

The Impact of Attributions in Marriage: A Longitudinal Analysis

Frank D. Fincham and Thomas N. Bradbury
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In this study, we investigate the longitudinal relation between attributions for relationship events and marital satisfaction. Thirty-four couples were assessed at two points separated by approximately 12 months. Causal and responsibility attributions for marital difficulties and negative spouse behaviors were strongly related to concurrent marital satisfaction. For wives, later marital satisfaction was predicted by both causal and responsibility attributions after the effects of earlier satisfaction were removed. For husbands, attributions did not predict later marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction did not predict later attributions for either husbands or wives. Marital satisfaction and the two types of attributions were related to concurrent unrealistic relationship expectations, but these expectations did not predict later marital satisfaction. The results are discussed in terms of a possible causal relation between attributions and marital satisfaction.

Social psychologists have generated an impressive body of knowledge concerning the attributions people make about others. The vast majority of studies, however, investigate causal attributions for the behavior of strangers and hypothetical persons. The usefulness of this knowledge for understanding attribution processes in close relationships has therefore been questioned (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985; Fincham, 1985a). For example, it has been shown that attributions are influenced by factors such as expected interaction (Knight & Vallacher, 1981), the affect experienced by an attributor toward an actor (Goldberg, 1978, 1981; Regan, Straus, & Fazio, 1974), and the degree to which an attributor is acquainted with an actor (Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976). As a consequence, a number of recent models have attempted to analyze attributions specifically in the context of close relationships, especially marriage (e.g., Arias & Beach, 1987; Baucom, 1986; Berley & Jacobson, 1984; Bradbury & Fincham, 1987; Doherty, 1981; Fincham, 1983, 1985a; Hotaling, 1980; Sillars, 1985).

The fundamental premise of these analyses is that differences in patterns of attributions for partner behavior and relationship difficulties underlie variations in marital satisfaction. Data consistent with this assumption come from a growing number of empirical studies (e.g., Baucom, Bell, & Duhe, 1982; Fincham, 1985b; Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987; Fincham, Beach, &

Nelson, 1987; Fincham & O'Leary, 1983; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985; Jacobson, McDonald, Follette, & Berley, 1985; Kyle & Falbo, 1985). For example, these studies show that relative to nondistressed spouses, distressed spouses view the causes of their partners' negative behavior as reflecting enduring, global characteristics of their partners (i.e., they make internal, stable, and global attributions). Distressed spouses also tend to view positive partner behavior as situationally determined and thus reflecting temporary, situation-specific causes (i.e., they make external, unstable, and specific attributions).

The findings cited here, however, only document the existence of an association between attributions and marital satisfaction. They do not address the fundamental premise that pervades current theoretical analyses of attributions in close relationships. Briefly stated, it has been argued that attributions are causally related to marital satisfaction. This is evident in the explicit suggestion that certain types of attributions may initiate or maintain marital distress (e.g., Baucom, 1986; Berley & Jacobson, 1984) and is implied in the equally widespread view that causal inferences for partner behavior mediate subsequent responses to such behavior (e.g., Fincham, 1985a). In contrast, little attention has been paid to the alternative interpretation that marital satisfaction influences attributions. Until empirical data are available to address the causal assumption made in the literature, "nagging doubts about the actual impact of the attribution process" are likely to persist (Sillars, 1985, p. 287).

It is important to resolve these doubts for both theoretical and applied reasons. Attribution processes have dominated discussions of social cognition in close relationships to the virtual exclusion of other potentially important processes (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1987). Their prominence at a theoretical level would be greatly diminished if data fail to demonstrate that attributions are causally related to marital satisfaction or marital behavior. At an applied level, treatment strategies for couples have already been developed on the assumption that attributions influence marital satisfaction (e.g., Baucom & Lester, 1986; Wright & Fichten, 1976). However, if attributions are not causally related to satisfaction, there is no compelling reason

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Frank D. Fincham, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois, 603 E. Daniel, Champaign, Illinois 61820.

why they, rather than any other cognitive correlate of marital satisfaction, should be the target of therapeutic intervention.

