

# The Role of Husbands' and Wives' Emotional Expressivity in the Marital Relationship

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The current investigation was designed to examine the role of positive and negative emotional expressivity in the marital relationship. Data from 58 married couples were used to assess spouses' levels of emotional expressivity and how these levels predicted reports of marital functioning. Regression analyses indicated that positive emotional expressivity had limited influence on marital functioning. Negative expressivity, however, had a strong impact on marital love, conflict, and ambivalence. Post-hoc analyses revealed significant differences between pairings in which the husband was high in negative expressivity, irrespective of wives' negative emotional expressivity, and pairings in which both partners were low in negative emotional expressivity. These findings are discussed with respect to previous research that suggests that wives' emotional expressivity is the major determinant of marital functioning.

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**KEY WORDS:** emotional expressivity; marriage; gender.

Problems with communication have been cited as the most common, as well as the most detrimental, complaint of couples seeking marital therapy (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981; Halford, Hahlweg, & Dunne, 1990; Sher & Baucom, 1993; Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990). Implicit in the construct of communication is the notion that in order to communicate with someone else, one must be able to express one's own thoughts and emotions. Individuals tend to differ in their overall pattern and style of expressing emotions, which is known as emotional expressivity (Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke, & Fox, 1995). Although there have been multiple conceptions of emotional expressivity (Gross & John, 1998), we find that the definition developed by Halberstadt and colleagues (1995, p. 93) to be the most encompassing. They define emotional expressivity as "an individual's persistent pattern or style of exhibiting nonverbal and verbal expressions that often, but not always, appear to be emotion-related."

In fact, researchers have found that spouses' emotional expressivity is highly related to their reports of marital satisfaction (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Feeney, Noller, & Roberts, 1998; Gill, Christensen, & Fincham, 1999). To study this link, researchers have often combined spouses' emotional expressivity ratings into a single couple's emotional expressivity score (Smith et al., 1990). One concern with this approach is that it can obscure the gender differences that have consistently been found in emotional expressivity (Brody, 1993; Carstensen et al., 1995; Kring & Gordon, 1998). The link between emotional expressivity and marital satisfaction has been found to operate differently for husbands and wives, which underscores the need to study how the emotional expressivity of individual spouses affects marital relationship quality (Halberstadt et al., 1995).

## Emotional Expressivity and Marriage

In studies where emotional expressivity has been examined, the expression of positive emotions, such as happiness and love, was often differentiated from the expression of negative emotions, such as

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anger and disgust (Brody, 1993; Carstensen et al., 1995; Fujita, Diener, & Sandvik, 1991; Kring & Gordon, 1998; Searle & Meara, 1999). This distinction is important with respect to outcome studies of the impact of positive and negative emotional expressivity on marriage because the two have been found to have very different relations with the marital relationship.

Researchers have consistently found that high levels of spouses' positive emotional expressivity were associated with greater marital satisfaction (Carstensen et al., 1995; Feeney, 2002; Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Feeney et al., 1998; Gill et al., 1999; Halberstadt et al., 1995). Results of observational studies indicate that satisfied spouses are more positive in their interactions with their partners and express more agreement, humor, approval, caring, and empathy than spouses who do not rate themselves as satisfied (Feeney et al., 1998). Studies with self-report measures indicate that, for women, greater positive emotional expressivity is associated with higher levels of reported marital satisfaction (Halberstadt et al., 1995). Together, these studies point to the beneficial role that positive emotional expressivity may play in determining spouses' marital satisfaction.

Several studies have also documented the association between negative emotional expressivity and lower levels of marital satisfaction (Carstensen et al., 1995; Feeney, 2002; Feeney et al., 1994, 1998; Gill et al., 1999; Halberstadt et al., 1995; Roberts & Krokoff, 1990). For instance, marital satisfaction has been found to be inversely associated with negative behaviors displayed during marital interactions, such as blame, criticism, and coercion (Feeney, 2002; Gill et al., 1999). Men's self-reported negative emotional expressiveness has also been negatively correlated with marital satisfaction (Halberstadt et al., 1995). Results of longitudinal research also indicate that aversive communication patterns generally predict declines in marital satisfaction over time (Gill et al., 1999). Further evidence for this link between negative emotional expressivity and low marital satisfaction comes from studies in which distressed spouses, in comparison to non-distressed spouses, were found to engage in significantly more negative communication behaviors, such as criticism (Feeney et al., 1994). Negativity in spouses' affect distinguished between couples in self-reported happy and unhappy marriages; the unhappy couples displayed a significantly greater amount of negative affect than did the happy couples (Alberts, 1988; Roberts & Krokoff, 1990). In

general, there appears to be support for an association between negative emotional expressivity and decreasing levels of marital satisfaction, such that less maritally satisfied couples engage in more negative emotional expressivity.

