PERCEPTIONS OF CONFLICT IN THE FIRST YEAR OF MARRIAGE: HOW IMPORTANT ARE SIMILARITY AND UNDERSTANDING?

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Perceptions of self and spouse play a central role in marital relationships. Using data from 219 newlywed couples, we examined the relative importance (to marital well-being) of partners' similarity and understanding of conflict styles. These data include reports of behaviors of the self and spouse during their most recent disagreement. Behaviors were categorized as either constructive or destructive to resolving the conflict, and data from each category were analyzed separately. Measures of perceptions of similarity based on one spouse's report, actual similarity between spouses' separate reports and spouses' accuracy in reporting (or 'understanding' of) each other's behaviors were derived from these reports. Consistent with earlier studies, perceived similarity was shown to be higher than actual similarity and was a stronger positive predictor of marital well-being. This finding highlights the importance of partners believing that they are similar. The strongest predictor of marital well-being for wives was wives' understanding of their husbands. For husbands, both spouses' self-reports of their own behaviors were the strongest predictors. These gender differences are discussed with regard to differences in orientation toward and power in relationships.

As Berger & Kellner (1964) theorize, marriage is a process of

constructing a shared reality or shared perceptions of a couple's experiences. Marital relationships provide a fitting backdrop for the study of partners' perceptions of self and other which may be the building blocks from which the spouses' shared reality is constructed (Laing et al., 1966). Whereas *person perception* involves one person's perception of another, *interpersonal perception* involves studying the relationship between partners' perceptions of one another (Sillars & Scott, 1983). According to Berger & Kellner (1964), partners' differences in perceptions decrease over time. Therefore, the early years of marriage are crucial to the formation of shared perceptions.

Interpersonal perceptions of spouse and other may be related in several ways, but, like Kenny & Acitelli (1989), we focus on three: when both partners' self-perceptions are congruent, partners are said to be *similar*; when one person's perception of the self and perception of other are congruent, there is *perceived similarity* for that person; and when a partner's perception of the other corresponds with the other's self-perception, there is *understanding*. We refer to these as *perceptual congruence* variables. Other terms for similarity are reciprocity and agreement (e.g. Kenny, 1988; Kenny & Acitelli, 1989). Other terms for perceived similarity are perceived reciprocity, assumed agreement (e.g. Levinger & Breedlove, 1966) and projection (e.g. Dymond, 1954). Terms for understanding are accuracy (e.g. Newmark et al., 1977) and empathy (e.g. Dymond, 1950). Even though researchers do not agree on use of terms, they do nevertheless agree that these perceptions and their interrelations can have important consequences for the partners' everyday interactions and their satisfaction with the relationship. We relate these perceptions of interaction to maritial well-being.

The referents of perception in a marriage can be almost anything, ranging from the perceptions of the relationship to perceptions of spouses' food preferences. Each in their own way can be important to the study of marriage. However, we heed the advice of Sillars (1985) who warns that the consequences of perceptions of similarity and understanding may depend on the specific referent of these perceptions and the context within which these perceptions occur. In the present study, then, we are limiting the focus to particular referents in a particular context, namely spouses' behaviors in conflict situations. The conflict context is a major arena for marital communication and relationship nego-

tiation. Though it is not the only setting in which couples create a shared reality, we would assert its critical role in that development. In conflict, discrepancies between partners' views are exposed, affect is aroused and differences are negotiated toward a shared view or at least a decision to allow the different views — the discrepancy — to stand (i.e. agreement to disagree). Indeed, unexposed differences may reinforce separate as opposed to shared realities. In general, we expect that the relationship between perceptual congruence of conflict behaviors and marital well-being will be positive.

Furthermore, when looking at spouses' perceptions of each other during conflict, we expect that the importance of perceptual congruence may depend on whether the perceived behaviors are constructive or destructive to conflict resolution. Other studies (Crohan, 1992; Oggins et al., 1991) have demonstrated that these different types of behaviors have different consequences for marital well-being. For example, it may be more important to a marriage for partners to agree not to insult one another — since insult is destructive to conflict resolution — than to agree to try to look at the conflict in a new light — which is constructive to conflict resolution. Thus, in delineating types of conflict responses, we are further specifying the referents of perception by distinguishing between behaviors that are constructive and those that are destructive.

