

THE CHANGING INFLUENCE OF INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTIONS ON MARITAL WELL-BEING AMONG BLACK AND WHITE COUPLES

Linda K. Acitelli

University of Houston

Elizabeth Douvan & Joseph Veroff

University of Michigan

ABSTRACT

This study is the longitudinal extension of an earlier study of perceptions of conflict in the first year of marriage (Acitelli et al., 1993). In both studies, we examined the relative importance (to marital well-being) of partners' similarity and understanding of conflict styles. While the earlier study related perceptions of conflict in the first year with first year marital well-being, the present study related the same first year perceptions with third year marital well-being. Two important changes appearing in the findings for the third year compared to the first year are: (1) constructive acts appeared more important than destructive acts to third year marital well-being, whereas destructive acts were more predictive than constructive acts of first year marital well-being; and (2) the association of wives' understanding of husbands to third year marital well-being was positive for black couples and negative for white couples. This association was positive for both groups in the first year. Results are discussed in terms of the ambiguity of positive interactions as well as the dissolution of the romantic myth in the course of relationship development in early marriage.

KEY WORDS • interpersonal perception • marital conflict • marital satisfaction

Portions of this article were presented to the 100th convention of the American Psychological Association, August 1992, Washington, DC. Our thanks go to the researchers of the Early Years of Marriage project who helped shape the presentation of this study and to Halimah Hassan for assistance with data analysis. This research was supported, in part, by grants from NIMH (R01-MH41253 and R01-MH46567). Address correspondence to: Linda K. Acitelli, Department of Psychology, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-5341, USA. [email: acitelli@uh.edu]

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships © 1997 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), Vol. 14(3): 291-304. [0265-4075 (199706) 14:3].

Interpersonal perceptions (Kenny, 1994; Laing et al., 1966; Sillars & Scott, 1983) have important consequences for marital partners' everyday interactions and their satisfaction with the relationship. At the most elementary level, marital satisfaction has been demonstrated to relate more to perceived similarity than to actual similarity (e.g. Levinger & Breedlove, 1966). It is clear, however, that marital well-being hinges on any number of complex interpersonal perceptions (e.g. Acitelli et al., 1993; Oggins et al., 1993).

The present study asks two basic questions: (1) Do interpersonal perceptions of married couples change over the first three years of their marriages, and (2) do these perceptions have different effects on marital well-being over the same time period? A previous study (Acitelli et al., 1993) had shown that spouses' perceptions of both their partners' and their own reactions to conflict in the first year of marriage correlated in systematic ways with how happy husbands and wives felt about their marriages at that time. The present study extends this work by relating first year perceptions to third year marital well-being. In so doing we scratch the surface of an enormously complex question of how marriages develop in the early years.

The theoretical basis of our work is formed mainly from the literature on social cognition and interpersonal perceptions in close relationships. As Sillars (1985) indicated, theories and findings about the significance of interpersonal perceptions may vary for different referents and contexts. While there are many other referents (e.g. preferences, attitudes) and contexts (e.g. dating, friendships) for considering interpersonal perceptions, we are raising questions about the effects of interpersonal perceptions of marital conflict behaviors only.

The context of conflict is critically important for understanding relationship development and negotiation, especially in the early years when the marital relationship is in its formative stages (Crohan, 1992; Fincham & Bradbury, 1991). Indeed, Gottman's (1995) research and cascade model of conflict demonstrate how spouses' momentary perceptions during conflict can lead to lasting cognitions about the marriage. Precisely how this happens and when such consolidation takes place have not been spelled out. It is generally thought, however, that difficulties in resolving conflicts stem not only from seeing events and situations differently, but also from seeing each other's attempts to resolve differences in different ways. What one partner intends to be a constructive attempt to resolve differences may be perceived by the other as irrelevant or even destructive. A common destructive pattern for a marriage is one partner confronting a problem while the other withdraws (e.g. Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Markman et al., 1993). There is little doubt regarding the incongruity of what a husband and wife perceive each other as doing or thinking in such situations.

