
Gender Differences in Relationship Awareness and Marital Satisfaction Among Young Married Couples

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Relationship awareness is defined here as thinking about interaction patterns, comparisons, or contrasts between oneself and one's partner in a relationship. This concept provides a framework for examining the effects of spouses' thinking and talking about their own relationships on marital satisfaction and contentment with life. During interviews conducted with 42 married couples, wives talked more about their relationships than their husbands did. Wives' marital satisfaction was positively associated with the husbands' degree of relationship talk during the interview. The association between husbands' relationship talk and wives' marital well-being was strongest for wives who talked very little about their relationship. Husbands' marital satisfaction was not related to either spouse's relationship talk. A similar pattern of results was found for contentment with life. Findings are discussed in light of previous research that focuses on gender differences in relationships, in the sense of self, and interpersonal communication.

The past decade has witnessed enormous growth in relationship research. A more recent offshoot of this growth is an interest in individuals' perspectives of themselves, their partners, and their relationships. This focus seems to have originated from scholars whose distinctly different conceptualizations have led them to converge on a common theme. Researchers in social cognition and interpersonal perception realize that such cognitions and perceptions are more meaningful within the context of an ongoing relationship than within the context of an experiment where the other is often a stranger (e.g., Kenny & Acitelli, 1989). Moreover, people who have been studying personal relationships are discovering that much of what is happening in relationships is occurring in the partners' minds (e.g., Duck & Sants, 1983).

The concept of relationship awareness has been introduced to provide a framework for studying the effects of thinking and talking about relationships (Acitelli, 1986,

1988; Acitelli & Duck, 1987; Burnett, 1986; Cate, Koval, & Lloyd, 1989; Martin, 1989, 1991; Snell, 1988). Relationship awareness is defined here as a person's thinking about interaction patterns, comparisons, or contrasts between himself or herself and the other partner in the relationship. Included are thoughts about the couple or relationship as an entity. This concept is not intended to designate an individual's accurate portrayal of a relationship but, rather, the process of thinking in relational terms. Furthermore, talking in relational terms is considered a behavioral manifestation of relationship awareness because "the focus of awareness, the giving of attention, which accompanies both [thinking and talking about relationships], is what is at issue" (Burnett, 1984).

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN RELATIONSHIP AWARENESS AND OTHER RELEVANT CONCEPTS

Differences between relationship awareness and other relevant constructs will clarify and demonstrate the distinctive nature of the concept.

Relational schema. In the area of social cognition, Planalp (1983, 1987) has made a conceptual shift from self-schemata (Markus, 1977) to relational schemata and has demon-

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strated that relational knowledge can influence how events are interpreted and that events can also shape relational knowledge. Whereas a relational schema is a cognitive *structure*, relationship awareness is a cognitive *process* that involves thinking about how two persons relate to each other.

Interpersonal and relational attributions. Several researchers of attributional processes have shown that attributions are related to marital satisfaction. Two kinds of attributions that come closest to the concept of relationship awareness are interpersonal attributions (Newman, 1981) and relational attributions (Fincham, 1985). Interpersonal attributions are causal explanations that focus on something about the actor in relation to the observer, as opposed to either the situation or the actor's disposition. Relational attributions are distinguished from interpersonal attributions in their focus on the relationship by making a statement about "us" or "we," as opposed to "my partner in relation to me." Relationship awareness is different from these attributions because one's awareness can include causal explanations but can also include descriptions without a search for causes.

Intentional metacommunication. When people begin to talk directly about the process of communicating or the relational context of their messages, they are engaging in what Perlmutter and Hatfield (1980) call *intentional metacommunication*. Intentional metacommunication may be an expression of relationship awareness when it involves talking about one's relationship to the other (e.g., "You look uncomfortable. You really don't like it when we hold hands in public, do you?") However, it is not always an expression of relationship awareness, especially when the focus is on the individual partner (e.g., "You look uncomfortable. You really don't like crowds, do you?"). Thus, intentional metacommunication may or may not be an expression of relationship awareness, depending on the focus of the message.

