Attributions in Marriage: Integrating Specific and Global Evaluations of a Relationship

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How do partners in close relationships integrate perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship with global evaluations of the relationship as a whole? The attributions that partners make for each other's behaviors should moderate this process by determining whether specific behaviors have global implications. To evaluate this idea, the current study assessed attributions and daily ratings of global and specific aspects of the relationship in a sample of 82 newlywed couples. Attributions were not associated with either kind of rating directly, but hierarchical linear modeling revealed that attributions were associated with the covariance between global and specific ratings within spouses. Results suggest a mechanism to account for the longitudinal association between attributions and marital satisfaction and point out the importance of measuring global and specific perceptions of relationships independently.

At the beginning of a close relationship, most people are very happy. Nowhere is this more true than in marriage, where newlyweds tend to report high levels of satisfaction with their relationships and optimism about the future (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Nevertheless, more than 60% of first marriages in the United States end in divorce or permanent separation, and the rate of dissolution for remarriages is even higher (Cherlin, 1992). The unfortunate tendency for partners' initially positive views of their relationships to deteriorate may reflect the fact that even the happiest couples eventually experience events or aspects of the relationship that are less than positive. Long-term relationship outcomes may depend in part on how couples integrate these specific experiences with their more global evaluations of the relationship. To the extent that partners protect their global evaluations of the relationship from their perceptions of specific experiences that may vary in quality from day to day, global evaluations are likely to be robust and stable over time. In contrast, to the extent that global evaluations are strongly linked to variable experiences, those evaluations are likely to be fragile and may deteriorate when daily experiences are negative.

Heider (1958), in his seminal work *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, suggested that an important way that individuals reconcile their global and specific perceptions of others is through making attributions, defined as "the analysis of the underlying conditions that give rise to perceptual experience" (p. 22). For example, deciding whether the cause of a specific behavior is internal or external to the actor helps the perceiver to determine whether the behavior has broader implications for the actor's character. Concluding that an actor is to blame for a specific behavior links judgments of that behavior to judgments of the actor's enduring traits. In contrast, excusing an actor for a specific behavior separates judgments of the behavior from judgments of the actor. Thus, according to Heider, the kinds of attributions that people make should account for individual differences in the way they integrate their global and specific impressions of others.

Although research on attributions has not tested this idea directly, a well-developed body of research on close

Authors' Note: The first and second authors contributed equally to the preparation of this article. Preparation of this article was supported by a Research Development Award from the College of Letters and Science at the University of Florida awarded to Benjamin R. Karney. Portions of this work were submitted by James K. McNulty to the University of Florida as a master's thesis. We thank Joanne Davila and Nancy Frye for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. We also thank Jessica Baker, Krista Bernard, Mark DaSilva, Katherine Leong, Sacha Lindekens, Giovanni Montrone, Kimberly Mosler, Lisa Neff, Jennifer Smith, and Mark Trujillo for their assistance in data collection and data entry. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to James K. McNulty or Benjamin R. Karney, Department of Psychology, P.O. Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; e-mail: mcnulty@ufl.edu or karney@ufl.edu.

PSPB, Vol. 27 No. 8, August 2001 943-955

relationships has established an association between attributions and partners' evaluations of their relationships. In particular, this research has shown that individuals who credit their partners for positive behaviors and excuse their partners for negative behaviors tend to judge their relationships more positively, whereas individuals who blame their partners for negative behaviors and find external reasons for positive behaviors tend to judge their relationships less positively (e.g., Jacobson, McDonald, Follette, & Berley, 1985; Thompson & Kelley, 1981). Within marital relationships, this association appears to hold true controlling for depressive symptoms (Fincham, Beach, & Bradbury, 1989), negative affectivity (Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994), and levels of marital violence (Fincham, Bradbury, Arias, Byrne, & Karney, 1997), leading some to conclude that the association between attributions and relationship satisfaction is "possibly the most robust, replicable phenomenon in the study of marriage" (Fincham, 2001, p. 7).

Given the breadth of this research, it is perhaps surprising that the mechanisms through which associations between attributions and relationship satisfaction come about have yet to be explored directly. In particular, this research has yet to examine Heider's (1958) original view that attributions may become associated with global judgments of a relationship through their direct effects on the way partners integrate their global and specific perceptions of each other. Two limitations of prior research may account for this oversight. First, prior research on cognition in close relationships has rarely measured partners' global and specific perceptions of their relationships independently. As a result, this research has been unable to identify how attributions might influence the way partners integrate or separate these levels of perception. Second, prior research has focused almost exclusively on between-subject designs. Such designs allow researchers to conclude that individuals who make certain kinds of attributions are likely to report certain kinds of perceptions, but they cannot address how attributions affect the association between these different levels of perception within individuals. Thus, the possibility remains that attributions affect close relationships not through their direct associations with relationship judgments but through their moderating influence on the associations between specific ratings of discrete aspects of the relationship and global perceptions of the relationship as a whole.