Although marital researchers routinely call for data that speak to the causal relation between attributions and marital satisfaction, studies on this topic have not emerged. This is due in part to constraints on conducting experiments in this area. The only published data available come from a study in which the attributions made by dating partners in the early stages of their relationship were manipulated. Seligman, Fazio, and Zanna (1980) found that making salient the extrinsic causes for being in the relationship resulted in lower scores on Rubin's (1970) Love Scale but not his Liking Scale. However, attributions did not affect global ratings of love and of liking. Although encouraging, these results need to be interpreted cautiously because of the extremely small sample, inconsistent findings, unclear relevance for established close relationships, and their failure to replicate (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985).

As Olson and Ross (1985) pointed out, perhaps the most viable means of gathering data that address a possible causal relation between attributions and marital satisfaction is to conduct longitudinal research. The major purpose of our study, therefore, was to examine attributions and marital satisfaction at two times approximately 12 months apart. On the basis of current theoretical statements, we hypothesized that attributions will predict later marital satisfaction. Because prior research shows that attributions for spouse behavior (Baucom et al., 1982; Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987; Fincham & O'Leary, 1983; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985) and for marital difficulties (Fincham, 1985b; Fincham & Beach, 1987) are related to concurrent marital satisfaction, both classes of events are used in assessing attributions.

A complete account of the relation between attributions and marital satisfaction needs to specify the nature of attributions that are useful for explaining variance in current and future marital satisfaction. Previous marital research has examined both causal (e.g., Baucom et al., 1982) and responsibility attributions (Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987). However, it has been argued that responsibility attributions rather than causal attributions are central in marriage (see Fincham, 1985a, for details of this argument).¹ Causal attributions concern the question of what produced an event or behavior. In contrast, responsibility attributions deal with accountability or answerability for the event or behavior. Thus, the question of responsibility arises when a person's behavior does not meet expected standards and the person is called to account for abrogating his or her duty to behave appropriately. These standards or duties often take the form of expectations in the context of close relationships. With minor exceptions, responsibility judgments entail judgments of causation, as persons are normally held responsible only for outcomes that they cause. Although this leads one to expect a high correlation between causal and responsibility judgments, the two judgments are conceptually distinct because responsibility rests on a number of additional criteria (e.g., the standards applied) and processes (e.g., determining the mismatch between actual and ideal behavior; see Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Hart & Honoré, 1959; and Shaver, 1985, for an extended discussion of the relation between perceived cause and responsibility). Fincham and his colleagues (Fincham & Bradbury, in press-a; Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987) have shown

that responsibility attributions are more strongly related to marital satisfaction and are better predictors of conflict-related behavior and of behavioral intentions than are causal attributions. In this study, therefore, we examine the relative usefulness of causal and responsibility attributions in predicting later marital satisfaction.

In evaluating the longitudinal relation between attributions and marital satisfaction, it is also important to consider how well attributions, compared with other cognitive variables, predict later marital satisfaction. The major alternative cognitive variable studied in marital research is unrealistic relationship expectations (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981; Epstein, Pretzer, & Fleming, 1987). The inclusion of a measure of relationship expectations in our study allowed us to examine the usefulness of a nonattributional cognitive measure in predicting later marital satisfaction. It also provided the first test of the theoretical relation postulated between relationship expectations and attributions in a close relationship (Fincham, 1985a; cf. Epstein et al., 1987).

Finally, this study provides a more complete test of the relation between attributions and marital satisfaction. This is because prior research is limited to showing that happily married couples as a group are more likely to make benign attributions than are distressed couples. Consequently, the association found between attributions and marital satisfaction may result from the sampling of extreme groups.

Method

Subjects

Thirty-nine couples were recruited for the study. Of these, 31 responded to an advertisement in a local newspaper that asked for married couples to participate in a study on marriage. The remaining 8 couples were seeking marital counseling and were referred to the project by a local counseling center. All couples were paid \$30 for participating in the first phase of the project and an additional \$20 for completing the second phase of the project. Two couples were divorced during the course of the project. Thirty-four of the 37 couples available for the second phase of the project agreed to participate, yielding a response rate of 92%. Seven of these couples had been seeking counseling at the time of the first phase of the project. The data reported for both phases of the project refer only to these 34 couples.