In the first year study (Acitelli et al., 1993), married couples were asked to think of their last disagreement and to report on their own and their spouses' behaviors during that disagreement. Spouses were asked to rate statements with regard to how true they were of themselves (e.g. 'I calmly discussed the situation') and their spouses (e.g. 'My spouse calmly discussed the situa-

tion'). These perceptions of spouse and partner may be related in several ways, but we focused on three that, as a group, will be referred to as *perceptual congruence* variables: when both partners' self-perceptions were congruent, partners were said to be *similar*; when one person's perception of the self and other were congruent, this was termed *perceived similarity*; and when a partner's perception of the other partner corresponded with the other partner's self-perception, this was called *understanding*. (Researchers have not settled on a consistent set of terms for these concepts, as Duck, 1994 has detailed.) Results of the earlier study (Acitelli et al., 1993) supported the longstanding finding that perceived similarity is greater than actual similarity and is more strongly related to first year marital well-being than actual similarity is.

Findings from the earlier study also indicated that the perceptual congruence variables were more predictive of wives' marital well-being than of husbands' marital well-being. Of particular salience to wives' marital well-being was wives' understanding of their husbands' constructive and destructive conflict behaviors. Husbands' marital well-being was more strongly related to both spouses' own self-reported behaviors. In addition, destructive conflict behaviors were understood better and related more strongly to marital well-being than were constructive ways of dealing with conflict. A major goal of the present study is to see how and if these findings change from the first to the third year and is reflected in our research questions.

Our first question was: *Do interpersonal perceptions of married couples change over the first three years of their marriages?* In general, a growing consensus of perspectives on how each partner handles conflict is expected to emerge over the first years of marriage and be associated with positive changes in marital well-being. Several scholars have noted the importance of consensus or congruence in developing a shared reality in marriages or families (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Deal et al., 1992; Duck, 1994). According to Berger & Kellner (1964), partners become more similar to one another over time, so partner differences in perception should decrease over time. Although this theory suggests a testable hypothesis, there is no clarity regarding when perceptions stabilize. The initial development of norms for interpersonal perception in a marriage may very well take place early on and not fluctuate much beyond the initial period. Nevertheless, we expect some shifts toward increased congruity with regard to actual or perceived similarity in the way a couple reacts to conflict, and in the degree of understanding that spouses might have of how their partners see themselves reacting to conflict. Such congruence is also expected to be positively related to marital well-being. Couples who do not easily arrive at such congruence in the early period may have special difficulties in their relationship, and so we expect that indices of congruence of interpersonal perceptions of conflict will be even more related to marital happiness in the third year than in the first year.

These ideas lead us to a second question: *Do these perceptions have effects on third year marital well-being that are different from their effects on first*

year marital well-being? While the overarching expectation is that congruence of interpersonal perceptions is beneficial for a marriage, the specific reactions assessed, responses to conflict, may be open to interpretations. In the study of the first year of marriage, destructive behaviors were more accurately perceived (or understood) than were constructive behaviors. This result is supported by the literature on social cognition in personal relationships demonstrating that negative behaviors are more easily noticed and more accurately recalled (e.g. Fletcher & Fitness, 1990). The constructive behaviors are not as vivid, or novel, and do not command as much attention. This finding is consistent with the idea that these 'constructive' behaviors are affectively neutral or ambiguous (Sillars, 1985; Wyer, 1973) and thus more subject to varying interpretations than the destructive behaviors. Fincham & Bradbury (1991) demonstrate that positive behaviors can be interpreted as negative, and Sher & Baucom (1995) emphasize that identical behaviors can have different meanings for a marriage. In extending schema theory to close relationship settings, the research of Fletcher & Fitness (1990) suggests that negative attributions of one's relationship partner will be more resistant to change than will positive attributions. Therefore, as partners approach the third year of marriage, we expect the meanings which constructive behaviors have for marital well-being to be more variable over time than the meanings of destructive acts.

Some of our thinking about the impact of interpersonal perceptions on marital well-being over the first three years has to consider ways in which the impact may be different for black couples and white couples. Our longitudinal data set is unique in that it has a substantial number of both black couples and white couples, while most longitudinal research on marriage is based on white samples. Even though the positives far outweigh the negatives, our sample composition is a mixed blessing in that, on the one hand, we have the valuable opportunity to compare marriages between groups that are rarely compared in the same sample (Broman, 1993). But, on the other hand, the rarity of such samples makes predictions difficult to make. We have very few data (except from our own project) from which to base predictions. In fact, an exhaustive review of the longitudinal research on marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) demonstrated that only 8 percent of the samples used in these studies were drawn from both black and white populations. (Most were white, middle-class couples.) Of those that included black populations, the Veroff et al. (1993a) project was the only one that included both husbands and wives in the sample.