The primary goal of the current study was to address this possibility by examining associations between attributions and variability in partners' global and specific evaluations of their relationships. To pursue this goal, this introduction is divided into three sections. The first section draws from the broader literature on person perception to support a distinction between global and specific perceptions of a relationship. The second section reviews research on attributions consistent with the idea that attributions may influence relationship outcomes by moderating the links between global and specific perceptions of the relationship. The final section describes the current study and is designed to evaluate these ideas by analyzing repeated assessments of the global and specific evaluations of newlywed couples.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN GLOBAL AND SPECIFIC EVALUATIONS OF A RELATIONSHIP

Most research on cognition in close relationships assesses partners' evaluations without regard to level of abstraction. For example, the two instruments most frequently used to assess satisfaction in marriage, the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), obtain ratings of agreement on specific marital issues (e.g., in-laws, finances, recreation) as well as spouses' global sentiments toward the relationship as a whole (e.g., "Indicate the degree of happiness, everything considered, of your present marriage"). By summing across these different kinds of items, measures such as these implicitly assume that perceptions of qualities at different levels of abstraction have similar implications for marital outcomes (cf. Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

Despite the widespread acceptance of this assumption, we are aware of no direct support for the equivalence of global and specific perceptions in research on close relationships. On the contrary, research in areas outside of close relationships offers at least two reasons that distinctions between these levels of evaluation should not be overlooked. First, global and specific judgments may respond differently to individuals' motives to perceive the world in particular ways. For example, in a program of research on the self-serving bias, Dunning and his colleagues (e.g., Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989) have shown that individuals tend to describe themselves more favorably on global traits (e.g., friendly, caring, sociable) than on more specific ones (e.g., punctual, athletic, artistic). As the researchers note, global traits can be defined in idiosyncratic ways, allowing the perceiver to choose from a wide range of specific examples to justify a positive self-view. Specific traits, in contrast, are defined more concretely and therefore restrict the flexibility of the perceiver to justify a desired belief. The desire to view a close relationship positively may be similarly constrained; that is, partners may have more flexibility to maintain their desired global evaluations of the relationships than they have to maintain their evaluations of any specific aspect of the relationship.

A second reason to distinguish between global and specific perceptions is that the integration between these two levels of cognition may be an important part of relationship functioning. Echoing Heider (1958), recent models of person perception have emphasized the relationship between global and specific perceptions in understanding other people. Srull and Wyer (1989), for example, have suggested that the accumulation of specific perceptions of others leads to the formation of global impressions of them, which in turn influence reactions to new specific information. In research that supports this idea, Srull, Lichtenstein, and Rothbart (1985) showed that when perceivers who have a globally positive belief about a person are confronted with specific behavior that is inconsistent with that belief, the perceivers tend to review and seek out other specific behaviors that reconcile or minimize the inconsistency. Similar processes have been documented in research on close relationships. For example, Murray and Holmes (1993) have found that people who are satisfied with their relationships construct elaborate narratives that allow them to integrate specific negative aspects of their partners with globally positive views of the relationship.

One implication of these findings is that individual differences in the way specific and global impressions are reconciled may account for variance in relationship outcomes. To illustrate this point, Figure 1 describes specific and global ratings of a marriage obtained from two spouses over the course of 1 week. Each evening, spouses were asked to evaluate several specific aspects of the marriage and also to evaluate the marriage as a whole. The figure presents each spouse's mean global and mean specific impressions on each day. As the figure reveals, there were few differences between these spouses in terms of their evaluations of specific aspects of the marriage. Both spouses begin the week rating specific aspects of the marriage positively, then ratings appear to decline and increase again by the end of the week. Despite these similar patterns of variability in their specific ratings, the covariance between specific ratings and global ratings for the two spouses was quite different. For Spouse A, specific and global ratings appear to covary strongly ($\beta = .34$). On days that specific ratings are lower than normal, global ratings are also lower than normal, and on days that specific ratings are more positive, global ratings are also more positive. The strong covariance indicates that, for this spouse, global evaluations of the marriage are relatively fragile, linked to the varying quality of the spouse's specific experiences during each day. In contrast, for Spouse B, global and specific ratings do not covary at all ($\beta = .02$). Despite similar variability in the specific ratings, the global impressions of Spouse B do not change from day to day. The weak covariance indicates that, for this spouse, global evaluations are robust, remaining constant regardless of the varying quality of the spouse's specific experiences during each day.

This ability to maintain a stable positive evaluation of the relationship despite specific impressions that fluctuate and become negative over time may be the hallmark of an enduring relationship. However, in the absence of research that measures both levels of evaluation and assesses how these perceptions may covary within partners, individual differences in the way partners integrate these levels have yet to be estimated or explored.

ATTRIBUTIONS AND THE MAINTENANCE OF MARITAL SATISFACTION

As Heider (1958) described them, attributional processes are one way that individuals coordinate their specific and global perceptions of other people. Research on attributions in marriage supports this idea. For example, Holtzworth-Munroe and Jacobson (1985) found that spouses are especially likely to report attributional thinking in response to partner behaviors that are negative or unexpected, that is, when specific behaviors appear inconsistent with global perceptions of the relationship. Longitudinal research further suggests that the nature of spouses' attributions for specific events accounts for stability and change in global satisfaction over time (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 2000).

Why should satisfaction with the relationship be more stable for partners who make adaptive attributions? Existing models of attributions in marriage suggest that attributions are directly associated with judgments of marital quality (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). The current perspective suggests an alternative explanation. A tendency to make adaptive attributions, or attributions that excuse the partner for negative behaviors and credit the partner for positive ones, may function to preserve the stability of global evaluations of the relationship during periods when specific aspects of the relationship fluctuate. In contrast, maladaptive attributions, or attributions that blame the partner for negative behaviors, may contribute to change in global evaluations by linking those evaluations to specific events and behaviors that may be negative. In this view, attributions affect marriage not through their direct influence on global or specific perceptions per se but rather by moderating the covariance between global and specific perceptions from day to day.

OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Heider's (1958) original model of person perception described attributions as a means through which individuals reconcile relatively stable global evaluations of

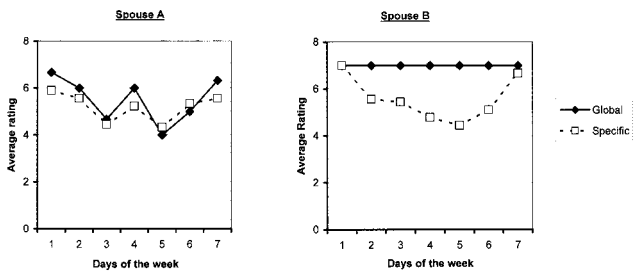

Figure 1 Global and specific evaluations of two spouses over the course of 1 week.

others with specific experiences that vary over time. Research on close relationships has seldom examined these levels of perception separately and has never, to our knowledge, assessed how perceptions at both levels of abstraction vary over time within individuals. Thus, the adequacy of this formulation remains an open question. To evaluate this perspective, the current study assessed attributions and daily ratings of global and specific aspects of the marriage in a sample of first-married newlywed couples. Selecting newlyweds ensured that all couples were at a similar marital duration and that the motivation to perceive the marriage as positive was strong and fairly uniform across spouses.

Analyses of these data addressed three specific questions. First, are global and specific ratings of a relationship equally positive and equally variable? In light of the studies by Dunning and his colleagues (e.g., Dunning et al., 1989) on self-serving biases, it was predicted that relationship-enhancing biases would operate more strongly on global than on specific ratings of the relationship. Thus, daily reports of global evaluations of the marriage were expected to be, on average, more positive and less variable than daily ratings of specific aspects of the marriage.

Second, are there individual differences in the way that spouses link global and specific perceptions of the relationship? In prior research, examining how spouses integrate different levels of information has been difficult because at any one time spouses' self-reports of different aspects of marriage tend to be highly correlated (Weiss, 1984). The current study avoided this problem by using repeated-measures data to examine the within-subjects covariance between daily ratings of global and specific aspects of the relationship over the course of 1 week. A strong covariance between the two kinds of daily ratings (e.g., Spouse A in Figure 1) was taken to mean that a spouse's global perceptions of the marriage each day were linked to specific perceptions from that day. In contrast, a weak covariance between the two kinds of daily ratings (e.g., Spouse B in Figure 1) was taken to mean that a spouse's global ratings of the marriage each day did not depend on specific ratings from that day. The current analyses provided an estimate of the covariance for each spouse in the sample; heterogeneity in the magnitude of the covariance was expected to be significant across spouses.

Third, do attributions account for individual differences in the way spouses integrate their global and specific perceptions of the relationship? In light of Heider's (1958) original model, we suggest that adaptive attributions act as a cognitive buffer, allowing global evaluations of the relationship to remain relatively invariant even when perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship fluctuate. Thus, for spouses who made adaptive attributions, the covariance between global and specific perceptions across time was expected to be relatively low. In contrast, it was predicted that maladaptive attributions render marital satisfaction vulnerable by linking global perceptions to perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship. Thus, for spouses who made maladaptive attributions, the covariance between global and specific perceptions across time was expected to be relatively high.

METHOD

Participants

Newlywed couples were recruited for this study through advertisements in community newspapers and

bridal shops and through letters sent to couples who had applied for marriage licenses in Alachua County, Florida. Couples responding to either method of solicitation were screened in a telephone interview to determine whether they met the following criteria: (a) This was the first marriage for each partner, (b) the couple had been married less than 3 months, (c) neither partner had children, (d) each partner was at least 18 years of age and wives were less than 35 years of age (to allow that all couples were capable of conceiving children over the course of the study), (e) each partner spoke English and had completed at least 10 years of education (to ensure comprehension of the questionnaires), and (f) the couple had no immediate plans to move away from the area. Nearly 300 couples responded to these solicitations. The first 82 eligible couples who arrived for their scheduled interview comprised the current sample.

On average, husbands were 25.1 (SD = 3.3) years old and had received 16.3 (SD = 2.4) years of education; 40% were employed full time and 54% were full-time students. Wives averaged 23.7 (SD = 2.8) years old and had received 16.3 (SD = 1.2) years of education; 39% were employed full time and 50% were full-time students. Slightly more than 70% of the sample was Christian (more than 45% of the sample was Protestant), and 83% of husbands and 89% of wives were White. The average combined income of couples was less than $20,000 per year.

Procedure

Couples meeting eligibility requirements were mailed a packet of questionnaires to complete at home and bring with them to a 3-hour laboratory session. This packet contained self-report measures and a letter instructing couples to complete all questionnaires independently of one another. At the session, couples completed additional questionnaires, were interviewed individually, and interacted with one another in a series of dyadic tasks. Couples were paid $50 for participating in this part of the study.

At the end of the session, each spouse was given a stack of seven stamped, addressed envelopes, each envelope containing a one-page questionnaire. Spouses were instructed to (a) complete one questionnaire independently of one another every night for the next 7 nights, (b) seal each completed questionnaire in the provided envelope, and (c) place the sealed envelope in the mail the following day. Couples received $1.50 for each page they completed or $25 for completing all 14 pages (i.e., a bonus for couples who completed all pages).

Measures

Attributions. Attributions were assessed during the initial interview session using the Relationship Attributions Measure (RAM) (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992), a widely used instrument for assessing attributions in marriage. This 24-item measure presents spouses with four negative stimulus events that are likely to occur in all marriages (e.g., "Your spouse criticizes something you say"). For each event, spouses were asked to rate their agreement with statements that reflect six attribution dimensions on a 7-point scale ranging from *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*. These dimensions were combined to form two subscales measuring attributions of causality and responsibility. The result was two scores for each spouse, with possible ranges of 12 to 84, with higher scores reflecting attributions that view the partner in a more negative light. Coefficient alpha was adequate for both subscales across spouses (for causality: alpha = .85 for husbands and .73 for wives; for responsibility: alpha = .89 for husbands and .90 for wives).

Global and specific evaluations. Each night for the 7 nights subsequent to their on-campus interviews, spouses were asked to complete a one-page questionnaire assessing their impressions of the relationship that day. The purpose of these assessments was to examine day-to-day variation in spouses' global and specific evaluations of their relationships.

