles and spouses' marital satisfaction. The more people reported conflict engagement, conflict withdrawal, and compliance, and the less they reported positive problem solving, the less satisfied they were with the marriage. These actor effects are almost surely expressions of reciprocal relationships: More satisfied spouses most likely exhibit lower levels of destructive conflict styles and spouses who infrequently exhibit destructive conflict styles are more satisfied with the marriage. By engaging in destructive communication during conflict (e.g., use of insults, exploding and getting out of control, launching personal attacks) spouses are likely to be both the source and the object of their actions. Such behaviors damage the quality of the marriage and engender a climate of negativity that motivates further negative communication during conflict episodes.

In addition to the actor effects, this study documented a series of partner effects for conflict styles and marital satisfaction. For example, participants' self-reported conflict engagement and withdrawal were not only predictive of their own lower marital satisfaction, but predictive of their partner's lower satisfaction as well. Clearly, neither husbands or wives feel good about marriage when partners communicate with hostility and negatively during conflict, or when partners withdrawal from conflict interactions. These findings are consistent with others in the literature that document the corrosive nature of conflict patterns such as demand and withdrawal (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Heavey et al., 1995). The partner effects for these two corrosive communication patterns have potentially important implications for identifying at-risk marriages. Couples in this study were all newlyweds. As Markman's relational bank account theory of marital satisfaction stipulates, couples enter into marriage with a large reserve of positive affect that can sustain numerous "withdrawals" in the form of negative behaviors before the relationship eventually becomes bankrupt (Markman, 1984). Despite the satisfied nature of most newlywed

couples, communication patterns such as hostile conflict engagement and withdrawal from conflict still substantially associate with dissatisfaction in partners. Although newlyweds might be able to tolerate this dissatisfaction in the short term, these patterns do not portend a happy future for couples and represent reasonable starting points for interventions aimed at preventing or treating marital distress.

The implications of using positive problem solving or compliance during conflict are more complex. Partner effects indicated that the tendency to propose positive solutions during conflict (e.g., findings alternatives that are acceptable to each party, negotiating and compromising) is associated with husbands' satisfaction when the wife is the actor, but husbands' positive problem solving did not appear to predict wives' satisfaction. It is possible that gender roles in marriage are associated with differential expectations for appropriate behavior in conflict settings from husbands and wives (e.g., Gayle, Preiss, & Allen, 1998), an issue addressed in more detail in the following paragraph. Also, compliance, or just giving in without a fight, is clearly associated with dissatisfaction for the actor, but not the partner. Compliance may be regarded as a communication behavior that is deleterious to the marital satisfaction of the self, but not necessarily to the partner. With compliance the agenda and concerns of the actor are subverted in favor of the partners' when the actor enacts compliant communication behaviors in conflicts.

All of the actor effects for conflict style and satisfaction and virtually all of the partner effects were nearly identical for husbands and wives. In other words, if a self-reported conflict style was associated with satisfaction for husbands, it was similarly associated with satisfaction for wives. If a husband's self-reported conflict style was associated with his wife's satisfaction, the same generally held for her self-reported conflict style and his satisfaction. Despite stereotypical assumptions in the communication literature about different communication behaviors enacted by men and women during conflict, meta-analyses indicate that sex accounts for only 0–1.5% of the variance in the propensity to utilize different conflict tactics (Gayle et al., 1994, 1998, 2002). Along with the results of the present study, one might conclude that not only do men and women approach conflicts with similar behavioral tendencies, but in early marriage at least, the use of certain communication behaviors during conflict have fairly universal or generic associations with spouses' satisfaction, regardless of sex.

In summary, the results on conflict styles and satisfaction show that in early marriage, negativity and hostility as well as withdrawal from conflict are potentially deleterious to both husbands' and wives' satisfaction, regardless of whether they are the source or target of such communication behaviors. People often assume that being the target of hostile behaviors from a spouse is damaging to one's satisfaction with the relationship, whereas experiencing a partner's constructive conflict behaviors is beneficial to one's marital satisfaction. However, the results of these dyadic analyses show that those presumed negative and positive effects extend to both source and target of marital conflict communications. Because dysfunctional marital conflict behaviors are so harmful to spouses' physical and psychological well-being (Eaker et al., 2007; Whitson & El-Sheikh, 2003) it is important to note that enactment, not