This article focuses on the following hypotheses derived from findings reported in the literature on interpersonal perception in close personal relationships:

1. Perceived similarity is greater than actual similarity (Byrne & Blaylock, 1963; Levinger & Breedlove, 1966; Sillars, 1985). Sillars has suggested that this reflects the fact that people use their own direct perspective as a reference for judging other people even when they have prior experience that could distinguish the other person's perspective.

2. Understanding (i.e. accurate perception) of partners' behaviors will be greater for destructive than for constructive behaviors. Literature indicates more accurate recall of information that is more immediate, vivid, easily observed and negative in emotional tone (Sillars, 1985). For some spouses, destructive behaviors may also be unusual, and novelty has been shown to increase arousal (Berlyne, 1963).

We also pursue an analysis to determine the unique contribu-

tions of actual similarity, perceived similarity and understanding to marital well-being in the first year of marriage. In this data set, we are able to control for shared variance and compare the unique contribution of each of these perception variables.

3. Perceived similarity will be more predictive of marital well-being than will actual similarity (Levinger & Breedlove, 1966). White (1985) and Bochner et al. (1982) warn that global measures of perception are multidimensional and may mask both issue-specific variance and variance that depends on the salience of the issue for the couple. In our work, we focus specifically on constructive or destructive behaviors during a disagreement. We explore the relationship of actual and perceived similarity to marital satisfaction separately for positive and negative behaviors.

4. Wives' understanding of their husbands will contribute more to marital well-being than will husbands' understanding of their wives. In a review of several studies on interpersonal perception between intimates, Sillars & Scott (1983: 165) note that 'the relationship between understanding and marital adjustment has been found to hold only when the wife is the respondent and the husband's perception is being predicted'. Furthermore, Allen & Thompson (1984) found that husbands' understanding of their wives does not predict communication satisfaction for either spouse, but wives' understanding of their husbands predicts husbands' satisfaction. The authors attribute this difference to a power differential: the person with low power needs to be able to understand and predict the actions of the more powerful partner in order to salvage some modicum of control.

Method

Data were obtained from a 4-year longitudinal study of 373 newlywed couples conducted by Veroff et al. (1985) of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. The sample was drawn from listings of marriage licenses in Wayne County, Michigan, from April through June 1986. The sample was largely urban and was heterogeneous with regard to socioeconomic status and educational background. Respondents' average level of education was at least 1 year of post-secondary education. All respondents were in their first marriage and all wives were under 35 years of age (so that they would be in their childbearing years to be eligible for other research purposes of the larger project). At the time of the first interview, the mean age for husbands was 27 and the mean age for wives was 25. Interviews were conducted between 5 and 8 months after their wedding and then again in their third year of marriage. In this study, we are reporting on results from the first-year interviews only. Spouses were interviewed separately in their homes for about an hour and a half on various aspects of married life.

    In approximately 40 percent of the couples, at least one partner said he or she
could not think of a recent disagreement or that they never disagreed or argued.
This reduced the size of the group for this study to 236 couples. Furthermore, when
spouses' reports were compared to see if they were reporting on the same disagree-
ment, it was found that approximately 70 percent of this group were not referring to
the same event. To see if it was necessary to reduce the sample further, we divided
the couples into matched groups (partners who referred to the same disagreement)
and unmatched groups (partners who referred to different disagreements). We
performed several one-way ANOVAs testing whether or not these groups differed
with regard to: their reports of behavior during conflict; the congruence of the
partners' reports of conflict behavior; their marital well-being; and their communi-
cation about the relationship. Results indicated that these groups were not signifi-
cantly different from one another in these respects. Thus, we decided to use the
entire group of 236 and, like Crohan (1992), acknowledge that we were assessing
perceptions of behavioral styles in conflictive situations rather than perceptions of
behaviors occurring during one incident. Missing data further reduced the sample
to 219. (In the third-year interviews, spouses were required to agree about the
specific incident before reporting on the specific behaviors. We plan to compare the
results of the first and third years in a future study.)
    Measures of conflict behaviors. In one section of the survey, 'Differences and
Disagreements', spouses were asked (separately) to think of the last time the
couple had disagreed or argued about something in the past month or so. They
were 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 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'. Responses ranged
from 1, very true, to 4, not at all true. The measures we utilize in this study were
derived from twelve 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). Earlier studies on these data have shown that these items cluster together as
separate factors (Crohan, 1992; Oggins et al., 1991). Cronbach alphas were com-
puted separately for husbands' and wives' reports of constructive behaviors (hus-
bands' alpha = .71; wives' alpha = .70) and destructive behaviors (husbands' alpha
= .68; wives' alpha = .69) and demonstrate reasonably adequate, but not high,
internal consistency.
    Measures of perceptual congruence. Indices of similarity, perceived similarity and
understanding were obtained for 12 pairs of items (see Figure 1). 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 hus-
band's self-reported behavior to the wife's self-reported behavior. Note that we