LINKING RELATIONSHIP AWARENESS TO RELATIONSHIP WELL-BEING

Just as awareness of the self and other has been associated with relationship satisfaction (Franzoi, Davis, & Young, 1985), attention to relationships has also been linked to relationship well-being. The surveys analyzed by Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981) indicate that spouses in 1976 were more aware of both the positive and negative aspects of their relationships than spouses in 1957. Such an awareness, the authors conclude, was likely to have contributed to their reports of greater marital happiness. In addition, Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, and Heron (1987) have demonstrated that when cognitive attention is focused on the *relationship* and *interaction* between

partners (as opposed to just the self or the partner), "this is generally associated with higher levels of happiness, commitment and love" (p. 488).

Furthermore, as relationship cognitions are associated with happiness, so is relational talk. In a study in which couples read stories about relationships (Acitelli, 1988), respondents rated partners as happier and more satisfied when the stories ended with partners talking about the relationship than when they talked about something other than the relationship. In a similar vein, couples who take a "relational orientation" when telling the story of their own relationship are happier and more likely to remain married than couples who do not (Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1991).

The main goal of the present study is to discover whether and how relationship awareness relates to marital well-being. Two alternative hypotheses are tested with this goal in mind. For convenience, they will be labeled the husband hypothesis and the similarity hypothesis.

Research on gender differences in relationships suggests the *husband hypothesis*: The more the husband demonstrates relationship awareness, the happier the couple is expected to be. Particular characteristics of the husband (e.g., interpersonal skills, intimacy maturity) are correlated with marital satisfaction, whereas the wife's characteristics are not (Kalin & Lloyd, 1985; Murstein & Williams, 1985; Noller & Venardos, 1986; White, Speisman, Jackson, Bartis, & Costos, 1986). Such findings support the idea that interpersonal skills and intimate relating are normative for women and are therefore expected. Because these characteristics are more unusual and unexpected in men, they may be more salient to perceptions of relationship satisfaction. In line with these earlier studies, husbands' relationship awareness should be positively associated with perceptions of marital satisfaction, and wives' relationship awareness is not expected to be related to the couples' satisfaction.

The *similarity hypothesis* refers to the degree of similarity between spouses rather than their level of relationship awareness: The more similar the partners are with regard to relationship awareness, the happier they are expected to be. Although Fletcher et al. (1987) found a positive association between a cognitive focus on the relationship and relationship happiness, they could not assess partner similarity, because they studied individuals, not couples. However, with married couples, Neimeyer (1984) tested and supported the hypothesis that "marital satisfaction should be related less to the overall *level*" of partners' cognitive complexity of personal constructs "than to their similarity in cognitive structure" (p. 259). Admittedly, cognitive complexity of personal constructs is not identical to relationship awareness, but his findings led him to recommend that marital therapy "be designed to

assist partners in formulating *shared understandings* of their relationships" (p. 262). This suggests that the degree to which partners share relationship awareness may predict marital satisfaction and stability.

The husband and similarity hypotheses predict different patterns of results. If the similarity hypothesis is correct, partners must be similar in their levels of relationship awareness to be happy. If the husband hypothesis is correct, only the husband need be high in relationship awareness, and partner similarity is not necessary. In only one configuration (both partners high in relationship awareness) do both hypotheses predict couple happiness. Therefore, the entire pattern of results would need to be examined to clarify which hypothesis is supported.

A secondary goal of this study is to extend and support Burnett's (1987) finding that men, compared with women, are less thoughtful and communicative about relationships. In a written questionnaire, Burnett asked respondents to report on their attitudes toward, frequency of, and level of comfort and ease in thinking and talking about relationships. For the most part, the gender differences that Burnett found were also found in a similar study that used an adapted version of Burnett's original questionnaire (Acitelli, 1986). The present study is intended to extend this finding by using a behavioral measure, based on relatively spontaneous occurrences of relational talk rather than a written response to a Likert-type scale.