At the time of the first phase of the project, couples had been married an average of 7.3 ($SD = 6.6$) years and had a median family income of

¹ The term *responsibility attribution* is used in a more restricted sense than in Fincham's previous work and approximates what has been referred to previously as *moral responsibility* (cf. Fincham & Jaspars, 1980). Moral responsibility is closely related to blame as it is a necessary condition for the assignment of blame, is affected by many variables that also affect blame (e.g., inferred intent), and is indeed equivalent to blame under some conditions (e.g., presence of negative intent and the absence of excusing conditions). In view of these similarities, we evaluate possible differences between evaluative judgments made regarding responsibility and blame and the more quasi-scientific judgments represented by causal attributions. The use of a single overall term to refer to several judgments relevant to responsibility and blame is not intended to deny the important conceptual distinctions that can be drawn among them (see Shaver, 1985), several of which are examined in our current research (Fincham & Bradbury, in press-a).

\$20,000–\$25,000. Wives were an average of 30.8 ($SD = 6.8$) years of age, had 14.4 ($SD = 1.7$) years of formal education, and obtained a score of 98.4 ($SD = 28.3$) on the Locke–Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). Corresponding figures for the husbands were 31.7 ($SD = 7.1$) years, 14.9 ($SD = 2.4$) years, and 103.8 ($SD = 20.5$), respectively. At the second phase, average Marital Adjustment Test scores were 95.8 ($SD = 32.4$) for wives and 101.9 ($SD = 17.7$) for husbands.

Procedure

Couples interested in the study telephoned the laboratory. A research assistant explained that they would be required to come to the laboratory to provide us with a variety of information. During the laboratory session, spouses independently completed a number of questionnaires. These included a demographics questionnaire, an assessment of attributions for current marital difficulties (Fincham, 1985b) and for hypothetical negative spouse behaviors (Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987; Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987), the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), and the Relationship Beliefs Inventory (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982).

Approximately 10–12 months later, couples were sent all these questionnaires except the Relationship Beliefs Inventory together with a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The Relationship Beliefs Inventory was not included in this phase of the study because its inclusion was not needed to address the questions investigated and would have made the length of the questionnaire booklet unacceptable. Husbands and wives were instructed to complete the materials independently. Several days after the materials were mailed, a research assistant called to ask whether the package had been received, to reemphasize the need for independent completion of the materials, and to answer any questions either spouse had about completing the questionnaires.

Measures

Attribution assessment. Attributions for marital difficulties and for hypothetical spouse behaviors were assessed because both have been related to marital satisfaction in previous studies (e.g., Fincham, 1985b; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). The use of hypothetical behaviors and marital difficulties as stimulus events in prior research confounds two dimensions, namely hypothetical versus real events and marital problems versus spouse behaviors. As the task of this study was to build on past research findings and gather data relevant to a possible causal relation between attributions and marital satisfaction, no attempt was made to examine these dimensions independently. This does not imply that the two dimensions are equally important. Their relative importance is an empirical question that needs to be investigated in future research.

Two marital difficulties were identified by giving spouses a list of topics that might lead to disagreements in a marriage (e.g., money management, sex, making decisions, trust). The topics were chosen on the basis of prior surveys on the areas that give rise to marital disagreement (Broderick, 1981; Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Spouses could also add topics to the list. For each item on the list, spouses indicated the extent to which this topic was a difficulty in the marriage. They did so by choosing a number from 0 (*not at all a difficulty*) to 100 (*very severe difficulty*). These ratings were used to obtain two items for which attributions could be assessed. An item that both spouses rated as one of the most severe difficulties in the marriage was chosen as the first for which attributions were solicited. The second item could differ within a couple, as it was the topic with the highest difficulty rating from those remaining in the list.

Attributions for hypothetical spouse behaviors were assessed with a shortened version of the Marital Attribution Style Questionnaire (see

Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987). Only negative events were assessed because these are most likely to prompt attribution processing (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985; Weiner, 1985). Because of time constraints on the laboratory session, three negative spouse behaviors were chosen from the six available in the questionnaire ("Your spouse criticizes something you do," "Your spouse does not pay attention to what you are saying," "Your spouse begins to spend more time doing things without you"). These items were chosen because they discriminated distressed and nondistressed spouses in previous research (Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987) and did not reduce appreciably the reliability of the 6-item subscale of the Marital Attribution Style Questionnaire.