The ethnicity factor played a minor role in our analysis of the correlation of interpersonal perceptions and first year marital happiness primarily because there were not many differences between groups with regard to these associations. However, we kept ethnicity in the present analysis, since Veroff et al. (1995) and Hatchett et al. (1995) found that some of the determinants of marital stability are discrepant for black couples and white couples. They find that the stability of marriages for all couples depend on nurturant wives, relatively independent-feeling husbands, sound social networks, and harmonious interactions. They also find that unlike stable white

marriages, stable black marriages depend on wives preserving a sense of independence in their marriages at the same time that they reassure their husbands about their acceptance. Their findings suggest that actual similarity in perceptions of how conflict is managed, while important for black marriages, may be somewhat less critical as long as black wives can maintain some separation and still reassure their husbands about their husbands' adequacy in spite of conflict. Thus, in black marriages, wives' understanding may be a more important factor than actual similarity.

Method

Data are obtained from the Early Years of Marriage (EYM) project, a 7-year longitudinal study of 373 newlywed couples conducted by Veroff et al. (1993a) of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. This is largely an urban sample that is heterogeneous with regard to socioeconomic status and educational background. Black couples were over-sampled so that reliable race comparisons could be made. In approximately 40 percent of the couples, at least one partner said he or she could not think of a disagreement or that they never disagreed or argued. This reduced the size of the group for this analysis to 236 couples (116 black and 120 white). Missing data further reduced the sample to 219 couples. For more details on the sample used for this study, see Acitelli et al. (1993).

Spouses were interviewed separately in their homes for about an hour and a half on various aspects of married life between 5 and 8 months after their marriage and then again in their third year of marriage. (Shorter telephone interviews were conducted in the second and fourth years.) The race of the interviewers was matched to the race of the respondents.

Spouses were separately asked to think of the last time the couple had disagreed or argued about something in the past month or so and were then asked to report perceptions of self and spouse during the disagreement. Each question was asked twice, once for the respondent's own behavior and once for the respondent's perception of the spouse's behavior. For example, each spouse would indicate on a 4-point scale how true the following statements were: 'I calmly discussed the situation', and 'My wife/husband calmly discussed the situation', or 'I yelled or shouted at my wife/husband', and 'My wife/husband yelled or shouted at me'. The measures we utilize in this study were derived from 12 pairs of items. Six of the pairs are labeled constructive (i.e. calmly discussing the situation, listening to each other's point of view, finding out what the other is feeling, saying nice things, trying to compromise, suggesting a new way of looking at things) and six are labeled destructive (i.e. yelling/shouting, insulting or calling each other names, threatening, bringing the spouse's family into the argument, bringing up things that happened long ago, having to have the last word) to the handling of conflict. Earlier studies on these data have shown that these items cluster together as separate factors (Oggins et al., 1993). Cronbach alphas were computed separately for husbands' and wives' reports of constructive behaviors (husbands' alpha = .71; wives' alpha = .70) and destructive behaviors (husbands' alpha = .68; wives' alpha = .69) and demonstrate adequate, though not high, internal consistency.

Indices of similarity, perceived similarity and understanding were obtained for 12 pairs of items. For example, comparing what the husband said he did on a

particular item to what he said his wife did would yield a measure of husband's *perceived similarity*, indicating the degree to which he thought he and his wife did the same thing. Comparing what the husband said his wife did to what the wife said she did would yield a measure of *understanding*. We derived *actual similarity* of response by comparing the husband's self-reported behavior to the wife's self-reported behavior. Note that we refer to actual similarity of response to the items which does not imply that we have a direct measure of actual similarity of behavior.

We obtained actual similarity, perceived similarity and understanding scores for each pair of items (e.g. 'I calmly discussed the situation' and 'My wife calmly discussed the situation'). Then we obtained averages for each of the three congruence measures on constructive and destructive items separately. Thus, we have perceived constructive similarity and perceived destructive similarity; actual constructive similarity and actual destructive similarity; and constructive understanding and destructive understanding. Although we are aware of the debate regarding discrepancy scores (e.g. Kenny, 1994), our measures are not discrepancy scores in the strictest sense of the term. They avoid the pitfalls of some scores having more than one possible meaning. For further detail on how these items were calculated, see Acitelli et al. (1993).