FIGURE 1
Actual similarity, perceived similarity and understanding
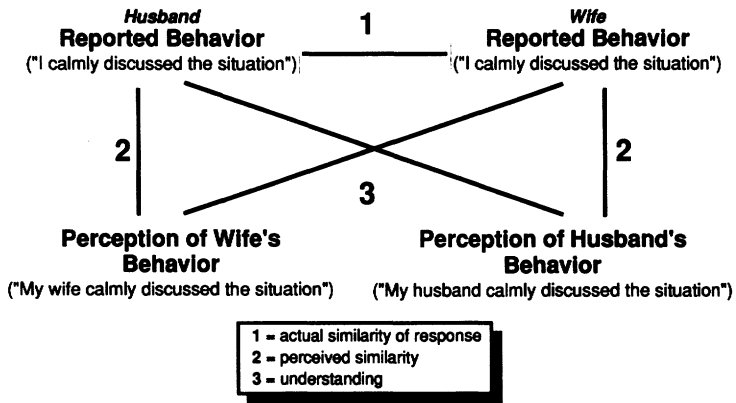
Source: Figure adapted from White (1985).

refer to actual similarity of response to the items which does not imply that we have
a direct measure of actual similarity of behavior.

Congruence measures (perceived similarity, actual similarity, understanding)
ranged from 1, complete incongruence, to 5, complete congruence (see Table 1).
For example, if both spouses responded 'very true' to 'I calmly discussed the
situation', their actual similarity score for that item would be 5 because their
responses were identical. On the other hand, if a wife endorsed 'not at all true' (4)
and her husband responded 'very true' (1), their actual similarity score would be 1
because their responses were completely incongruent. Assigning scores to the
matrix in Table 1 has a conceptual advantage over an absolute discrepancy score in
that it distinguishes between responses that are *somewhat congruent* and *somewhat
incongruent* as follows. The difference between very true (1) and somewhat true (2)
is 1 and is the same as the difference between not very true (3) and not at all true
(4), so the partners in each pair are *somewhat congruent* in that they both gave
either a positive or negative response. The difference between somewhat true (2)
and not very true (3) is also 1, but partners who gave these responses are *somewhat
incongruent* because one spouse gave a positive response while the other spouse
gave a negative response. Thus, couple scores that are somewhat congruent are
assigned the number 4, and scores that are somewhat incongruent are assigned the
number 3.

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 congru-
ence measures on constructive and destructive items separately. These averages are
the scores for perceived constructive similarity and perceived destructive similarity;
actual constructive similarity and actual destructive similarity; and constructive
understanding and destructive understanding.

TABLE 1
Values for measures of perceptual congruence

	Wife's response			
Husband's response	Not at all true	Not very true	Somewhat true	Very true
Not at all true	5	4	2	1
Not very true	4	5	3	2
Somewhat true	2	3	5	4
Very true	1	2	4	5

1 = complete incongruence; 2 = incongruence; 3 = somewhat incongruent; 4 = somewhat congruent; 5 = complete congruence.