For marital difficulties and for hypothetical behaviors, spouses wrote down what they considered the major cause of the stimulus event. They then rated the extent to which the cause rested in the spouse (locus), affected only the area mentioned in the stimulus event as opposed to other areas of the marriage (globality), and was likely to be present when the event occurred in the future (stability). In addition, they made three responsibility judgments by indicating the extent to which the spouse deserved to be blamed for the stimulus event, the extent to which the spouse behavior (or spouse behavior contributing to the difficulty) was intentional, and the extent to which it reflected selfish concerns. The latter two judgments were included because intent and motivation are important bases for responsibility attribution (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980). All responses were made on 7-point rating scales.

Index construction. In previous research, individual attribution dimensions (e.g., stability, intentionality) have typically been examined (e.g., Baucom et al., 1982; Fincham & O'Leary, 1983). However, it is the pattern of attributions across the dimensions (e.g., the extent to which spouses locate a cause in the partner and consider it global and stable) that is emphasized in theoretical statements and interpretations of past findings. Consequently, we constructed crossdimensional attribution indices (see Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987).

To obtain an overall index of causal attribution, we summed the 15 questions pertaining to causation (5 stimulus events \times 3 questions). The causal attribution index indicated the extent to which spouses viewed the causes in a manner likely to maximize the impact of the event (i.e., locating the cause in the spouse and seeing it as stable and global). A responsibility attribution index was constructed in the same manner. The responsibility attribution index similarly indicated the extent to which spouses made less benign attributions (saw behavior as intentional, worthy of blame, and reflective of selfish concerns). These attribution indices showed satisfactory reliability for husbands (coefficient alphas: for causal index = .82; for responsibility index = .83) and for wives (coefficient alphas: for causal index = .73; for responsibility index = .75).²

Marital Adjustment Test. Marital satisfaction was measured with the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). This widely used measure of marital satisfaction has well-established psychometric properties and discriminates between nondistressed spouses and spouses who have documented marital problems.

Relationship Beliefs Inventory. This 40-item instrument provides a measure of five unrealistic expectations in marriage: "disagreement is destructive," "partners cannot change," "mindreading is expected," "sexual perfectionism," and "the sexes are different." The scale is reli-

² The data were also analyzed with the causal and responsibility indices for each type of event kept separate. The same pattern of results was obtained for these indices. This is perhaps not surprising in that the corresponding attribution indices for the two types of events were significantly related regardless of sex (correlations for wives: causal index = .47, responsibility index = .43; for husbands: causal index = .67, responsibility index = .55; $p < .01$ in all cases). These findings are consistent with the fact that studies using either type of event have yielded similar results.

Table 1
Correlations Between Attribution Indices, Unrealistic Expectations, and Marital Satisfaction

Attribution	Marital satisfaction					
	Time 1		Time 2		Test-retest	
	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands
Responsibility index	-.46**	-.60**	-.31*	-.37*	.80**	.77**
Causal index	-.31*	-.56**	-.55**	-.59**	.74**	.82**
Unrealistic expectations	-.41**	-.31*	—	—	—	—
Marital satisfaction	—	—	—	—	.77**	.66**

Note. $df = 34$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

able, correlates with irrational beliefs about the self (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982), and is negatively associated with the estimated chance of improvement in marital therapy (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981).

Results

No differences were obtained between the patterns of results found when including and excluding the 7 couples seeking counseling at the first phase of the project. Consequently, the results reported here pertain to the 34 couples who completed both phases of the study. In addition, the data were analyzed separately for each sex because (a) the phenomenon investigated is conceptualized at the intraindividual level and (b) it can be argued that the responses obtained from each spouse within a couple are not independent.

Attributions, Expectations, and Concurrent Marital Satisfaction

Table 1 shows the correlations found between the cognitive variables and marital satisfaction. The relations obtained are consistent with the findings of prior research. Consistent with the finding that extreme groups of distressed and nondistressed spouses differ in their attributions, causal and responsibility attributions were significantly related to marital satisfaction in both phases of the project. However, no evidence was obtained to suggest that responsibility attributions are more strongly related to marital satisfaction than are causal attribution dimensions. In a similar vein, the association reported previously between unrealistic relationship expectations and marital satisfaction was replicated (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981).