To measure global evaluations of the relationship, spouses responded to three items modified from the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS) (Schumm et al., 1986): (a) "How satisfied are you with your partner today?" (b) "How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner today?" and (c) "How satisfied are you with your marriage today?" Each day, coefficient alpha for these three items was high, ranging from .90 to .95 for husbands and from .90 to .96 for wives.

To measure specific evaluations of the relationship, spouses were asked to rate their daily impressions of nine aspects of the marriage. Each night, spouses rated that day's impressions of (a) their sex life, (b) their partner's physical appearance, (c) their partner's social skills, (d) the way their partner contributed to household chores, (e) how their partner supported them, (f) their partner's intellect, (g) their interactions with their partner, (h) the time spent together with their partner, and (i) the way disagreements were resolved. Two criteria were used to select the targets of these specific items. First, specific items were chosen such that the range of behaviors relevant to these items was narrower than the range of behaviors relevant to rating the relationship as a whole. Second, specific items were chosen that could potentially be rated differently from day to day.

Participants responded to both kinds of items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very unsatisfied*) to 7 (*very satisfied*). The order of the two sections was counterbalanced so that half the participants responded to the specific questions first and half responded to the global

questions first each night; preliminary analyses revealed that order of presentation had no effects on either kind of evaluation. Each day, coefficient alpha for the nine specific items was adequate, ranging from .82 to .93 for husbands and from .87 to .94 for wives.

Data Analysis

Addressing the hypotheses described here requires within-subject and between-subject analyses, suggesting a two-stage approach. In the first stage, repeated-measures data from each spouse was used to estimate the covariance between that spouse's global and specific evaluations over the course of 1 week. In the second stage, spouses' attribution scores were used to account for between-subjects differences in the magnitude of the within-subjects covariance. To accomplish these analyses in a way that controlled for correlated errors across levels, data were examined with Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992), implemented using the HLM/2L computer program (Bryk, Raudenbush, & Congdon, 1994). HLM was chosen for two reasons. First, in contrast to other approaches to analyzing multilevel models (e.g., structural equation modeling), HLM provides reliable estimates of within-subject parameters even when sample sizes are relatively small. Second, HLM provides maximally efficient estimates of these parameters by weighting individual estimates by their precision, according to empirical Bayesian theory. When the global-specific covariance for an individual can be estimated precisely, the final estimate relies heavily on the individual data. When the covariance cannot be estimated precisely (e.g., because of missing data), the final estimate relies more heavily on the mean of the sample. Because the most precise estimates therefore contribute more to the final estimated variance of the sample, variances estimated in this way tend to be more conservative than those obtained through traditional ordinary least squares (OLS) methods. In all of the analyses described here, parameters describing husbands' and wives' data were estimated simultaneously in a couple-level model, according to procedures described by Raudenbush, Brennan, and Barnett (1995).

RESULTS

Data Profile and Preliminary Analyses

Of the 164 spouses in the study, 144 (88%) returned all seven assessments, whereas 6 spouses (4%) returned none of them. Moreover, 155 spouses (95%) returned at least three assessments, enough to estimate a within-spouse covariance between global and specific ratings. Thus, the final *N* for analyses involving within-subject data consisted of 78 husbands and 77 wives.

Descriptive statistics for all variables used in these analyses are presented in Table 1. Results are presented separately for each global and specific item and for the global and specific scale scores computed across items. For the global and specific items, descriptives were computed by calculating, for each spouse, the mean and standard deviation of each item across all days in which the diary was completed. Scale scores were then computed by averaging these statistics across each spouse. As would be expected in a sample of newlyweds, average daily ratings of both kinds of items were generally very positive (i.e., around 6 on a 7-point scale).

With respect to attributions, mean scores on the RAM revealed no significant differences between spouses in the types of attributions they made for each other's behavior (for causal attributions, $t[81] = 1.3$, $p = .19$; for responsibility attributions, $t[81] = 1.0$, $p = .33$). However, consistent with most previous studies of attributions in marriage, responsibility attributions were less maladaptive than causality attributions for both spouses (for husbands, $t[81] = 8.8$, $p < .001$; for wives, $t[81] = 7.7$, $p < .001$); that is, spouses were on average more likely to report that their partners were the causes of negative events than to report that their partners were to blame for those events.

The correlations among average global and specific scale scores and causal and responsibility attributions are presented separately for husbands and wives in Table 2. Consistent with prior research on spouses' self-reports (e.g., Weiss, 1984), Table 2 reveals that on average, spouses' global and specific ratings of a marriage were very highly correlated (rs = .91 for husbands and .86 for wives). The degree of overlap between average global and specific ratings did not threaten subsequent analyses, however, because these zero-order correlations do not account for day-to-day variability in these ratings or for the covariance between variability in global and specific ratings.

Table 2 also reveals that causal and responsibility attributions, although significantly correlated with each other ($r = .60$ for both spouses), were not directly associated with specific or global evaluations for either spouse. The failure to find direct associations is surprising in light of research that has reported negative associations between attributions and marital satisfaction in newlyweds (Karney & Bradbury, 2000). With respect to the current analyses, one implication of this result is that spouses' attributions appear to be independent of their evaluations of the marriage in this sample.