Marital well-being was measured by adding together standard scores of six items covering how happy, how satisfied, how equitable, and how stable the spouse feels the marriage is. Items were derived from Veroff et al. (1981) on happiness and satisfaction; Austin & Walster (Hatfield) (1974) on equity; Utne et al. (1984) and Booth et al. (1983) on stability. The items reflect general feeling states about the marriage, rather than specific characteristics of the marriage (e.g. communication, conflict), often found in popular marital adjustment scales (Spanier, 1976). Therefore, this measure avoids confounding independent variables that might be used to predict marital well-being (see Fincham & Bradbury, 1991; Glenn, 1990; and Johnson et al., 1992 for detailed discussions of this point). This 6-item measure has been demonstrated to be internally consistent ($\alpha = .83$; Crohan & Veroff, 1989) and to have considerable construct validity (see Hatchett et al., 1995). Furthermore, we use the term marital well-being because the items tap into how happy, satisfied and stable the individual feels the relationship is, so it is an index of how the spouse thinks and feels about the relationship in general, much like an individual well-being measure asks the individual to rate feelings about life in general. Thus, our measure is not an adjustment or quality of marriage measure. All of the above measures were administered in both the first and third years of the respondents' marriages.

Results

Results of analyses are presented in relation to the two research questions.

Q1: Do interpersonal perceptions of married couples change over the first three years of their marriages? Pairwise comparisons (accounting for the non-independence of scores) between the means of the perceptual congruence variables (actual similarity, perceived similarity, and understanding) in the first and third years were used. These revealed stability in both the constructive and destructive variables over the 2-year period. In only two groups — black wives and white husbands — was there significant change, and that occurred in only one constructive variable for each group. Black wives perceived themselves and their husbands as more similar in Year 3 ($M = 4.12$) than in Year 1 ($M = 3.85$, t

= 2.11, $p < .05$) with respect to handling conflicts constructively. White husbands' understanding of their wives was greater in Year 3 ($M = 3.88$) than in Year 1 ($M = 3.70$, $t = 2.26$, $p < .05$) with respect to handling conflicts constructively. The other two groups remained essentially the same on all of the congruence measures over the 2-year period. For the most part, neither blacks nor whites became more congruent in their perceptions over time.

Q2: Do these perceptions have effects on third year marital well-being that are different from their effects on first year marital well-being? Because the measures of perceptual congruence are complex variables, we kept our analyses relatively simple. Furthermore, the focus of our study is on the direct relationship between congruence variables and change in marital well-being, thus the testing of more complicated models is unnecessary for our purposes.

We tested the effect of congruence variables from the first year on marital well-being in the third year. We performed simultaneous regression analyses of the contribution of first year actual similarity, perceived similarity, understanding, and spouses' perception of their own behaviors to third year marital well-being. There were eight separate analyses — third year marital well-being regressed on constructive measures (Table 1) and on destructive measures (Table 2), each run separately for the four groups (white husbands, white wives, black husbands, black wives).

Congruence scores are entered simultaneously with the respondents' ratings of their own conflict behaviors. Because one component of all congruence scores is a spouse's self-report of conflict behavior, this analysis accomplishes two goals. First, when we find a significant association between a congruence

TABLE 1
Betas from four multiple regression analyses predicting husbands' (H) and wives' (W) Year 3 marital well-being from perceptual congruence of constructive behaviors

	Husbands' marital well-being		Wives' marital well-being	
	Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites
W understanding H	.27***	-.31***	.19**	-.24**
H understanding W	-.10	-.06	-.03	-.22*
W perceived similarity	.12	-.06	.17*	-.16*
H perceived similarity	.05	-.05	-.11	-.17*
Actual similarity	-.36**	.10	-.52***	.29**
W self-perception	.02	.21**	.13	.08
H self-perception	.03	.23***	.09	.06
Year 1 marital well-being	.03	.15	.29***	.35***
Parental status	-.31***	-.18**	-.09	-.07
Length of cohabitation	.06	.01	.07	-.02
Household income	.02	-.01	.03	.12
	$F(11,108)$	$F(11,111)$	$F(11,108)$	$F(11,111)$
	= 2.87***	= 2.45**	= 5.34***	= 2.57**
	$R^2(\text{adjusted})$	$R^2(\text{adjusted})$	$R^2(\text{adjusted})$	$R^2(\text{adjusted})$
	= .15	= .12	= .29	= .12

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Betas from multiple regression analyses predicting husbands' (H) and wives' (W) Year 3 marital well-being from perceptual congruence of destructive behaviors