### Gender and Emotion

The current work was designed to further our understanding of the association between individuals' emotional expressivity and their marital relationship functioning. Because we were studying the effects of positive and negative emotional expressivity on various indicators of marital functioning, and because we had self-reports of expressivity and marital relationship quality from both husbands and wives, we were also able to address gender differences in emotional expressivity and the effects of similarity of spousal emotional expressivity on various indicators of marital functioning.

Numerous researchers have reported differences in the levels of emotional expressivity found in men and women; women usually are found to be more expressive of a number of different emotions, including happiness, sadness, and fear (Brody, 1993; Carstensen et al., 1995; Kring & Gordon, 1998; Searle & Meara, 1999). Several researchers have found that women report expressing both positive and negative emotions more than men do (Carstensen et al., 1995; Fujita et al., 1991; Gross & John, 1998; Notarius & Johnson, 1982). Further evidence for gender differences comes from Halberstadt and colleagues (1995), who found that married men's and women's positive and negative emotional expressivity differentially predicted marital satisfaction. For wives, positive emotional expressivity was positively correlated with marital satisfaction, but no association was found for husbands. Instead, for husbands, levels of negative emotional expressivity were negatively correlated with marital satisfaction, though this construct was unrelated to marital satisfaction for the wives. The authors interpreted these findings as suggesting that positive emotional expressiveness may be more relevant for women's interpersonal relationships, whereas negative emotional expressiveness may be more important in determining the quality of men's interpersonal relationships (Halberstadt et al., 1995).

The extensive evidence that women are more emotionally expressive than men in both positive and negative ways suggests that perhaps the emotional expressivity of the wife may be more predictive

of marital functioning than that of her husband. Cancian and Gordon (1988) discussed the social expectations that women are more responsible than men for the emotional tenor of the marriage, due in part to their greater investment in close relationships (Wood, Rhodes, & Whelan, 1989). Further, women may play the role of emotional specialists in their marriages (Alexander & Wood, 2000; Wood et al., 1989), which suggests that spouses in relationships in which the wife is low on expressivity, especially positive expressivity, may have lower marital satisfaction ratings than spouses in relationships where the wife is highly positively expressive (Halberstadt et al., 1995). The effect of the husbands' levels of both positive and negative expressivity on the spouses' marital satisfaction ratings may be diluted once the wives' levels are taken into account (Alexander & Wood, 2000; Wood et al., 1989). In the present investigation, we examined the role of gender in emotional expressivity and its relations with marital relationship quality.

### Similarity Versus Dissimilarity in Emotional Expressivity

Numerous researchers have reported that couples with greater overall similarity in personality, values, and interpersonal behaviors rate themselves as happier than couples do who are not as similar (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Barton & Cattell, 1972; Dryer & Horowitz, 1997). Perhaps the same is true for emotional expressivity, given that emotionally expressive people could be hypothesized to be happier with partners who were similarly high in expressivity and less happy and more frustrated with partners whose emotional expressivity differs from their own. One might want to consider, though, whether similarity in couples' expressiveness might affect marital interaction and ratings of marital functioning differently depending upon whether couples are similar on positive or negative emotional expressivity. Whereas similarity in positive emotional expressivity may be beneficial for a couple's marriage, there may be detrimental effects on the marriage if both partners are high in negative emotional expressivity. In the current research we examined whether spouses were similar with respect to negative and positive expressivity and how this was related to the quality of the marital relationship.

In sum, there were three goals of the present study. First, we wished to examine gender differences and individual differences in positive and negative emotional expressivity. In other words, were men's

and women's levels of positive and negative emotional expressivity significantly correlated, and were there differences between men's and women's emotional expressivity? We predicted that wives would have higher positive and negative emotional expressivity scores than husbands would. The second goal was to examine whether men's and women's levels of positive and negative emotional expressivity differentially predicted appraisals of marital functioning. Would the women's emotional expressivity have greater predictive power on both her own and her husband's marital satisfaction than would the men's emotional expressivity? The third goal was to examine how emotional expressivity pairings related to measures of marital functioning. Were couples whose levels of positive and negative emotional expressivity were more similar happier than dissimilar couples, or did couples whose levels of positive and negative emotional expressivity complement each other appear to be more satisfied with their marriages?