Cross-spouse correlations between these variables are presented in Table 3. As the table reveals, spouses' average global and specific ratings of the marriage were significantly correlated with each other, offering some evidence that husbands and wives were experiencing their relationships in the same way. In contrast, with the

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics for Husbands and Wives

	Husbands		*Wives*	
	M	SD	M	SD
Global evaluations (average across days)				
Satisfaction with partner	6.2	0.70	6.3	0.72
Satisfaction with relationship	6.2	0.71	6.3	0.71
Satisfaction with marriage	6.4	0.53	6.4	0.61
Mean (scale)	6.3	0.65	6.3	0.68
Specific evaluations (average across days)				
Sex life	5.2	1.3	5.3	1.2
Time spent together	5.5	1.2	5.4	1.3
Interactions	5.8	1.1	5.9	1.1
Resolved disagreements	5.9	0.9	6.0	1.0
Spouse contributed to chores	6.0	0.9	5.8	1.0
Spouse supported you	6.0	0.8	6.0	0.9
Spouse's social skills	6.1	0.7	6.1	0.8
Spouse's intellect	6.2	0.6	6.3	0.6
Spouse's physical appearance	6.4	0.5	6.3	0.6
Mean (scale)	5.9	0.9	5.9	0.9
Attributions				
Responsibility	33.1	12.2	34.8	14.7
Causal	43.2	11.0	44.7	10.0

TABLE 2: Correlations Between Attributions and Average Global and Specific Evaluations of the Marriage for Husbands and Wives

	Global	*Specific*	*Causal*	*Responsibility*
Global	—	.86***	–.04	–.18
Specific	.91***	—	–.08	–.19
Causal	–.14	–.13	—	.60***
Responsibility	–.10	–.13	.60***	—

NOTE: Correlations for wives are presented above the diagonal; correlations for husbands are presented below the diagonal.
***$p < .01$.

exception of husbands' and wives' causality attributions, spouses' attribution scores tended not to be correlated with each other. Finally, husbands' and wives' attribution scores were not significantly correlated with their partners' average global or specific evaluations.

In sum, preliminary analyses indicate that all measures performed generally as expected. Furthermore, these findings suggest that, in this sample, the tendency to make adaptive or maladaptive attributions was not directly related to spouses' evaluations of the marriage. The possibility remains, however, that attributions were associated with variability in those evaluations, in particular the covariance between global and specific evaluations over time.

TABLE 3: Cross-Spouse Correlations Between Attributions and Average Global and Specific Evaluations of the Marriage

	Husbands			
	Global	*Specific*	*Causal*	*Responsibility*
Wives				
Global	.51***	.49***	–.08	–.17
Specific	.47***	.51***	–.06	–.06
Causal	–.09	–.12	.23**	–.07
Responsibility	–.17	–.16	.12	–.07

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

Comparing Global and Specific Ratings of the Relationship

The first goal of these analyses was to examine whether global and specific ratings of the relationship responded equally strongly to spouses' presumed desire to perceive the marriage in a positive light. In view of prior research that found greater evidence of self-serving biases on global traits than on specific traits (e.g., Dunning et al., 1989), we predicted that global ratings of the marriage should, on average, be more positive and less variable from day to day than ratings of specific aspects.

As described in Table 1, these data support both parts of this hypothesis. With respect to mean differences between global and specific ratings, a paired sample *t* test indicated that the average of the three global items (for husbands, $M = 6.3$; for wives, $M = 6.3$) was higher than the average of the nine specific items (for husbands, $M = 5.9$; for wives, $M = 5.9$) and that this difference was statistically significant for both spouses (for husbands, $t[77] = 5.7$, $p < .05$; for wives, $t[76] = 10.3$, $p < .01$). With respect to the variability of the two kinds of ratings over the course of the week, a paired samples *t* test indicated that the average standard deviation of the specific items (for husbands, $M = 0.89$; for wives, $M = 0.93$) was greater than the average standard deviations of the global items (for husbands, $M = 0.65$; for wives, $M = 0.68$), and this difference also was statistically significant for both spouses (for husbands, $t[77] = 8.3$, $p < .001$; for wives, $t[76] = 7.4$, $p < .001$).

An additional implication of the hypotheses addressed here is that spouses should be more likely to make the highest possible ratings on global items than on specific items. In fact, of the 158 spouses who returned multiple diaries, 22 (13%) exclusively used the highest response option when making the global ratings, but only 2 (1%) did so on the specific ratings. Despite this pattern, the average standard deviation across days was still significantly different from zero for both kinds of ratings among husbands and wives, suggesting that the ceiling effects played a minimal role in these data.

In sum, comparing spouses' ratings of their marriage at different levels of abstraction suggests that maintaining a stable positive view of the marriage may be easier at the level of global evaluations than at the level of specific perceptions. Specific perceptions of the marriage, perhaps more responsive to the vicissitudes of daily life, were less positive and more likely to fluctuate from day to day.

The Covariance Between Global and Specific Ratings of the Relationship

Given the significant differences between global and specific perceptions of a marriage, how do spouses reconcile these differences and integrate their perceptions? The second goal of these analyses was to examine the covariance between daily fluctuations in global and specific ratings of the marriage and, in particular, to estimate the degree of heterogeneity in this covariance across spouses.

To estimate the covariance between global and specific ratings over the course of 1 week, the daily assessments from each spouse were examined with HLM. Specific scores were centered around the mean for each spouse before being entered into the equation. Thus, the first stage of the analysis can be understood as a regression of each spouse's daily global scores onto his or her daily specific scores according to the following model:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Specifics}) + r_{ij}, \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ij} is the global score for individual j on a given day; β_{0j} estimates the average global score of individual j across days; β_{1j} captures the covariance between variability in daily specific ratings and variability in daily global satisfaction for spouse j; and r_{ij} is the residual variance in repeated measurements for spouse j, assumed to be independent and normally distributed across spouses. Husbands' and wives' parameters were estimated simultaneously using a multivariate technique suggested by Raudenbush et al. (1995).