Measure of marital well-being. Marital well-being was measured by averaging the standard scores of 6 items: (1) Taking things together, how would you describe your marriage? Would you say your marriage is very happy, a little happier than average, just about average or not too happy? (2) When you think about your marriage — what each of you puts into it and gets out of it — how happy do you feel? Would you say very happy, fairly happy, not too happy or not at all happy? (3) How certain would you say you are that the two of you will be married 5 years from now? Would you say very certain, fairly certain, not too certain or not at all certain? (4) How stable do you feel your marriage is? Would you say very stable, fairly stable, not too stable or not at all stable? (5) In the last few months how often have you considered leaving your (wife/husband)? Would you say often, sometimes, rarely or never? (6) All in all, how satisfied are you with your marriage? Would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied? This 6-item measure of marital well-being was derived from previous factor analyses, has been demonstrated to be internally consistent (alpha = .83; Crohan & Veroff, 1989) and has considerable construct validity (see Hatchett et al., in press). In the present study, the measure of marital well-being is not averaged into a couple score, but is rather reported separately for husbands and wives.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Perceived similarity is greater than actual similarity. Pairwise comparisons (t-tests accounting for the non-independence of scores) between the means of actual similarity scores and perceived similarity scores supported the first hypothesis. Perceived similarity was significantly higher than actual similarity for both husbands and wives for both constructive and destructive behaviors. Wives' perceived constructive similarity ($M = 4.09$; SD = .72) was significantly greater than actual constructive similarity ($M = 3.59$; SD = .68; $t = -8.81$, $p < .001$). Husbands' perceived constructive similarity ($M = 4.27$; SD = .68) was significantly greater than actual constructive similarity ($M = 3.59$; SD = .68; $t = -12.38$, $p < .001$). Likewise, wives' perceived destructive similarity ($M = 4.15$; SD = .72) was significantly greater than actual destructive similarity ($M = 3.89$; SD = .71; $t = -5.97$, $p < .001$). Husbands' perceived destructive similarity ($M = 4.36$; SD = .63) was significantly greater than actual destructive similarity ($M = 3.89$; SD = .71; $t = -9.41$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 2: Understanding of partners' behaviors will be greater for destructive than for constructive behaviors. This hypothesis was also confirmed. Wives' understanding of husbands' destructive behaviors ($M = 4.04$; SD = .69) was significantly

greater than wives' understanding of husbands' constructive behaviors ($M = 3.65$; SD $= .68$; $t = -6.77$, $p < .001$). Husbands' understanding of wives' destructive behaviors ($M = 3.93$; SD $= .66$) was also significantly greater than husbands' understanding of wives' constructive behaviors ($M = 3.66$; SD $= .66$; $t = -4.63$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 3: Perceived similarity will be more predictive of marital well-being than will actual similarity. We performed simultaneous regression analyses of the contributions of actual similarity, perceived similarity, understanding and spouses' perceptions of their own behaviors to first-year marital well-being. There were four separate analyses — for husbands' well-being regressed on both constructive and destructive measures and wives' well-being regressed on both constructive and destructive measures (see Table 2). The hypothesis was confirmed for both husbands and wives with regard to the constructive items. Perceived similarity was at least marginally related to marital well-being in all four models. Table 2 shows that for the constructive items, wives' perceived similarity (beta $= .20$, $p < .01$) contributed significantly to their marital well-being and to a greater degree than actual similarity (beta $= -.09$, NS). For husbands, perceived similarity contributed only marginally to their marital well-being (beta $= .12$, $p < .10$), but to a greater degree than actual similarity (beta $= -.03$, NS). The results with regard to the destructive items indicate that the contributions of perceived similarity and actual similarity to marital well-being are almost equal but in opposite directions, with actual similarity being negatively related to both spouses' marital well-being. For wives' destructive items, actual similarity was negatively and significantly related to marital well-being (beta $= -.19$, $p < .05$).

Hypothesis 4: Wives' understanding of their husbands will contribute more to marital well-being than will husbands' understanding of their wives. This hypothesis was partially supported. For both constructive and destructive items, wives' understanding of husbands' explained more variance in both spouses' marital well-being than did husbands' understanding of wives. However, wives' understanding of husbands *significantly* predicted marital well-being for wives only. Wives' understanding of husbands appears to be a strong predictor of marital well-being for wives for both constructive and destructive items. Wives' understanding of husbands was not a significant predictor of husbands' marital well-being. Husbands' understanding of wives was only marginally predictive of wives' marital well-being and only for the destructive items (beta $= .14$, $p < .10$).

Overall, the results indicate that the perceptual variables are much better predictors of marital well-being for destructive items than for constructive items. The percentage of variance accounted for by the constructive items for husbands and wives was 9 and 6, respectively, while the percentages for destructive items were 19 and 33. It also appears that the perceptual congruence variables are better predictors of marital well-being for wives than for husbands, while spouses' perceptions of their own behaviors were more predictive of husbands' well-being.