## METHOD

### Participants

Fifty-eight married couples were recruited as part of a study on family relationships in families with preschool-aged children. A subset of the sample ( $n = 37$ ) had participated in an earlier study that looked at family relationships when the children were infants (see Volling & Elins, 1998). Maritally-intact families with a 4-year old child and an older child between the ages of 5 and 10 were eligible to participate. The couples were married for an average of 11.4 years, and most were White (93%) and middle class (median family income = \$75,000; range = \$38,000 to \$200,000). The husbands averaged 17.7 years ( $SD = 3.6$ ) of education, were approximately 39.2 years old (27–48 years), and all of them were employed. The wives averaged 16.5 years ( $SD = 2.9$ ) of education, were approximately 36.6 years old (26–45 years), and 61% of them were employed. Of the 58 families who participated, four wives and seven husbands failed to return their questionnaires; therefore, a total of 54 wives and 51 husbands participated in the current study.

### Procedures

Families were invited to the university laboratory when the younger child was 4 years old and asked to participate in a study designed to assess

sibling and friend relationships. At this time, both spouses were given questionnaire packets to complete at home; these included questions designed to assess their emotional expressivity and the quality of their marital relationship. Spouses were asked to complete their questionnaires separately and to return them within 2 weeks by mail using postage paid envelopes. All families were compensated \$35 for their participation.

## Measures

### *Emotional Expressivity*

Both spouses completed the Self-Expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire (SEFQ; Halberstadt et al., 1995). This measure consists of 40 hypothetical affective scenarios representing a range of emotions in a variety of settings typical of many families. Participants rated the frequency with which they were likely to express themselves both verbally and behaviorally in the family context on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all frequently* to 9 = *very frequently*). The questionnaire consists of two subscales that assess positive emotional expressivity (e.g., "Expressing deep affection or love for someone; Spontaneously hugging a family member";  $\alpha = .87$  for wives and  $.88$  for husbands) and negative emotional expressivity (e.g., "Criticizing someone for being late; Sulking over unfair treatment by a family member";  $\alpha = .85$  for wives and  $.88$  for husbands).

### *Marital Relationship*

Braiker and Kelley's (1979) 25-item Intimate Relations Questionnaire was used to assess the quality of the marital relationship. Individuals were asked to rate on a 9-point scale the degree to which each statement was characteristic of their current relationship with their spouse (1 = *very little or not at all* to 9 = *extremely or very much*). The questionnaire consists of four subscales that assess feelings of love for the spouse (e.g., "How close do you feel to your partner";  $\alpha = .91$  for wives and  $.85$  for husbands); conflict (e.g., "How often do you and your partner argue with one another";  $\alpha = .75$  for wives and  $.76$  for husbands); ambivalence (e.g., "How confused are you about your feelings toward your partner";  $\alpha = .84$  for wives and  $.83$  for husbands); and maintenance (e.g., "To what extent do you reveal or disclose very intimate facts about yourself to your partner";  $\alpha = .76$  for wives and  $.69$  for husbands).

## RESULTS

Results are presented in three sections. First, results from preliminary and descriptive analyses are presented, including a paired samples *t*-test, which was used to assess gender differences in both positive and negative emotional expressivity, and correlational analyses, which we used to examine consistent individual differences in spouses' positive and negative levels of emotional expressivity. Second, multiple regression analyses were conducted to assess whether husbands' and wives' levels of positive and negative emotional expressivity differentially predicted their appraisals of marital functioning. Third, marital groups were created based on positive and negative emotional expressivity to examine how partners' positive and negative expressivity levels interacted to predict various indicators of marital functioning.

### Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics of the measures used in the analyses for both husbands and wives are presented in Table I. Preliminary correlational analyses were conducted to examine whether there were any relations between demographic variables (i.e., parental age, years of education, family salary, years married, number of children) and the measures of interest (e.g., emotional expressivity, marital functioning). Correlations revealed that husbands who had been married a greater number of years were significantly more negatively emotionally expressive,  $r = .34, p < .05$ , and that husbands who had had more years of education were more likely to put effort into the maintenance of their marital relationship,  $r = .42, p < .01$ . All analyses reported were rerun to control for husbands' years of education and the number of years married; however, controlling for these variables did not significantly alter the results. No other relationships were found between the measures and the demographic variables.