The average empirical Bayesian estimate of β_1, summarizing the average covariance between daily specific and daily global ratings for each spouse, was .24 (SD = .07) for husbands and .21 (SD = .08) for wives. The hypothesis that this covariance was different from zero was tested using a t test, a relatively conservative test recommended by Bryk and Raudenbush (1992) when sample sizes are small. Table 4 presents the results of these tests for each of the specific ratings and for the total of the specific ratings. As the t tests in the second and fifth columns indicate, global ratings of the marriage covaried significantly and positively with ratings of each of the specific items and with the sum of the ratings of the specific items; that is, despite the mean differences in global and specific ratings described earlier, global ratings nevertheless tend to be higher than average on days that specific ratings are higher than average and lower than average on days that specific ratings are lower than average. A paired sample t test indicated that the magnitude of this covariance was significantly higher for husbands than for wives, $t(78) = 7.8$, $p < .001$.

Although on average the covariance between global and specific ratings of the marriage was significant for both spouses, the key question for these analyses was whether the magnitude of this covariance differed significantly across spouses. The hypothesis that there were significant individual differences was evaluated with chi-square tests, reported in the third and sixth column of Table 4. Consistent with predictions, the chi-square tests were significant in almost every case, indicating that spouses do vary in the extent to which day-to-day changes in their specific evaluations of the marriage covaried with changes in their global impressions of the marriage. For some spouses, global evaluations on a given day appear to rely heavily on their specific evaluations for that day. For other spouses, global evaluations are not as strongly influenced by their specific evaluations on that day. In sum, it appears that some spouses are better than others at maintaining positive global evaluations of their relationships despite being less satisfied with specific attributes of the marriage.

Do Attributions Moderate the Covariance Between Global and Specific Ratings?

The third goal of these analyses was to examine whether the attributions that spouses make for their partners' behaviors account for individual differences in the covariance between their global and specific ratings of the relationship. We predicted that the tendency to blame the partner for negative behaviors should link global impressions more strongly to daily specific experiences, whereas the tendency to excuse the partner for negative behaviors should allow spouses to maintain positive global ratings even on days when specific aspects of the marriage are rated less positively. Thus, the more maladaptive the attributions, the higher the predicted covariance between global and specific ratings.

To test this hypothesis, attributions were entered into the second stage of the HLM analysis. This is a between-subjects analysis, estimating the association between spouses' attribution scores and the covariance between their global and specific ratings, according to the following equation:

$$\beta_{1j} = d_{10} + d_{11}(\text{Attributions}) + u_j, \quad (2)$$

TABLE 4: Within-Spouse Associations Between Daily Specific Ratings and Daily Global Evaluations

	Husbands			*Wives*		
Specific Evaluation	*Effect Size* r	t	*Chi-Square Test of Variance*	*Effect Size* r	t	*Chi-Square Test of Variance*
Sex life	.59	6.4****	143.9****	.62	6.9****	135.6****
Time spent together	.72	8.6****	187.5****	.61	6.5****	212.5****
Interactions	.82	11.7****	214.0****	.80	11.5****	272.9****
Resolved disagreements	.75	8.7****	240.7****	.82	11.1****	218.8****
Spouse contributed to chores	.70	7.4****	72.6*	.55	5.1****	107.1****
Spouse supported you	.80	10.4****	182.6****	.83	11.6****	166.5****
Spouse's social skills	.77	8.9****	186.0****	.74	8.2****	177.8****
Spouse's intellect	.80	9.2****	125.2****	.76	8.7****	131.4****
Spouse's physical appearance	.73	7.3****	53.3	.67	6.2****	95.4****
Total (scale)	.90	16.9****	150.7****	.86	13.6****	203.0****

*$p < .10$. ****$p < .001$.

where β_{1j} is the covariation between daily global evaluations and daily specific evaluations for spouse j, d_{10} is the average covariance for the sample, d_{11} captures the association between attributions and the global-specific covariance, and u_j is the residual variability in the covariance that remains to be explained after controlling for attributions. Because HLM conducts between-subject analyses as a series of simultaneous equations, all of the analyses described below control for the associations between attributions and spouses' average ratings of the marriage. Because scores on the two RAM subscales were significantly correlated, causal attributions and responsibility attributions each were examined independently. Results of these analyses, presented separately for each specific rating and for the total of the specific ratings, are described in Table 5.

Examining Table 5 reveals different patterns of results for different kinds of attributions. In general, causality attributions were not associated with the covariance between spouses' global and specific ratings of the marriage. This held true for the total of the specific ratings as well as for most of the specific attribute ratings. In other words, spouses' tendency to believe that their partners are the cause of negative marital events was not associated with the covariation between their daily global evaluations and their daily specific evaluations.

In contrast, the responsibility attributions of both husbands and wives were associated with the covariance between their global and specific ratings. For both spouses, this association was significant for the total of the specific ratings, such that the more spouses blamed their partners for negative events, the more fluctuations in their ratings of specific aspects of the marriage were associated with fluctuations in their global ratings of the marriage. For husbands, this association also was significant or marginally significant for seven of the nine individual attribute ratings. For wives, this association was significant for all of the attribute ratings. To determine whether the effects for wives were significantly stronger than the effects for husbands, a model was specified in which the effects of responsibility attributions were constrained to be equal for husbands and for wives. This model fit the data as well as the unconstrained model (chi-square = 0.86, $p > .50$), indicating no significant gender differences in the effects of responsibility attribu-

TABLE 5: Moderating Effects of Attributions on the Covariation Between Global and Specific Evaluations of the Marriage

	Husbands		*Wives*	
Specific Evaluation	t	*Effect Size* r	t	*Effect Size* r
Effects of causality attributions				
Sex life	0.9	.10	0.8	.09
Time spent together	0.6	.07	1.3*	.15
Interactions	1.3	.15	1.1	.13
Resolved disagreements	0.8	.09	1.5*	.17
Spouse contributed to chores	–0.2	–.02	0.6	.07
Spouse supported you	1.0	.12	0.6	.07
Spouse's social skills	0.9	.11	0.9	.11
Spouse's intellect	1.3*	.15	0.5	.06
Spouse's physical appearance	1.3	.15	0.4	.05
Total (scale)	1.3	.13	1.0	.11
Effects of responsibility attributions				
Sex life	1.8**	.20	3.3***	.35
Time spent together	1.3	.15	3.9****	.41
Interactions	1.6*	.18	4.1****	.43
Resolved disagreements	1.4*	.16	3.9****	.42
Spouse contributed to chores	0.5	.06	3.6***	.39
Spouse supported you	1.4*	.15	3.4***	.37
Spouse's social skills	1.5*	.17	3.8****	.41
Spouse's intellect	2.1**	.24	3.1***	.35
Spouse's physical appearance	2.0**	.23	3.3***	.36
Total (scale)	2.3**	.25	4.2****	.43

NOTE: Analyses reported control for type of attribution at intercept.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$. ****$p < .001$.

tions on the covariance between global and specific ratings.