	Husbands' marital well-being		Wives' marital well-being	
	Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites
W understanding H	.37***	.20	.13	-.01
H understanding W	.17	-.11	.20	.12
W perceived similarity	.19	-.24*	-.15	.09
H perceived similarity	.17*	-.09	-.02	-.12
Actual similarity	-.33**	-.06	-.26*	-.12
W self-perception	.06	-.45***	-.09	-.05
H self-perception	.10	-.08	-.06	-.26***
Year 1 marital well-being	-.06	.02	.31***	.23**
Parental status	-.25***	-.14	-.01	.05
Length of cohabitation	.02	.03	.05	.07
Household income	.07	-.08	.12	.07
	<i>F</i> (11,108)	<i>F</i> (11,111)	<i>F</i> (11,108)	<i>F</i> (11,111)
	= 2.80***	= 2.29***	= 3.09***	= 2.49***
	<i>R</i> ² (adjusted)	<i>R</i> ² (adjusted)	<i>R</i> ² (adjusted)	<i>R</i> ² (adjusted)
	= .14	= .10	= .16	= .12

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

score and marital well-being, we know it is due to the degree of congruence between variables rather than to the positivity or negativity of the behavior itself. The perceptions of the behaviors are in essence controlled for in this design. Second, we also account for the non-independence of the items that are different combinations of the same items. A careful inspection of the covariances between items also revealed no multicollinearity problems.

Other controls were entered into the equation simultaneously with the described variables. First year marital well-being was entered into the regression equation to control for the relationship between the first year perceptual congruence variables and first year marital well-being. Thus, we are assessing whether interpersonal perceptions in the first year can predict change in marital well-being from the first to the third year. Household income, parental status, and length of premarital cohabitation were also included as controls because these factors are related to the racial/ethnic co-cultures in this sample (Hatchett et al., 1995).

For black husbands and wives, actual similarity in the first year (in reports of constructive and destructive behaviors) is negatively related to marital well-being in the third year. Betas for black husbands and wives in the four analyses ranged from $-.52$ to $-.26$. In the first year analysis, the relation between similarity of destructive acts and wives' marital well-being was also negative. Although not significant, all of the associations between actual similarity and first year marital well-being were negative.

Our earlier report described the strong association between wives' understanding of husbands' constructive and destructive acts and wives' own marital well-being. Neither wives' understanding nor husbands' understanding was related to husbands' marital well-being in the first year.

For third year, wives' understanding predicts marital well-being in all four analysis groups in the case of constructive behaviors, and for black husbands with respect to destructive behaviors as well ($\beta = .37, p < .01$). Wives' understanding relates to marital well-being in very different — indeed opposite — ways in black and white couples. For black couples, a wife's understanding her husband's constructive acts is positively related to her marital well-being ($\beta = .19, p < .05$) and also to his ($\beta = .27, p < .01$). For white couples, on the other hand, a wife's understanding of her husband's constructive behaviors is *negatively* related to the both her marital well-being ($\beta = -.24, p < .05$) and his marital well-being ($\beta = -.31, p < .01$).

The same analyses (including the controls) predicting third year marital well-being from third year perceptual congruence variables yielded few significant results. Most constructive perceptual congruence variables in the third year did not relate significantly to third year marital well-being for any analysis group, except one. Black wives' third year perceived similarity was significantly associated with black wives' third year marital well-being ($\beta = .24, p < .05$) and was marginally associated with black husbands' third year well-being ($\beta = .21, p = .06$).

Also, most destructive perceptual congruence variables in the third year was not significantly related to third year marital well-being for any analysis group, except one. White husbands' perceived similarity was negatively associated with white spouses' third year marital well-being (husbands' $\beta = -.21, p < .05$, wives' $\beta = -.37, p < .001$), and actual similarity of destructive behaviors was positively related to white husbands' marital well-being ($\beta = .28, p < .05$).

Discussion

First, we consider findings that relate to our original research questions: *Do interpersonal perceptions of married couples change over the first three years of their marriages?* The perceptual variables are remarkably stable over the first three years of marriage. For the entire sample, there are no differences in perceptual variables. Only when we analyze by sex and race do we find any changes. Black wives increase in perceived similarity and white husbands show increased understanding of their wives. Both of these changes occur in the context of constructive acts.