To test gender differences between men and women in their levels of positive and negative emotional expressivity, a paired samples *t*-test was run (see Table I). Significant differences were found between husbands and wives for positive expressivity,  $t(50) = 5.58, p < .01$ , such that wives reported more positive expressivity than husbands did. Husbands and wives reported significantly different levels of negative expressivity,  $t(50) = 2.50, p < .05$ ; wives reported more negative emotional

**Table I.** Descriptive Statistics for Positive and Negative Emotional Expressivity and Marital Functioning Measures for Husbands and Wives

Measures	Husbands			Wives		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Positive emotional expressivity	141.30	22.31	87–178	161.77	17.15	120–205
Negative emotional expressivity	70.16	18.32	42–122	77.59	17.22	34–108
Marital love	72.24	10.45	42–88	69.18	14.99	24–90
Marital conflict	22.82	7.45	7–44	24.44	7.59	9–45
Marital ambivalence	15.29	7.50	5–36	15.61	7.97	5–38
Marital love	28.02	6.28	15–40	27.46	6.90	5–42

*Note.* Paired *t*-tests were conducted between husbands' and wives' scores for all measures.

expressivity than husbands did. Thus, for both positive and negative emotional expressivity, wives reported expressing significantly more emotions than their husbands did.

Intercorrelations were run between husbands' and wives' levels of positive and negative emotional expressivity in order to assess consistency in individual differences across partners' reports. No significant relations were found between the partners' reports of their levels of positive emotional expressivity or their levels of negative emotional expressivity. Thus, an examination at the group level indicated that men and women, on average, differ with respect to both positive and negative expressivity. An examination of the consistency in individual differences across spouses indicates that husbands and wives in each couple were not similar to one another.

Because there was no association between husbands' and wives' emotional expressivity, we considered each partner's emotional expressivity separately in our regression analyses where we examined whether husbands' and wives' emotional expressivity levels made unique contributions to spouses' reports of marital functioning.

**Multiple Regression Analyses**

Multiple stepwise regressions were conducted to examine the amount of variance in marital functioning outcomes that could be explained by husbands' and wives' levels of positive and negative emotional expressivity. Table II shows the results of our examination of the effect of emotional expressivity on

**Table II.** Regression of Wives' and Husbands' Positive and Negative Emotional Expressivity on Wives' Reports of Marital Relationship Quality

Predictors	$\beta$	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> Change	Total <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Outcome: love			
Step 1. Wives' positive emotional expressivity	.00	.00	
Step 2. Husbands' positive emotional expressivity	.16	.03	
Step 3. Wives' negative emotional expressivity	-.06	.00	
Step 4. Husbands' negative emotional expressivity	-.07	.00	.04
Outcome: conflict			
Step 1. Wives' positive emotional expressivity	.04	.02	
Step 2. Husbands' positive emotional expressivity	-.10	.03	
Step 3. Wives' negative emotional expressivity	.41**	.22**	
Step 4. Husbands' negative emotional expressivity	.38**	.14**	.39**
Outcome: ambivalence			
Step 1. Wives' positive emotional expressivity	-.04	.00	
Step 2. Husbands' positive emotional expressivity	-.04	.01	
Step 3. Wives' negative emotional expressivity	.34*	.14**	
Step 4. Husbands' negative emotional expressivity	.20	.04	.18*
Outcome: maintenance			
Step 1. Wives' positive emotional expressivity	.14	.03	
Step 2. Husbands' positive emotional expressivity	.14	.02	
Step 3. Wives' negative emotional expressivity	.06	.00	
Step 4. Husbands' negative emotional expressivity	-.02	.00	.05

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

**Table III.** Regression of Wives' and Husbands' Positive and Negative Emotional Expressivity on Husbands' Reports of Marital Relationship Quality

Predictors	$\beta$	$R^2$ Change	Total $R^2$
Outcome: love			
Step 1. Wives' positive emotional expressivity	-.03	.00	
Step 2. Husbands' positive emotional expressivity	.36**	.13**	
Step 3. Wives' negative emotional expressivity	.00	.00	
Step 4. Husbands' negative emotional expressivity	-.42**	.17**	.31**
Outcome: conflict			
Step 1. Wives' positive emotional expressivity	.18	.06	
Step 2. Husbands' positive emotional expressivity	-.18	.05	
Step 3. Wives' negative emotional expressivity	.23*	.10*	
Step 4. Husbands' negative emotional expressivity	.49**	.23**	.43**
Outcome: ambivalence			
Step 1. Wives' positive emotional expressivity	.15	.04	
Step 2. Husbands' positive emotional expressivity	-.22	.06	
Step 3. Wives' negative emotional expressivity	.20	.07	
Step 4. Husbands' negative emotional expressivity	.32*	.10*	.26**
Outcome: maintenance			
Step 1. Wives' positive emotional expressivity	.08	.01	
Step 2. Husbands' positive emotional expressivity	.35*	.11*	
Step 3. Wives' negative emotional expressivity	.12	.01	
Step 4. Husbands' negative emotional expressivity	-.12	.01	.15