To test whether the effects of responsibility attributions were significantly stronger than the effects of causality attributions, an analysis was conducted entering both types of attributions into the model simultaneously and constraining them to have equal effects on the covariance. Comparing this model to an unconstrained model revealed that the effects of responsibility attributions are significantly stronger than the effects for causality attributions for wives (chi-square = 7.0, $p < .01$) but not for husbands (chi-square = 1.1, $p = .29$).

In sum, for both husbands and wives, responsibility attributions, but not causal attributions, moderated the association between spouses' global evaluations of the relationship and their evaluations of more specific aspects of the relationship. Spouses who hold their partners responsible for negative events in their marriages demonstrate a stronger association between these kinds of ratings, compared to spouses who do not hold their partners responsible for negative events. In other words, the tendency to make adaptive responsibility attributions allows husbands and wives to maintain positive global satisfaction even on days when their specific perceptions of the relationship are lower than average.

DISCUSSION

Rationale and Summary of Results

Although the association between attributions and judgments of relationship quality is one of the most robust and well replicated in research on close relationships (Fincham, 2001), the mechanisms through which this association comes about have remained poorly understood. The current study evaluated an explanation derived from Heider's (1958) original formulation of attribution theory. Specifically, this study examined the proposition that attributions come to be associated with judgments of relationship quality not through their direct effects on the content of partners' judgments but through their moderating influence on the way global and specific judgments are associated within the individual. For spouses who make maladaptive attributions, blaming their partners for negative behaviors, global evaluations of the relationship should covary with evaluations of specific relationship attributes. For spouses who make adaptive attributions, excusing their partners for negative behaviors, global perceptions of the relationship should be relatively invariant regardless of fluctuations in perceptions of specific relationship attributes. In this way, adaptive attributions may act as a cognitive buffer, protecting initially positive global impressions of the relationship from the implications of specific impressions that may fluctuate and grow negative.

To address this possibility, attributions and daily variability in global and specific perceptions of the marriage were assessed over the course of 1 week in a sample of newlywed couples. Each of the three hypotheses derived from the model was confirmed. First, analyses of mean differences indicated that, even in these generally satisfied newlywed couples, global perceptions of the relationship were more positive and less variable across days than were perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship. Second, within-subjects analyses revealed that, despite the mean differences between them, changes in partners' specific and global perceptions of the relationship were nevertheless highly associated, such that global perceptions of the relationship tended to be more negative on days when perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship were more negative. The magnitude of this association, however, differed significantly across partners. Some were better than others at protecting global impressions of the relationship from the implications of changing perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship.

The third set of analyses addressed the central focus of this study: Do the kinds of attributions that spouses make for their partners' behaviors account for the strength of the covariance between their global and specific perceptions of the relationship? Results differed depending on the type of attribution being examined. Attributions of causality were not associated with the covariance between different levels of perception for either spouse. Attributions of responsibility, however, were associated with the covariance for both spouses and in the predicted direction; that is, for spouses who tended to hold their partners responsible for negative behaviors, global ratings of the marriage covaried more strongly with daily ratings of specific relationship attributes. In contrast, for spouses who tended to excuse their partners for negative behaviors, global ratings of the marriage were less likely to covary with daily ratings. It is important to note that attributions were not directly correlated with partners' perceptions at either level. Thus, in these relatively satisfied couples, attributions moderated the associations between global and specific perceptions independently of the content of those perceptions.

Adaptive Attributions as a Cognitive Buffer

These results were obtained over a single week, but they suggest a mechanism through which attributions may protect global judgments of relationship quality over longer periods of time. Examining the nightly assessments indicates that ratings of specific relationship attributes may fluctuate from day to day in even the hap-

piest relationships. The difference between relationships that remain satisfying and those that deteriorate may lie in the way that perceptions of specific attributes are linked to global evaluations of the marriage (Karney, McNulty, & Frye, in press). Spouses who make adaptive attributions may stay happier longer because their global evaluations are protected from the broader implications of specific aspects of the relationship, even when those perceptions grow negative. Spouses who make maladaptive attributions may be vulnerable to declining satisfaction because their global evaluations are closely tied to their perceptions of specific relationship attributes and therefore may decline when those perceptions grow negative.

The fact that these analyses revealed stronger effects for responsibility attributions than for causality attributions is consistent with prior research on attributions in marriage (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). Given the high correlation between the two kinds of attributions, the reason for the difference is not clear. One possibility consistent with the current model is that attributions of responsibility are more directly related to the global implications of specific behavior. For example, given a negative behavior (e.g., the partner is rude and abusive), an individual can attribute the cause of that behavior to the partner without also attributing responsibility to the partner (e.g., he acted that way because he is an alcoholic and not in control of his own actions). It may be the idea that the partner is responsible for an action, and not the idea that the partner caused the action, that lends a global implication to a specific behavior. This suggestion is consistent with the pattern of mean scores reported here and in other studies using the RAM: Husbands and wives are significantly more likely to report maladaptive causality attributions than maladaptive responsibility attributions.