METHOD

Subjects

Names and addresses of couples who had applied for marriage licenses in Washtenaw County, Michigan, were made available from the state's Department of Public Health. Letters were sent to 250 couples who had been married between 2 and 5 years. Because the addresses were obtained from records that were at least 2 years old, 76 couples (30.4%) never received the letters (unable to be forwarded). The sample was composed of 42 couples who responded by agreeing to participate in the study and who lived within 50 miles of Ann Arbor. The interviews were conducted in their homes, and couples were paid \$15 for their participation.

Couples married between 2 and 5 years were chosen because they are more likely than a newlywed sample to vary on marital happiness. (The peak period for divorce is between 2 and 5 years after the wedding; Spanier & Thompson, 1984.) Restricting both age of spouses and length of marriage would also make generalizations to young married couples plausible; given the size of the sample, a wide range of ages and number of years married would make generalizations impractical.

The respondents were employed in a wide range of occupations and varied greatly in level of education—a much more heterogeneous group than a sample chosen from the college population would have been. Level of education ranged from not completing high school to completing 10 years of postsecondary education. The mean level was 3.33 years of postsecondary education (3.4 years for husbands, 3.3 years for wives). Length of time married ranged from 2 years to 4 years 6 months; mean, 2 years 3 months. Ages ranged from 20 to 42, with a mean of 28 years. Husbands' mean age was 28.3, and wives' was 27.5. All but one of the 84 subjects were under 35 years of age.

Measures

Relationship awareness. Open-ended questions asked during a joint interview were decided on as an appropriate method for assessing whether or not the spouses had an orientation toward thinking in relational terms.

A short interview was conducted with each couple (spouses together) and was recorded (audiotaped). Initially, two questions were asked as icebreakers: "How did you two meet?" and "How did you first realize that you were serious about one another?" Responses to the next two questions were coded for relationship talk. In these questions the word *relationship* was purposely avoided so that the respondents' answers would not necessarily be focused on their relationship and could range from concrete material things to abstract relational qualities. In addition, when relationship talk did occur, it could be considered to be more spontaneous and natural than if it had been solicited directly. The questions were "Tell me about the nice things in your lives since you've been married" and "Tell me about the unpleasant things in your lives since you've been married."

Responses were coded for frequency of relationship statements made by each spouse and timed to estimate the amount of time spent on relational talk. Statements were coded as an expression of relationship awareness if they focused on interaction patterns, comparisons, or contrasts between partners in the marital pair. Because the interviews were intended to tap into a general perspective of the relationship, a statement regarding a single interaction or event was not coded as an expression of relationship awareness. Only those statements that referred to interaction patterns or general qualities within the relationship were deemed relationship awareness statements. For example, "We went on a vacation together and loved it" is a description of one event and would not be coded as an expression of relationship awareness. However, "We like to take trips together" describes a general pattern of interaction and notes that both spouses like something (which is a comparison of

their feelings) and would therefore be coded as a relationship awareness statement. (The assessment of a more specific, contextualized relationship awareness similar to metacommunication is discussed elsewhere. See Acitelli, 1988.)

Distinctions were also made between self-awareness and relationship awareness. If a spouse said, "I've become more confident since I've been married," this statement would not be considered a relational statement, because the focus is on the self. However, if the spouse had said, "I've become more assertive because she has been teaching me to be," this describes the speaker in relation to his partner, what she has done, and how he has responded, and it would be coded as a relationship awareness statement.

Likewise, if the speaker focuses on the partner and says, "He's a fighter," this is not a relational statement. But if she says, "He's a fighter, and I fight back," this describes an interaction pattern and would be considered a relational statement. More distinctions and examples of relationship awareness and non-relationship awareness statements can be seen in the *Relationship Awareness Coding Manual* (Acitelli, 1986).