Discussion

Our results indicate that perceived similarity between spouses is greater than actual similarity of response within both contexts of

TABLE 2
Four multiple regression analyses predicting husbands' (H) and wives' (W) marital
well-being from perceptual congruence on constructive and destructive behaviors
$(n = 219)^a$

| | Constructive behaviors | | | |
| | Husbands' well-being | | Wives' well-being | |
	beta	t	beta	t
W understanding H	.04	.47	.22	2.80***
H understanding W	−.01	.06	.03	.28
W perc. similarity	.10	1.46	.20	2.91***
H perc. similarity	.12	1.71*	−.01	.20
Actual similarity	−.03	.28	−.09	.85
W self-perception	.11	1.47	.03	.33
H self-perception	.26	3.90***	.09	1.32
	$F(7,211) = 4.11^{***}$		$F(7,211) = 3.00^{***}$	
	R^2 (adjusted) = .09		R^2 (adjusted) = .06	
	Destructive behaviors			
W understanding H	.12	1.52	.37	4.92***
H understanding W	.11	1.25	.14	1.71*
W perc. similarity	−.03	.36	.14	1.69*
H perc. similarity	.12	1.79*	−.01	.09
Actual similarity	−.13	1.25	−.19	2.15**
W self-perception	−.19	2.08**	−.26	3.13***
H self-perception	−.23	2.78***	−.03	.45
	$F(7,211) = 8.38^{***}$		$F(7,211) = 16.03^{***}$	
	R^2 (adjusted) = .19		R^2 (adjusted) = .33	

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$. ^{a} n is reduced due to missing data.

constructive and destructive conflict behaviors. This finding is con-
sistent with previous literature on assumed similarity in marriage
(e.g. Levinger & Breedlove, 1966) and with more recent literature
on the 'false consensus effect' (Ross et al., 1977) where persons
assume that others are more like themselves than the others report
themselves to be. Explanations offered (e.g. McFarland & Miller,
1990) for the false consensus effect are that people overestimate
commonness to assure themselves of the appropriateness or cor-
rectness of their own response, to protect their self-esteem and to
consensually validate their own preferences. In addition, believing
that their own qualities are positive, respondents may believe that
the positive target group also possesses their characteristics.
Results also support Sillars's (1985) contention that people use
themselves more as the basis for making judgments about others
than they actually use the others (or 'targets' of perception).

Destructive behaviors were more accurately perceived (or
understood) than were constructive behaviors. This result is con-
sistent with the literature on social cognition and personal relation-

ships that demonstrates that negative behaviors are more easily noticed and more accurately recalled (Gaelick et al., 1985). The constructive behaviors are not as vivid, or novel, and do not command as much attention. Some may even call them affectively neutral (Sillars, 1985). It is rather unfortunate that positive behaviors may go unnoticed by spouses.

Thus, we see that partners understand spouses' negative behaviors better than spouses' positive behaviors. This may also help explain the 'negative reciprocity' cycle that Gottman (1979) and others have noted in distressed couples. Gottman found that, in distressed couples, positive behaviors elicited by one spouse were not as likely to be reciprocated as negative behaviors. We would speculate, then, that positive behaviors may be less easily interpreted and more often go unnoticed in comparison to negative behaviors. Negative behaviors are more clearly understood as negative and, thus, may be more likely to evoke a negative response.

Earlier work has revealed that the relationship between perceived similarity and marital satisfaction is stronger than the relationship between actual similarity and marital satisfaction. However, the earlier studies focused on partner attitudes and role expectations and did not require partners to report on behavioral interactions during conflict. Our study adds the behavioral dimension to the literature on perceived similarity by requiring respondents to report perceptions of their interactions with each other, not just their attitudes or preferences or what they think their partners' attitudes or preferences are.

The relationship between perceived similarity and marital well-being was consistent across both types of conflict behaviors, although the causal direction is not clear, as it is not clear in other literature, and indeed literature on similarity in friendship suggests that there is a reciprocal causality between similarity and attraction. Newcomb (1961) found that some time after an initial acquaintance, friends' attraction preferences changed in favor of those with similar attitudes. Blankenship et al. (1984) demonstrated that partners' personality characteristics become more similar through interactions over time. Both studies show that some form of similarity both predates and follows the development of relationships. These findings are consistent with Berger & Kellner's (1964) postulation that, in marriage, partners' perceptual differences decrease over time. Note, however, that in our study,

actual similarity of response was not as important as perceived similarity in predicting marital well-being.