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

wives' reports of marital functioning. For wives' reports of the positive aspects of their marriage (i.e., love, maintenance), expressivity of either spouse, whether positive or negative, appeared to have no predictive value. However, when we examined more negative appraisals of marriage, such as conflict and ambivalence, expressivity was indeed associated with reports of marital quality. The bulk of this effect appears to be carried by negative expressivity. For the wives' reports of marital conflict, both her own self-reported negative expressivity and her husband's self-reported negative expressivity appeared to predict strongly how conflictual she reported the marriage to be. Only her own level of negative expressivity predicted how ambivalent the wife felt about her marital relationship. These findings suggest two things. First, positive expressivity on the part of either spouse does not appear to be associated with women's appraisals of marital functioning. Second, negative expressivity appears to be strongly associated with women's appraisals of marital maladjustment.

Table III shows the results of our examination of the effect of emotional expressivity on husbands' reports of marital functioning. For husbands, expressivity was strongly associated with their appraisals of marital relationship quality. For reports of marital love, their own levels of both positive and negative expressivity were associated with how much they

reported that they love their wives. Though the total amount of variance explained by spouses' positive and negative expressivity for husbands' reports of maintenance was not significant, the change in the  $R^2$  at Step 2 was significant for husbands' positive emotional expressivity, which suggests that husbands' reports of positive emotional expressivity have a strong association with their reports of the positive aspects of the marital relationship. The results for husbands' appraisals of conflict and ambivalence closely mirror those results found for wives. Both spouses' self-reported negative expressivity was related to how conflictual the husband reported his marriage to be. Again, only the husbands' negative expressivity was related to how ambivalent he felt about the marital relationship. These results indicate that positive expressivity appears to influence only husbands' evaluations of the positive aspects of the marital relationship, whereas negative expressivity appears to influence both spouses' appraisals of negative marital functioning.

### The Interaction of Positive and Negative Emotional Expressivity

In order to examine the interaction of partners' emotional expressivity levels, emotional expressivity pairings were created. These emotional expressivity

pairings were created by dividing husbands' and wives' scores on positive and negative emotional expressivity at the median to create four marital groups for both positive emotional expressivity and negative emotional expressivity: (1) husbands low on expressivity/wives low on expressivity (for positive,  $n = 10$ ; for negative,  $n = 15$ ), (2) husbands low on expressivity/wives high on expressivity (for positive,  $n = 16$ ; for negative,  $n = 12$ ), (3) husbands high on expressivity/wives low on expressivity (for positive,  $n = 16$ ; for negative,  $n = 10$ ), (4) husbands high on expressivity/wives high on expressivity (for positive,  $n = 9$ ; for negative,  $n = 14$ ).

Analyses were conducted to examine whether husbands' and wives' positive and negative expressivity levels interacted to predict their reports of marital functioning, using a 2 (spouse)  $\times$  4 (expressivity groups) repeated measures ANOVA with spouse as the repeated factor. Though no significant interactions were found, several main effects emerged for the negative emotional expressivity pairings. No significant main effects emerged for the positive emotional expressivity pairings. Table IV summarizes the means by spouse and negative emotional expressivity pairings.

As shown in Table IV, a significant group effect was found for marital love,  $F(1, 47) = 3.97, p \leq .01$ . Tukey's post-hoc comparisons revealed a significant group difference, ( $p < .01$ ), such that women and men in the wife low/husband high group (Group 3) for negative emotional expressivity were significantly

lower in marital love than were women and men in couples who were both low in negative emotional expressivity (Group 1). There were no other significant differences between groups for negative emotional expressivity pairings and marital love, which suggests that couples were likely to experience less marital love for one another only when the husband was highly negatively emotionally expressive and the wife was not.

A significant group effect of negative emotional expressivity was also found for marital conflict,  $F(1, 47) = 8.88, p < .01$  (refer to Table IV). Tukey's post-hoc comparisons again revealed a significant group difference, ( $p < .01$ ), between the women and men in couples that were both low in negative emotional expressivity (Group 1) and women and men in couples where only the wife was low in negative emotional expressivity (Group 3). Spouses in Group 1 reported significantly less conflict than spouses in Group 3. Further, Tukey's post-hoc comparisons revealed that women and men in Group 1 were also significantly different,  $p < .01$ , from couples in which both partners were high in negative emotional expressivity (Group 4); again the former group reported far less conflict than the latter group.