As noted above, the results described here held true despite the fact that attributions were not associated with either level of perception directly. The failure to replicate the well-established cross-sectional association between relationship quality and attributions may be a consequence of the fact that the couples examined in this sample were all newlyweds in their first marriages. As a relationship becomes more established, the nature of the specific experiences that partners have in their relationships may affect the attributions that partners make for these experiences. Suggestive evidence in support of this idea comes from a study that assessed marital satisfaction and attributions eight times over the course of the first 4 years of marriage in a similar sample of newlyweds (Karney & Bradbury, 2000). This study found that attributions and satisfaction do covary across time, such that the nature of the attributions that spouses make becomes more or less adaptive as spouses' global ratings of marital satisfaction increase or decline. Thus, whereas the study described here suggests that attributions may affect the content of partners' judgments through a direct effect on the covariance between global and specific ratings, over longer periods of time the content of partners' ratings are likely to affect the nature of their attributions as well. As both satisfaction and adaptive attributions decline, the covariance between global and specific perceptions of the relationship should become stronger, such that in highly distressed couples these levels of perception may be indistinguishable. Disentangling these associations may require studies that begin with newlywed couples, as was done here.

Longitudinal data supporting this model would have implications for therapies that have targeted attributions in efforts to alleviate or prevent relationship distress (e.g., Baucom, Sayers, & Sher, 1990). To the extent that partners' perceptions of specific aspects of their relationships are highly responsive to the circumstances of their daily lives, it may be unreasonable for practitioners to attempt to influence the content of those perceptions in the context of therapy. Instead, the current model suggests that it may be easier and more beneficial for practitioners to focus their efforts on the way partners integrate cognitions at different levels of abstraction (e.g., Lawrence, Eldridge, Christensen, & Jacobson, 1999).

Strengths and Limitations

Our confidence in the results of this study is enhanced by a number of strengths in its design. First, by addressing daily variability in partners' global and specific ratings of the relationship, the current study could address the structure of partners' cognitions in a way that is normally masked by the high correlations between average levels of the two kinds of ratings. Second, the HLM approach used here estimated the covariance between these levels of perception, controlling for the overall positivity of each partner's ratings, ensuring that these two parameters were not confounded. Third, the rate of compliance with the diary protocol was quite high, with 95% of the spouses in the sample returning multiple nightly evaluations of the marriage, reducing the likelihood that our results were affected by attrition bias. Fourth, in contrast to most prior research on marriage that has addressed couples' varying widely in marital duration, the analyses reported here examine data from a relatively homogeneous sample of newlyweds, reducing the likelihood that the effects observed here result from uncontrolled sample characteristics. Fifth, the focus on variability in partners' ratings substantially reduces the possibility that these results were affected by social desirability concerns, which are more likely to influence mean ratings.

Despite these strengths, several factors nevertheless limit interpretations of the current findings. First, although partners' attributions predicted associations between their global and specific ratings over the subsequent week, these data are nevertheless correlational, limiting our ability to draw conclusions about causal relationships. Second, because these data were obtained from a relatively homogeneous sample of couples, generalizations to other samples should be made with caution. In particular, as noted above, attributions may have different associations with global and specific perceptions in relationships of longer duration or relationships that are already distressed. Third, although the specific relationship attributes examined here behaved in a manner consistent with predictions, it is possible that the associations between global and specific ratings would differ with a different set of specific attributes. Fourth, although the size of the current study compares favorably with similar marital research on attributions, the power of these analyses to detect effects would be greater in larger samples.

Additional Directions for Future Research

A common theme for cognition in close relationships. The model described here suggests that integrating global and specific evaluations of a relationship may be a central task in relationship maintenance. Attributions may be only one of many cognitive variables that affect this process. For example, Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999) recently reported that partners' ideals for their close relationships also moderate the associations between perceptions of specific attributes of the relationship and evaluations of the relationship as a whole. Partners with unrealistic standards or excessively high ideals may be at risk for negative relationship outcomes because these cognitions link specific failures in the relationship to judgments of the quality of the relationship as whole (e.g., Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). Future research, by measuring global and specific evaluations of relationships separately, may show that the integration of specific and global perceptions of a relationship is a common theme that explains how a number of different aspects of cognitive content affect relationship outcomes.

Sources of cognition in close relationships. One way to elaborate on purely cognitive models of relationships and link this literature to the broader literature on relationship outcomes (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995) is to address possible sources of the cognitions examined here. The emphasis on associations between global and specific beliefs suggests two possible directions for such research. First, what are the sources of variance in couples' specific perceptions? Existing research suggests that the nature of each partner's specific perception is likely to be a function of specific events experienced by the couple. For example, partners are likely to have more negative specific experiences with each other to the extent that levels of external stress are high and to the extent that couples have poor communication skills (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Tesser & Beach, 1998). By giving rise to specific experiences, these variables determine the nature of the specific perceptions that partners must reconcile with their initially positive global perceptions of the relationship. Second, what are the sources of the ability to integrate global and specific perceptions adaptively? A number of lines of research suggest that partners' ability or willingness to reconcile perceptions at different levels of abstraction may be a function of individual difference and personality variables. In the case of attributions, for example, spouses who score higher on measures of neuroticism tend to make less charitable attributions for their partners' negative behaviors, controlling for their overall satisfaction with the relationship (Karney et al., 1994). Therefore, this personality trait should lead to global ratings of the relationship that are linked more strongly to perceptions of specific experiences, regardless of the nature of the specific experiences. In these two ways, many of the established effects in research on relationship maintenance and deterioration may be mediated by their associations with the way partners integrate their global and specific perceptions of their relationships.

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Received August 4, 1999

Revision accepted June 6, 2000