The data also address several issues that have not been investigated previously. First, unrealistic expectations were related to attributions, as predicted in prior theoretical analyses (e.g., Fincham, 1985a). Significant correlations were found for the causal index (for wives, $r = .42$, $p < .01$; for husbands, $r = .54$, $p < .01$) and for the responsibility index (for wives, $r = .48$, $p < .01$; for husbands, $r = .43$, $p < .01$). Second, attributions were quite stable over the course of a year and showed approximately the same degree of variation as did marital satisfaction scores. Third, causal and responsibility attribution indices, as expected, were related to each other for husbands (Time 1, $r = .64$; Time 2, $r = .59$, $p < .01$) and for wives (Time 1, $r = .57$, $p < .01$; Time 2, $r = .60$, $p < .01$). However, husbands' and wives'

attributions were not significantly correlated in either phase of the project.

Attributions, Expectations, and Future Marital Satisfaction

In order to address the question of whether attributions predict later marital satisfaction, we also examined the data by means of regression analysis.³ A hierarchical regression strategy was used in which predictor variables from Time 1 were entered into the analysis in a predetermined order. This allowed the assessment of a given predictor's ability to account for variance in the Time 2 dependent variable beyond that associated with variables entered into the equation earlier (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). To examine the extent to which the attribution indices predicted later satisfaction, the responsibility and causal attribution indices obtained in the first phase of the project were used to predict marital satisfaction 1 year later. The regression analysis consisted of two steps. In the first step, marital satisfaction scores at Time 1 were entered into the equation, with marital satisfaction scores at Time 2 serving as the dependent variable. In the second step, the two attribution variables were entered into the regression equation. The increment in R^2 shows the extent to which attributions account for variance in Time 2 satisfaction once the effect of marital satisfaction scores obtained at Time 1 were removed. In other words, this strategy predicts change scores in the dependent variable. Separate regression equations were computed for each sex. Thus, these analyses were conducted at the intraindividual level and are consistent with those of past research and the rationale outlined in the introduction.

As shown in Table 2, a significant increase in R^2 associated with the inclusion of the attribution indices was obtained in the regression analysis conducted for wives. In addition, the beta weights associated with both of the attribution indices were also significant. These findings are particularly noteworthy as the marital satisfaction scores obtained in the two phases of the project were strongly related. Thus, the proportion of variance for which the attribution measures could account was greatly

³ Because of the size of the sample in this study, it was not possible to undertake causal modeling of the relation between attributions and marital satisfaction.

Table 2
Beta Coefficients and ΔR^2 for Prediction of Time 2
Marital Satisfaction From Time 1 Marital
Satisfaction and Attribution Indices

Predictors	Marital satisfaction (Time 2)			
	β		ΔR^2	
	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands
Step 1			.64**	.45**
Marital satisfaction (Time 1)	.80**	.67**		
Step 2			.08*	.04
Causal index	-.28*	-.26		
Responsibility index	-.35*	.09		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

reduced. For husbands, no significant findings were associated with the attribution indices in this analysis. Finally, a sex difference in the relation between attributions and later satisfaction was found only for the responsibility index, $t(31) = 2.05$, $p < .05$.

It is important to determine whether the pattern of results regarding attributions is merely reflective of results that would be obtained with any cognitive variable. Consequently, a similar hierarchical regression strategy was used in which relationship expectations served as a predictor variable that was entered into the equation in the second step of the analysis, after Time 1 satisfaction was entered into the equation. Again, separate analyses were conducted for each sex. We found that for husbands and for wives, scores on the Relationship Belief Inventory accounted for no unique variance (<.1%) in later marital satisfaction after earlier satisfaction scores were taken into account. In sum, it appears that wives' attributions predict their later marital satisfaction and that this finding does not apply to all cognitive variables.

In interpreting these results, it is important to consider whether marital satisfaction predicts later attributions. If this were the case, the data would also be consistent with the view that marital satisfaction causes attributions. Moreover, it would then be possible that the power of attributions at time n to predict marital satisfaction at time $n + 1$ may result in part from the fact that attributions are a reflection of marital satisfaction at time $n - 1$. To examine this issue, marital satisfaction at Time 1 was used to predict each attribution index at Time 2. The same strategy used in the analyses just outlined was adopted. That is, the corresponding attribution measure at Time 1 was entered into the equation first. Marital satisfaction scores obtained at Time 1 were entered in the second step. Two regression equations, one relating to the causal attribution index and one relating to the responsibility attribution index, were computed for each sex. As seen in Table 3, marital satisfaction was not a significant predictor of later attributions. These findings, in combination with those outlined earlier, are consistent with the view that wives' attributions are causally related to their marital satisfaction.