Because these specific results were not predicted, we must be cautious in our interpretations. Other analyses of the EYM data set prompt us to speculate that the change in black wives' perception relates to changes in the relative decision power of black spouses. In the first year of marriage black couples who say that the husband has the most say in decisions are also high on marital satisfaction and stability (Veroff et al., 1995). By the third year this association has decreased and, in fact, black husbands share roles (in things like household tasks and childcare) quite extensively with

their wives (Veroff et al., 1995). This change — reflecting perhaps the black husbands' increased security in the relationship — may underlie the black wives' increased willingness to see that both spouses constructively handle conflicts in the same way.

The fact that black wives' third year perceived similarity was related to both black spouses' third year marital well-being, underscores the importance of the shift in black wives' perception. This shift is consistent with the Veroff et al. (1995) findings that black marital stability depended more than white marital stability on wives empathizing with and reassuring their husbands.

Reasons for the increase in white husbands' understanding of their wives' constructive acts are not as clear. We cautiously speculate that white men, who are generally accorded more power than women or blacks in our society, might be somewhat naive and untutored in taking the role of the other. Perhaps their wives gradually socialize them to attend to their behaviors, particularly during conflict situations, and thus increase the white husbands' understanding.

Overall, we are struck primarily by the stability of the perceptual congruence measures. This stability is important since it suggests that interpersonal perceptions in marriage and in perhaps any relationship are forged early in the commitment and remain relatively constant as the relationship progresses. There may be a critical period early in relationship development for the creation of these perceptions. As Duck (1994) states, developing a shared relational reality may be the most important process in relationship adjustment and satisfaction from the very beginning.

Do these perceptions have effects on third year marital well-being that are different from their effects on first year marital well-being? Just as in the first year analysis, wives' understanding of husbands is more important to the marital well-being of couples than is husbands' understanding of their wives. However, the effects of wives' understanding differs for blacks and whites and for positive and negative actions of the spouse. While wives' understanding of husbands predicted first year marital happiness significantly only for wives, wives' understanding, particularly regarding constructive acts, predicts third year happiness for both husbands and wives.

But the direction of effect is different for black and white couples. For black couples, the wife's understanding of her husband's constructive acts has a significant positive effect on her own and her husband's marital well-being as one may expect from our general congruence hypothesis. In the white marriages, however, the wife's understanding of her husband's constructive acts has a significant negative effect on her own and her husband's marital well-being.

How do we interpret this difference between the groups? The findings for black marriages — that the wife's understanding of her husband's behavior positively affects the couple's marital well-being — seems straightforwardly consonant with other findings indicating that the wife's sensitivity to her husband's needs and feelings (particularly to feelings of

powerlessness caused by discrimination) is crucial for stability and happiness in black marriages (Hatchett et al., 1995). Indeed, we have noted in our first year analyses that the wife's understanding of her husband was more predictive of her marital well-being than was the husband's understanding of his wife, regardless of race. Thus the finding for blacks is consistent with our expectations and findings from the first year study. It is important to realize that wives' understanding continues to predict blacks' well-being in marriage even when partialling out the effects of first year marital well-being. For blacks, understanding in the first year paves the way for positive changes over the next two years.

But what about the findings for white couples — that wives' understanding of husbands predicts lower happiness for both husbands and wives? This means that the more a wife sees her husband as he sees himself, the less happy the couple becomes. Thus, more understanding of constructive acts predicts a decrease in marital well-being beyond the initial period.

These findings provide partial support for the idea that the meaning of constructive acts changes more than that of destructive acts, particularly for the white couples in this sample. The finding that the association between white wives' understanding of their husbands' 'constructive' behaviors and marital well-being changes from positive to negative from the first to the third year is consistent with the premise that positive behaviors are ambiguous and subject to varying interpretations (Fincham & Bradbury, 1991; Sillars, 1985). However, we can only speculate as to the specific form the varying interpretations take. Perhaps wives who once saw certain conflict styles in their husbands as constructive now see them as cool or patronizing (one more form of control). By the third year these wives may not be as happy about what they understood in the first year, recognizing it now as false, a kind of hoodwinking, and may have communicated their distress to their husbands. Thus, a different 'understanding' may have gradually developed for some women. Regardless of the form the wives' interpretations take, the ambiguity of constructive behaviors can be problematic for analyses such as these. According to Sillars, ambiguous behaviors are the most problematic in determining meaning, and a spouse's understanding of them may have negative correlations with marital satisfaction (Sillars, 1985; Sillars et al., 1990).