Finally, a significant group effect of negative emotional expressivity was also found for marital ambivalence,  $F(1, 47) = 4.46, p < .01$  (see Table IV). Again, Tukey's post-hoc comparisons revealed a significant group difference between Group 1 and both Groups 3 ( $p < .01$ ) and 4 ( $p < .05$ ). In both cases,

**Table IV.** Means (and Standard Errors) of Marital Outcomes as a Function of Spouse and Negative Emotional Expressivity Pairings

Marital outcome	Spouse			Expressivity pairing				$F(1, 47)$
	Wife	Husband	$F(1, 47)$	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	
Love			<i>ns</i>					3.97**
<i>M</i>	69.37	71.54		76.29 <sub>a</sub>	71.25	61.93 <sub>b</sub>	72.35	
<i>SE</i>	(1.92)	(1.32)		(2.66)	(2.98)	(3.26)	(2.76)	
Conflict			<i>ns</i>					8.88**
<i>M</i>	24.00	23.35		17.87 <sub>a</sub>	23.04	27.50 <sub>b</sub>	26.29 <sub>b</sub>	
<i>SE</i>	(0.84)	(0.91)		(1.37)	(1.53)	(1.67)	(1.41)	
Ambivalence			<i>ns</i>					4.46**
<i>M</i>	15.23	15.59		10.83 <sub>a</sub>	15.58	18.50 <sub>b</sub>	16.71 <sub>b</sub>	
<i>SE</i>	(0.91)	(1.04)		(1.46)	(1.63)	(1.79)	(1.51)	
Maintenance			<i>ns</i>					<i>ns</i>
<i>M</i>	27.49	28.02		27.87	28.79	26.25	28.11	
<i>SE</i>	(1.00)	(0.90)		(1.47)	(1.64)	(1.80)	(1.52)	

*Note.* Negative emotional expressivity pairings: Group 1: wives low/husbands low; Group 2: wives high/husbands low; Group 3: wives low/husbands high; Group 4: wives high/husbands high. Group differences are indicated in subscript.

\*\* $p \leq .01$ .

men and women in couples where both partners were low in negative emotional expressivity (Group 1) expressed significantly less ambivalence about their marital relationship than did pairs in which the husband was high in negative emotional expressivity (Groups 3 and 4).

To summarize, these findings suggest several different things. First, there appear to be gender differences in positive and negative emotional expressivity levels, such that wives are more emotionally expressive than husbands. Similarly, there does not appear to be consistency in individual differences across spouses in either positive or negative expressivity. Second, the multiple regressions suggested an association between negative emotional expressivity and partners' appraisals of marital functioning, especially marital maladjustment, whereas positive emotional expressivity appeared to be associated only with husbands' appraisals of the positive aspects of the marriage. Third, the repeated measures analyses revealed the association between negative emotional expressivity and both spouses' marital outcomes, though only in post-hoc analyses did we begin to see group differences based on different expressivity pairings.

## DISCUSSION

The current investigation was designed to examine the effects of positive and negative emotional expressivity on the marital relationship. In so doing, we expanded upon knowledge of how husbands' and wives' emotional expressivity differentially predicts both spouses' views of the marital relationship.

### Individual and Group Differences in Emotional Expressivity

It has been well documented that women express more positive and negative emotions than men do (Brody, 1993; Kring & Gordon, 1998; Searle & Meara, 1999), and the results of the current study support these findings. However, in contrast to previous research (Acitelli et al., 2001; Barton & Cattell, 1972; Dryer & Horowitz, 1997), we found little support for consistent individual differences across spouses in either positive or negative emotional expressivity.

Though it appears that spouses were not similar at the level of individual differences, results of the group analyses showed that dissimilarity between spouses' negative expressivity levels did not appear

to be responsible for why spouses in which the wife was low and the husband high in expressivity were more likely to report conflict in and ambivalence about their marriages, as well as less marital love, than spouses who were both low in negative expressivity, because no significant difference was found between spouses in which both partners were low in negative expressivity and spouses in which the wife was high and the husband low. Although Noller and Fitzpatrick (1990) found that larger discrepancies in partners' affective disclosure were associated with greater distress in couples, the results of the current study only support this for negative expressivity in couples in which the husband alone was high in negative expressivity. Further, spouses in that group appeared to be at a risk for marital conflict and ambivalence similar to that of spouses in the expressivity pairing in which both spouses were high in negative emotional expressivity. These group differences underscore the role of the husband's negative emotional expressivity on the marital relationship.