For the most part, perceptual congruence variables contributed more to the marital well-being of wives than of husbands. The individuals' perceptions of their own constructive and destructive behaviors were more important to husbands' well-being. In other words, a wife's marital well-being is more closely linked to the relationship between partners' perceptions, while a husband's marital well-being is more clearly connected to the individual spouses' self-reports. Although, not specifically parallel to our study, findings from other studies show that women's well-being is tied to relational variables such as relationship talk (Acitelli, 1992) and reciprocity of social support (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1990), and that women, compared to men, are relationship oriented in general (e.g. Gilligan, 1982; Markus & Oyserman, 1989). We would speculate that the relational and individual orientations of females and males are manifesting themselves in our data.

The finding that wives' understanding of their husbands predicted wives' marital well-being, while husbands' understanding of wives did not predict husbands' well-being is also consistent with earlier research (Sillars & Scott, 1983). Allen & Thompson (1984) point to differences in power between husbands and wives that make it more important for wives to understand husbands than for husbands to understand wives. The person in a position of greater power (the husband in this case) has no great need to understand the person in the position of lesser power (the wife). Wives' understanding of their husbands may give them a sense of control and some access to the resources of their husbands, perhaps also explaining why wives' understanding was related to wives' happiness, but not to husbands'. In addition, as traditional caretakers of relationships, women's understandings of their husbands should contribute to smooth relationship functioning.

Another intriguing result is that for destructive styles, actual similarity was negatively related to wives' marital well-being. We hypothesize that this result is related to Gottman's (1979) findings that distressed partners are more likely to reciprocate negative behaviors with each other while non-distressed couples do not get caught in the negative reciprocity cycle. Thus, when one partner is destructive while the other is not, wives are more likely to be happy than in a situation where partners are similar in destructive styles. Again, for wives, it is a matter of how the perceptions relate

to one another, whereas for husbands, it is more a matter of the degree to which each spouse reports engaging in destructive behavior.

We also found that the destructive items predicted the degree of marital well-being better than the constructive items did. Related research (e.g. Gaelick et al., 1985; Noller & Venardos, 1986) indicates that negative behaviors are more easily recalled and seem to have more impact on perceptions than positive or affectively neutral behaviors. In addition, Bradbury & Fincham (1987) show that dissatisfied spouses are more sensitive to their partners' negative behaviors than to other behaviors. Perhaps the unhappy spouses in our study noticed the presence of destructive behaviors more than happy spouses did. They may also have reciprocated such behavior, and also been affected by it enough to cause them further unhappiness. Although the causal direction is not clear, earlier research would suggest a bidirectional 'vicious cycle'.

Thus, we have evidence for the benefit of understanding a spouse's conflict style, particularly for women, and particularly with regard to destructive conflict styles. In a related study, Corsini (1956) demonstrated that the relationship between wives' understanding of husbands' personality characteristics and couples' satisfaction was due to the extent to which the husbands were typical (i.e. were like other husbands rather than unique) and the extent to which their wives saw them this way. One might suggest that our findings be interpreted in a similar fashion. However, Kenny (1991) has analyzed the data from the present study and found that a wife's marital well-being relates to her understanding of her husband's unique destructive style, not to her understanding of how typical he is as Corsini's work suggests. On the other hand, with regard to the constructive styles, marital well-being of both husbands and wives is related to understanding the extent to which one's spouse is typical, calling into question the meaning of understanding with regard to constructive styles.

An important finding in this study is that perceived similarity operates more strongly than actual similarity with regard to conflict management styles. As couples negotiate their shared reality in the first year of marriage, they evidently develop couple norms for how to fight which become part of the way they think about their lives. There are also some indications that the more they think they are congruent with regard to fighting, the better they feel about their marriage. Whether they are actually similar is

another matter. In fact, there is evidence that actual similarity with regard to destructive conflict styles is associated with marital dissatisfaction for wives. These findings are extremely important in light of the distinction that Duck (1991) makes between similarity and shared meaning. He points out that 'the importance of similarity is not its existence, but the *recogniton* of its existence by the persons concerned' (Duck, 1991: 21). Our findings suggest that perceived similarity is more important than actual similarity in the early stages of a marriage. Perhaps, over time, spouses become more similar in line with their perceptions (see White, 1985), and perhaps those perceptions of similarity and the communication of those perceptions help make it so. Future analysis of the longitudinal sample should permit clarification of this issue.

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