This intriguing finding is also consistent with the general supposition that a lack of consensus between spouses is detrimental to a marriage (e.g. Deal et al., 1992) even though it appears to indicate the opposite. Additional analyses showed that white husbands' and wives' perceptions of their own constructive acts do not correlate with each other ($r = -.05$, NS). Thus, the more wives understand their husbands, the more they may realize that their husbands are not reciprocal in the extent to which they deal with conflict constructively. In other words, white wives may perceive that the extent to which they are constructive does not at all relate to the extent to which their husbands are constructive. Table 1 shows that similarity of constructive behaviors predicts an increase in whites' marital well-being.

Thus, the more wives understand that the spouses are not similar, the more their marital happiness decreases.

Another finding supporting this interpretation is that white wives' perceived similarity is negatively related to marital happiness. This finding contradicts a long-established association between perceived similarity and marital happiness (e.g. Levinger & Breedlove, 1966). Yet in light of the fact that white husbands and wives are not similar, the more similar a wife thinks the spouse is, the more inaccurate she is in her assessment of his behavior, and it is this inaccuracy that might relate to the decrease in marital well-being. Although we provide interpretations for these findings within racial/ethnic groups, the reasons these links differ between racial/ethnic groups are not clear.

Two evident changes in findings for the third year compared to the first year are related to changes in the relative importance of destructive versus constructive acts, and in ethnic differences which were not salient in the earlier study. Destructive acts, the locus of most of the findings in the first year, no longer seem to be the focus of findings in the third year. In the third year, most findings occur in the context of constructive acts. Gottman's (1993) balance theory of conflict suggests that positive behaviors have the capacity to negate the impact of negative behaviors over time. If so, then the number of positive associations between perceptions of constructive behaviors and marital well-being should increase from the first to the third year, as it did for black couples. For whites, however, the ambiguity of constructive acts may have set the stage for reinterpreting positive behaviors in a negative light.

Race differences, too scanty to report in the first year, are more significant in year three. We expected co-culture differences to become clearer as time went on. The romantic myth that dominates our larger cultural construction of early marriage ('the honeymoon period') might mask co-cultural differences among groups, particularly in the area of conflict. Thus time would be required to dilute the effect of the myth and allow co-cultural differences to emerge. Findings from these and other analyses from this data set consistently indicate that not only do there seem to be 'his' and 'her' marriages (Bernard, 1972), but that marriage is experienced differently, and perhaps the meaning of marriage is different for blacks and whites (Veroff et al., 1993b).

The results of our study in the third year suggest that there is both considerable continuity and change in the degree and effects of interpersonal perceptions about conflict from the first to the third year. These interpersonal perceptions can become stabilized early in marriage, and yet there is some room for change. There are no simple answers regarding when to expect continuity and when to expect change. The most provocative hypothesis generated from this study is that change occurs when couples are describing outwardly positive responses to conflict, and the underlying motivations for these responses are evidently more open to interpretation (than negative responses) as being either positive or negative.