### Positive Expressivity in the Marital Relationship

The results of the current study lend strong support to the distinction earlier researchers have found between positive and negative emotional expressivity (Brody, 1993; Carstensen et al., 1995; Fujita et al., 1991; Kring & Gordon, 1998; Searle & Meara, 1999) because the two were shown to have different associations with the marital relationship. In contrast to previous findings (Carstensen et al., 1995; Feeney, 2002; Feeney et al., 1994, 1998; Gill et al., 1999), we found surprisingly few associations between positive emotional expressivity and the marital relationship. Even though many researchers have found that higher levels of positive emotional expressivity in spouses were associated with greater marital satisfaction (Carstensen et al., 1995; Feeney, 2002; Feeney et al., 1994, 1998; Gill et al., 1999), we found that only husbands' positive emotional expressivity was related to their own reports of marital love and maintenance.

Although husbands' positive emotional expressivity was related to marital love and maintenance, we were surprised that positive emotional expressivity did not appear to impact wives' reports of marital functioning. As the results currently stand, we cannot rule out the possibility of shared method variance in explaining why husbands' marital love and maintenance reports were affected by their positive emotional expressivity because it is possible that

those husbands who endorsed questionnaire items about how often they expressed positive emotions were, in turn, more likely to report positive aspects of their marriage, such as love.

However, we did not find such an effect for wives. This lack of support for the impact of positive emotional expressivity on wives' reports of marital functioning is surprising considering the findings of Halberstadt and colleagues (1995). As mentioned earlier, those authors found that positive emotional expressivity was related to women's reports of marital satisfaction, whereas there was no such association for men. The authors interpreted this as suggesting that positive emotional expressivity was more pertinent to women's than to men's marital satisfaction. One possible explanation for our findings comes from the work of Sprecher and Sedikides (1993), who investigated gender differences in emotionality in the context of close relationships. The authors found a negative correlation between relationship duration and expressed emotions for both men and women; the strongest association was between relationship duration and women's expressed positive emotions. As the couples in our sample were married for an average of 11.4 years, based on Sprecher and Sedikides' (1993) findings, it could be hypothesized that, though wives expressed more positive emotional expressivity than their husbands, their overall level had decreased throughout the course of their marriage. This decline could be accompanied by positive emotions becoming less central to wives' evaluations of their marital relationships, which could explain why positive emotional expressivity would not be significantly associated with wives' reports of the marital relationship.

With regard to the link between husbands' positive emotional expressivity and their reports of marital love and maintenance, this link is in line with Lippert and Prager's (2001) findings on intimacy. Those husbands who reported a greater frequency of positive emotions were also more likely to feel a sense of intimacy with their wives. This increased intimacy might be hypothesized to increase the love that the husband felt for his wife as well as increase his desire to maintain the marital relationship. Perhaps for wives, positive emotional expressivity on their own part and on the part of the spouse affects something apart from either love or maintenance. Further research is clearly needed to examine how positive emotional expressivity specifically benefits women in marriage because the results of the current study suggest that it may not be through either love or maintenance.

Another surprising finding is that neither the husbands' nor the wives' positive emotional expressivity affected their spouses' reports of marital functioning. The frequent disclosure of positive emotions, as indicated by the endorsement of items such as "expressing deep affection or love for someone," would seem to affect not only one's own reports of marital quality, but also the spouse's reports as well. Having a spouse who frequently expresses positive emotions, such as love and affection, would seem to create a positive cycle of emotions, such that the spouse would feel more love for the partner as he or she felt more loved by the partner. Beyond this, it could be hypothesized that people would be more likely to maintain a relationship with another person if they themselves felt valued and loved by their partners. We found no evidence of cross-spouse influence, which leads us to ponder whether positive emotional expressivity is pertinent mainly to one's own feelings of love and happiness, as opposed to benefiting either one's partner or one's relationship. Previous researchers have examined how one's own positive emotional expressivity affected one's own marital satisfaction and found that they were positively associated (Carstensen et al., 1995; Feeney, 2002; Feeney et al., 1994, 1998; Gill et al., 1999; Halberstadt et al., 1995), but clearly future researchers need to examine the ways in which, if at all, positive emotional expressivity influences one's partner's appraisal of the marital relationship.

#### **Negative Expressivity in the Marital Relationship: More Important than Positive Expressivity?**

Halberstadt and colleagues (1995) found that only men's negative emotional expressivity was relevant to their reports of marital satisfaction; there was no association between men's positive emotional expressivity and marital satisfaction. In the current study, we found that marital functioning was strongly related to negative emotional expressivity for both husbands and wives. Further strengthening our interpretation of the importance of negative emotional expressivity is the finding, that for both spouses, marital conflict was predicted by both partners' negative emotional expressivity as opposed to only by their own negative expressivity. It appears that negative emotional expressivity is a more powerful determinant of marital functioning than positive emotional expressivity for both husbands and wives. As previously mentioned, the post hoc group differences in emotional expressivity indicate

that, although negative emotional expressivity in general has a powerful effect on both spouses' views of their marriage, it is the husbands' negative emotional expressivity in particular that has a significant influence on the marital relationship.