To the extent that attributions are communicated in a mar-

riage, it seems plausible that they might be related to concurrent partner satisfaction or might affect partner satisfaction over the course of time. However, neither attribution index was related to the concurrent marital satisfaction of the partner, nor did they predict his or her later satisfaction.

Discussion

This study provides the first data relevant to the causal relation assumed in theoretical accounts to exist between attributions and marital satisfaction. In doing so, it addresses two additional issues that have not been investigated directly in prior research. These concern the correlation of attributions with concurrent marital satisfaction and the relation between attributions and unrealistic relationship expectations. We discuss each before considering the implications of the longitudinal data for the presumed causal relation between attributions and marital satisfaction.

Both causal and responsibility attributions were strongly related to concurrent marital satisfaction. The significance of this finding is emphasized by the fact that prior research has been limited to demonstrating the existence of attributional differences between extreme groups, usually nondistressed couples in the community and distressed couples seeking marital therapy. This study therefore provides the first data to show that attributions are directly related to marital satisfaction and that this association is not dependent on the sampling of extreme groups.

The correlational design used in this study may account for the fact that, in contrast to previous studies, no data were obtained to support the relative importance of responsibility attributions over causal attributions in marriage. It is quite possible that previous findings depend on the investigation of severely distressed couples in therapy, couples for whom issues of accountability and blame are often highly salient (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979).

Table 3
Beta Coefficients and ΔR^2 for Prediction of Time 2
Attribution Indices From Time 1 Attribution
Indices and Marital Satisfaction

Predictors	β		ΔR^2	
	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands
	Causal index (Time 2)			
Step 1			.55**	.67**
Causal index (Time 1)	.74**	.82**		
Step 2			.06	.00
Marital satisfaction	-.25	.00		
Responsibility index (Time 2)				
Step 1			.61**	.60**
Responsibility index (Time 1)	.78**	.77**		
Step 2			.01	.00
Marital satisfaction	-.08	.00		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

In a similar vein, causal and responsibility attributions also correlated significantly with unrealistic relationship expectations, as predicted in theoretical statements (e.g., Fincham, 1985a). This finding is consistent with the position that attributions arise in relation to expectations and that these two variables represent different sides of the same coin. Thus, before any attempt is made to change attributions in marital therapy, the expectations that give rise to the attributions should be carefully explored. Despite their strong association, attributions and unrealistic relationship expectations differed in the prediction of later marital satisfaction, the issue to which we now turn.

An interesting pattern of results was obtained when predicting Time 2 variables. For wives, both the causal and responsibility attribution indices accounted for a significant portion of the variance in marital satisfaction a year later after the effects of earlier marital satisfaction were removed. Two factors make this finding particularly noteworthy. First, marital satisfaction scores obtained for wives in the two phases of the study were highly correlated. Second, the Marital Adjustment Test is an omnibus measure that contains different types of items. Responses to some items may themselves reflect general attributional tendencies.⁴ The fact that attributions predicted later marital satisfaction is consistent with the view that attributions are causally related to marital satisfaction. In addition, the failure of marital satisfaction to predict later attributions reliably suggests that a potential causal relation may be one in which attributions influence marital satisfaction and not vice versa. However, a definitive causal interpretation of these findings is unwarranted because it is quite possible that the relations found result from unmeasured third variables. Nonetheless, it is important to consider how attributions may influence later satisfaction.

Theoretical statements on the role of attribution processes in close relationships assume that attributions for specific partner behaviors affect the spouse's subsequent response to the partner. It can be argued, however, that this level of analysis is not reflected in current research, as existing data are limited largely to attributions made for hypothetical behaviors and global relationship problems. Such attributions may reflect a spouse's general attributional style rather than his or her attributions for a real spouse behavior. Indeed, the homogeneity of responses found across items and event types in this study is consistent with this viewpoint.