just reception of, these strategies can have potentially negative consequences. In terms of damaging one's own marital satisfaction, these dysfunctional strategies do not simply include the enactment of hostile and aggressive conflict styles, but include withdrawal from conflict, being overly compliant, and the absence of positive problem solving during conflict. Conflict behaviors such as positive problem solving and compliance are potentially fruitful for the satisfaction of the person enacting them, although they do not have consistent associations with the satisfaction of the recipients of these forms of conflict communication.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings presented in this investigation are correlational in nature, and therefore the direction of causality between these relationships cannot be established. For example, the APIMs tested paths from conflict styles to satisfaction, but that does not imply that this is the only direction of causality between these two variables. As Caughlin and Vangelisti (2006) concluded, conflict and relational outcomes are best understood as reciprocal effects. With that important point made, there exists no shortage of evidence in the literature to show that conflict styles predict changes in satisfaction over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and in studies that compare the two possible orders, the conflict \rightarrow satisfaction relationship has received stronger support than the satisfaction \rightarrow conflict relationship (Kurdek, 1995). Nevertheless, it would not be prudent to interpret the results of this investigation as supporting a single causal direction between conflict and marital satisfaction. Rather, it would be useful to study both the prospective association between conflict styles and change in marital satisfaction as well as the extent to which conflict styles are stable or fluid, perhaps changing in response to varying levels of marital satisfaction. The couples in this investigation were all newlyweds and it is at least possible that as couples adjust to each other's styles of communication the association between specific conflict management behaviors and marital satisfaction weakens with time.

On a related point, even though this investigation included only those who were in a first marriage of less than five years' duration, it may not be prudent to assume homogeneity in the degree of adjustment to each other's styles of communication during conflict. Some of these couples might have had extensive courtships during which acclimation to each other's conflict styles could have already commenced. This possibility suggests that it might be useful for future research to include an assessment and examination of courtship duration, premarital conflict communication behaviors, and their association with marital satisfaction. Conflict patterns during courtship do not generally appear to have a relational impact until some years into the marriage (Kelley, Huston, & Cate, 1985).

As with any investigation based on self-reported communication behaviors, couples' responses are potentially susceptible to various reporting biases (e.g., social desirability). Even though partner reports essentially corroborated the self-reports of various conflict styles, it is still possible that partner reports were susceptible to similar biases as self-reports given the closeness and interdependence of the relationship. An obvious way to disentangle these effects would be for future

research to combine perceptions of spouses' conflict behaviors in a particular interaction with those of observers or coders who would be less inclined to be affected by relationship enhancing biases.

Another bias that could impact the results of this investigation concerns willingness to participate in the investigation. Regardless of the sampling method by which potential couples were contacted, all participated on a voluntary basis. Accordingly, a self-selection bias could have filtered out the most distressed or conflicted couples. This might have restricted the range of both the conflict styles, especially those that are negative in nature, as well as marital satisfaction.

Finally, conflict styles were assessed in terms of frequency of use, without respect to particular situations or topics of conflict. Even though characteristic tendencies to engage in certain types of conflict management behaviors (e.g., hostile engagement, withdrawal) appear to be associated with lower marital satisfaction and other characteristic tendencies (e.g., positive problem solving) are associated with higher marital satisfaction, these results do not explain how consequential certain conflict management styles are for addressing specific areas of disagreement. They also do not indicate whether spouses are more or less accurate in perceiving their partners' styles as a function of different areas of disagreement. Furthermore, there is evidence that certain contexts and situations pull for more competitive gender role behavior because the context is perceived as more "masculine" in nature (Gayle et al., 1998). This at least raises the possibility that associations between enactment of certain conflict communication behaviors and satisfaction with the marriage might not be equivalent for husbands and wives in all marital conflict contexts, even though the results of this investigation suggest fairly uniform effects for husbands and wives. A next logical step in this line of research would be to appraise spouses' conflict management styles in different domains that are important to marriage (e.g., finances, work-family strain) to determine if the conflict styles interact with topical domain to predict couples' satisfaction.

Results of this investigation reveal that newlywed husbands and wives are both accurate and biased in their perceptions of each other's conflict styles. They tend to see their partner similar to how their partner sees the self. However, people assume that partners engage in conflict styles similar to the self. This study adds further evidence to the literature on benevolent perceptions and marital happiness. For several conflict styles, spouses were happiest when they made rather generous perceptions of each others' tendencies to use positively or negatively toned conflict styles. In contrast, there was no credible evidence that accurate perceptions of a partner's conflict styles had any association with marital satisfaction. From a practical standpoint, these results question the importance of trying to get spouses to see things the same way as their partner does. Although mutual understanding is in many contexts important to the success and happiness of marriage, there are evidently other contexts in which couples might not need to see things eye to eye in order to be happy. Rather, what appears more important is that they cultivate positive, and perhaps even idealized, views of their partner's interpersonal behavior. Self-reported conflict engagement and withdrawal are not only predictive of self-reported marital

satisfaction, but partner-reported satisfaction as well. These actor and partner effects for conflict style and marital satisfaction affirm the vital association between how couples handle their conflicts and the marital satisfaction of both spouses.

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