Through our use of a dyadic approach, in which pairings were created using both partners' emotional expressivity levels, we were able to discern the significance of the husband's emotional expressivity on both spouses' views regarding the quality of their marriage. Our results appear to be inconsistent with previous findings. For example, Alexander and Wood (2000) proposed that wives would be more responsible for the marital climate, but our data underscore the importance of husbands' emotional expressivity. Halberstadt and colleagues (1995) found that negative emotional expressivity was more a determinant of men's marital satisfaction, though the important piece here is that negative emotional expressivity appears to be associated with wives' impressions of marital functioning as well.

Although we can only speculate at this point, it is interesting to question why the husband's negative emotional expressivity would determine both his own and his wife's reports of marital functioning more than the wife's negative emotional expressivity would. Though wives express more negative emotions on average, when men do express a greater frequency of negative emotions, the effects appear to be more detrimental to the marital relationship. Garside and Klimes-Dougan (2002) found that men reported having been punished more often as children for the expression of negative emotions than women did. Women are also socialized to have a greater "ability to talk about and deal with emotional issues [which] can be viewed as a social skill that enhances the quality of social functioning" (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998, p. 257). Without socialization for dealing with negative emotions, it could be that husbands express their negative emotions in a less skillful manner, which can have a greater negative impact on the marital relationship than the negative expressions of wives.

Another explanation for these gender differences could be differences in the intensity of the negative affect husbands show in comparison to that shown by their wives. If husbands expressed more dominant negative emotions, such as anger, and women expressed more submissive negative emotions, such as sadness, this may be why husbands' negative emotional expressivity had stronger associations with marital functioning. Again, literature

from the emotion socialization field lends credence to this hypothesis. In a review of emotion socialization, Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) found striking gender differences, such that boys received more parental disapproval than girls for the expression of sadness. However, boys received less parental disapproval than did girls for the expression of anger.

To test this hypothesis that men may be expressing more dominant negative emotions whereas women may be expressing more submissive negative emotions, we conducted follow-up analyses examining both wives' and husbands' tendency to use dominant versus submissive negative emotions. The SEFQ (Halberstadt et al., 1992) was derived from the Family Expressiveness Questionnaire (FEQ; Halberstadt, 1986), which, in addition to measuring whether individuals expressed positive or negative emotions, assessed the degree of dominance of the emotional expressions and behaviors. The resulting negative submissive scale included items that indicated the degree of sadness and crying expressed by the individual within the family, and the negative dominant scale included items that assessed the frequency of the individual's expressed anger and hostility. To test whether husbands and wives were more likely to use dominant or submissive negative emotions, a paired samples *t*-test was run. Significant differences were found for wives  $t(56) = -9.29$ ,  $p < .001$ , such that wives reported expressing significantly more negative submissive emotions than negative dominant emotions. However, no significant differences were found for husbands, indicating that they were equally likely to express dominant or submissive negative emotions.

It appears then that in our society, men but not women are allowed to be angry, whereas women but not men are encouraged to express less intense negative emotions, such as sadness. Therefore, in the current study, wives' negative affect may have been primarily sadness, whereas husbands' negative affect may have been anger in addition to sadness (Fischer, Mosquera, & van Vianen, 2004). Anger could, due to its greater intensity, have a substantial impact on marital functioning. Without further research on emotional expressivity and marital functioning, it is difficult to explain why husbands' negative emotional expressivity was more detrimental to marital functioning than was wives'.

In sum, these results suggest a complex association between positive and negative emotional expressivity and the marital relationship. First, although previous researchers have emphasized the

importance of positive emotional expressivity within marriage, we found evidence to suggest its importance only for husbands. Second, though husbands, as expected, reported less emotional expressivity than their wives did, it appears that their negative emotional expressivity in particular has a strong association with both their own and their wives' views of the marriage. Although the small cell size for the emotional expressivity pairings may have limited our ability to examine these associations fully, negative emotional expressivity clearly has a significant association with the quality of the marital relationship for both husbands and wives. Future researchers need to examine why the husband appears to be the more influential member of the marital dyad when negative emotional expressivity and marital relationship quality are concerned.

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