Although the distinction between a pervasive attributional style and on-line attributions in a marital interaction is an important one, attributional style presumably influences the attribution made for a real partner behavior and hence the response to it. This possibility is consistent with the finding that a wife's attributional style, as reflected in her tendency to infer a negative intention on the part of a story character, is related to negative criticism of her spouse as coded by trained observers (Doherty, 1982). The wife is likely to become increasingly aware of her negative responses over time, resulting in lowered marital satisfaction. To the extent that her responses are apparent to the husband (e.g., via explicit communication or his observation of her behavior), his satisfaction might also decrease. The failure to assess spouses' awareness of their partner's attributions in this study may account for the absence of any relation between attributions and marital satisfaction at the interpersonal level.

As regards husbands, even their own attributions did not predict their later marital satisfaction. Similarly, marital satisfaction did not predict later attributions. That is, no evidence was obtained to suggest the existence of any possible causal relation between husbands' attributions and marital satisfaction. The pattern of findings obtained for husbands and wives in the longitudinal analyses differed reliably for responsibility attributions. This sex difference is consistent with that found by Doherty (1982) where only wives' attributions related to their behavior. Holtzworth-Munroe and Jacobson (1985) also reported a sex difference in spouses' tendency to engage in attributional activity, with nondistressed husbands less likely than either their wives or spouses in distressed marriages to engage in attributional processing.

These sex differences contrast with the pattern of strong correlations found between attribution ratings and concurrent marital satisfaction for both husbands and wives in this study and in most prior research. The fact that attributions and marital satisfaction are also related across time for wives is consistent with a number of studies showing that women may be the barometers of marital functioning (e.g., Gottman, 1979; Ickes, 1985). This is most likely because women in our society are more concerned with issues such as attachment, intimacy, and caring than men are (e.g., Fitzpatrick, *in press*; Gilligan, 1982), and this concern may explain why women are usually aware of relationship problems sooner than their male partners are (Floyd & Markman, 1983; Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981). Such differences in orientation may therefore account for the fact that responsibility attributions and marital satisfaction are related over time for wives but not for husbands. That is, our data are consistent with the intriguing possibility that husbands' attributions may simply reflect their marital satisfaction, whereas wives' attributions actually influence their marital satisfaction over time.

This suggestion does not preclude the possibility that marital satisfaction influences attributions. Intuitively, this might be expected to occur. Although no evidence was obtained in the study to support this viewpoint, the limited nature of the data collected points to the need to view our findings as tentative. Data from a larger scale longitudinal study that obtains at least three waves of data are needed before stronger conclusions can be reached. Our study provides some justification for this more costly research. The importance of such research is also emphasized by the need to investigate the temporal relation between attributions and marital satisfaction by using different lag times. At present, unfortunately, there is no guide as to the optimal lag for attributions and marital satisfaction to influence each other. Any impact that attributions may have on marital satisfaction could occur over a shorter or longer period than that investigated in this study. If this is the case, our data are likely to underestimate any causal relation between the two variables.

⁴ We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this observation. An important implication of this observation is that the relations found between attributions and concurrent marital satisfaction may be inflated. It is therefore important to replicate these findings by using a measure of marital quality that precludes possible overlap in content (see Fincham & Bradbury, *in press-b*, for an analysis of this and other problems in the assessment of marital quality).

The results obtained in regard to relationship expectations suggest that it is attributions rather than cognitive variables per se that are important in predicting wives' later marital satisfaction. Even though this is the major alternative cognitive variable investigated in research on close relationships, it may not be the optimal one for examining the relative usefulness of attributions in predicting marital satisfaction. Ironically, this is because expectations were found to be related to attributions as predicted. At a theoretical level, it can be argued that there is a linear causal ordering among the three variables under consideration. That is, relationship expectations give rise to attributions, which in turn affect marital satisfaction. In fact, our data are consistent with this model.

To conclude, this study provides data that are consistent with recent theoretical analyses of cognition in close relationships in which a causal relation is assumed to exist between attributions and marital satisfaction. However, these data should be considered preliminary in the absence of a multiwave longitudinal study that replicates these findings and provides more conclusive evidence regarding the direction of the causal relation between attributions and marital satisfaction. Ideally, both attributions and marital satisfaction would be manipulated to determine their effects on each other, as causal statements can be made confidently only on the basis of experiments. However, both practical and ethical restraints make experiments in this domain extremely difficult. Finally, evidence for the importance accorded to attributions in research on close relationships also requires studies that demonstrate that the attributions a spouse makes actually affect subsequent behavior in interactions with his or her partner.

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