REFERENCES

- Acitelli, L.K., Douvan, E. & Veroff, J. (1993) 'Perceptions of Conflict in the First Year of Marriage: How Important are Similarity and Understanding?', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 10: 5–19.
- Austin, W. & Walster (Hatfield), E. (1974) 'Reactions to Confirmations and Disconfirmations of Expectancies of Equity and Inequity', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 30: 209–16.
- Berger, P. & Kellner, H. (1964) 'Marriage and the Construction of Social Reality', *Diogenes* 46: 1–24.
- Bernard, J. (1972) *The Future of Marriage*. New York: World Publishing.
- Booth, A., Johnson, D. & Edwards, J. (1983) 'Measuring Marital Instability', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 45: 387–94.
- Broman, C.L. (1993) 'Race Differences in Marital Well-Being', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55: 724–32.
- Christensen, A. & Heavey, C.L. (1990) 'Gender and Social Structure in the Demand/Withdraw Pattern of Marital Interaction', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59: 73–81.
- Crohan, S.E. (1992) 'Marital Happiness and Spousal Consensus on Beliefs about Marital Conflict', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 9: 89–102.
- Crohan, S.E. & Veroff, J. (1989) 'Dimensions of Marital Well-Being among White and Black Newlyweds', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51: 379–83.
- Deal, J.E., Wampler, K.S. & Halverson, C.F. (1992) 'The Importance of Similarity in the Marital Relationship', *Family Process* 31: 369–82.
- Duck, S.W. (1994) *Meaningful Relationships: Talking, Sense, and Relating*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fincham, F.D. & Bradbury, T.N. (1991) 'Marital Conflict: Towards a More Complete Integration of Research and Treatment', in J. Vincent (ed.) *Advances in Family Intervention, Assessment, and Theory* (Vol. 5). London: Kingsley.
- Fletcher, G.J.O. & Fitness, J. (1990) 'Occurrent Social Cognition in Close Relationship Interaction: The Role of Proximal and Distal Variables', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59: 464–74.
- Glenn, N. (1990) 'Quantitative Research on Marital Quality in the 1980s: A Critical Review', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52: 818–31.
- Gottman, J.M. (1993) 'The Roles of Conflict Engagement, Escalation, and Avoidance in Marital Interaction: A Longitudinal View of Five Types of Couples', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61: 6–15.
- Gottman, J.M. (1995) 'A Theory of Marital Dissolution and Stability', *Journal of Family Psychology* 7: 57–75.
- Hatchett, S., Veroff, J. & Douvan, E. (1995) 'Factors Influencing Marital Stability among Black and White Couples', in B. Tucker & C. Mitchell-Kernan (eds) *The Decline of Black Marriages*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Johnson, D.R., Amoloza, T.O. & Booth, A. (1992) 'Stability and Developmental Change in Marital Quality: A Three Wave Panel Analysis', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54: 582–94.
- Karney, B.R. & Bradbury, T.N. (1995) 'The Longitudinal Course of Marital Quality and Stability: A Review of Method, Theory, and Research', *Psychological Bulletin* 118: 3–34.
- Kenny, D.A. (1994) *Interpersonal Perception*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Laing, R.D., Phillipson, H. & Lee, A.R. (1966) *Interpersonal Perception: A Theory and a Method of Research*. New York: Springer.
- Levinger, G. & Breedlove, J. (1966) 'Interpersonal Attraction and Agreement', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39: 367–72.
- Markman, H.J., Silvern, L., Clements, M. & Kraft-Hanak, S. (1993) 'Men and Women Dealing with Conflict in Heterosexual Relationships', *Journal of Social Issues* 49: 107–25.

- Oggin, J., Veroff, J. & Leber, D. (1993) 'Perceptions of Marital Interaction among Black and White Newlyweds', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65: 494–511.
- Sher, T.G. & Baucom, D.H. (1995) 'Marital Communication: Differences among Maritally Distressed, Depressed, and Nondistressed-Nondepressed Couples', *Journal of Family Psychology* 7: 148–53.
- Sillars, A.L. (1985) 'Interpersonal Perception in Relationships', in W. Ickes (ed.) *Compatible and Incompatible Relationships*. New York: Springer.
- Sillars, A.L. & Scott, M.D. (1983) 'Interpersonal Perception between Intimates: An Integrative Review', *Human Communication Research* 10: 153–76.
- Sillars, A.L., Weisberg, J., Burggraf, C.S. & Zietlow, P.H. (1990) 'Communication and Understanding Revisited: Married Couples' Understanding and Recall of Conversations', *Communication Research* 17: 500–22.
- Spanier, G. (1976) 'Measuring Dyadic Adjustment: New Scales for Assessing the Quality of Marriage and Similar Dyads', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 38: 15–27.
- Utne, M.K., Hatfield, E., Traupmann, J. & Greenburger, D. (1984) 'Equity, Marital Satisfaction and Stability', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 1: 323–32.
- Veroff, J., Douvan, E. & Hatchett, S. (1993a) 'Marital Interaction and Marital Quality in the First Year of Marriage', in W. Jones & D. Perlman (eds) *Advances in Personal Relationships*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Veroff, J., Douvan, E. & Hatchett, S.J. (1995) *Marital Instability: A Social and Behavioral Study of the Early Years*. Greenwich, CT: Greenwood.
- Veroff, J., Douvan, E. & Kulka, K. (1981) *The Inner American*. New York: Basic Books.
- Veroff, J., Sutherland, L., Chadiha, L.A. & Ortega, R.M. (1993b) 'Predicting Marital Quality with Narrative Assessment of Marital Experience', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55: 326–37.
- Wyer, R.S. (1973) 'Category Ratings as "Subjective Expected Values": Implications for Attitude Formation and Change', *Psychological Review* 80: 96–112.