All 42 interviews were coded by the author, and scores were obtained for each of the 84 spouses for frequency of and time spent on relationship talk and nonrelationship talk. Ten of the interviews were coded independently by an individual who was trained to use the coding system. Rank-order correlation coefficients (Kendall's coefficient of concordance) between the two coders for relationship statements (.83) and relationship talk time (.93) were high enough to consider the system reliable ($n = 20$). Neither coder was aware of the spouses' reported degree of marital satisfaction at the time of coding. The more accurate measure of the number of seconds spent talking about the relationship (rather than the number of relational statements) will be used as the basis for assessing relationship awareness because it was more difficult to reliably parse utterances into statements. It was also decided that the *proportion* of total speaking time spent on relational talk would be a better assessment of the inclination to think in relational terms. In this way, scores would not favor respondents who tended to be talkative in general. Therefore, the time (in seconds) that each speaker spent talking about his or her relationship was divided by the speaker's total time spent talking.

Marital well-being. Different measures of marital well-being were administered to both spouses before and after the interview in order to counteract the influence that the interview might have had on the mood of the spouses. All these measures were contained in written

questionnaires given to husbands and wives separately to ensure privacy. Spouses were guaranteed anonymity and were given the assurance that their partners would not see their responses. These measures of marital well-being have been used successfully and reliably in a number of studies (e.g., Crohan & Veroff, 1989; Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, in press; Utne, Hatfield, Traupmann, & Greenberger, 1984).

As in the Crohan and Veroff (1989) and the Utne et al. (1984) studies, measures used to assess marital *contentment* were short and direct. Before the interview, respondents were asked, "How satisfied are you with your marriage in general?" and "How happy are you with your marriage in general?" Possible answers ranged from 1 *very unsatisfied (unhappy)*, to 5, *completely satisfied (happy)*. (Utne et al. adapted these two measures from the Locke-Wallace [1959] Marital Adjustment Test.)

The following measures were administered after the interview.

Austin's (Austin & Walster [Hatfield], 1974) measure of contentment (or equity) asks: "When you think about your marriage—what you put into it and what you get out of it—and what your partner puts into it and what s(he) gets out of it—how does that make you feel?" Spouses indicate how "content" and how "happy" they feel. Possible answers range from 1, *not at all*, to 4, *very much*. The content and happy scores were summed to form a measure of *equity*.

To measure marital *stability*, Utne et al. (1984) asked couples three questions directly after the equity questions: "How certain are you that the two of you will be together five years from now?" Possible answers range from 1, *very uncertain*, to 5, *completely certain*. "Since marriage, how often have you considered moving out?" Answers range from 1 to 4 (*often to never*). "How stable do you feel your marriage is?" Answers range from 1 to 5 (*extremely unstable to extremely stable*). Again, responses were summed to form a total index.

In preliminary analyses on these separate indexes of marital well-being, no significant differences (changes) were detected between measures administered before and those administered after the interview. These indexes were significantly correlated (between .43 and .50) at the .01 level, and each was similarly related to relationship talk. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, it was decided to construct a composite measure of general marital well-being. Because the scales (i.e., 1 through 4 and 1 through 5) on the items were not identical, the scores for each of the marital well-being items were standardized. These standard scores were then summed and averaged in order to obtain a general marital well-being score for each spouse.

General life satisfaction. Before the interview, respondents were also asked, "How satisfied are you with your life?" and "How happy are you with your life?" The range of responses was identical to that of the contentment with marriage measure (above). As in the Utne et al. study, a total index was constructed by summing the respondents' scores on these two items.

RESULTS

Frequency of Relationship Talk: Gender Differences

During the interview, each spouse talked for an average of 4 min 10s ($M = 250$ s, $SD = 166$ s). On the average, spouses spent 42% ($SD = 19\%$) of their time during the interview talking about general relationship patterns. Similarly, 41% ($SD = 16\%$) of all statements were statements about the relationship. Of the time spouses spent talking about their relationship, 43% was in response to the question about the "nice things" in their lives and 57% was in response to the question about the "unpleasant things" in their lives.

A significant difference was found between males ($M = .38$, $SD = .17$) and females ($M = .46$, $SD = .20$) in the proportion of time spent talking about the relationship, $t(41) = 3.02$, $p < .004$. Consistent with expectations, when wives talked, they were more likely to be talking about their marital relationship than husbands were. There was no significant gender difference in the amount of time spent talking in general, and so this difference could not be said to be the result of one sex talking more or less than the other. (Husbands' mean time spent talking was, in fact, greater than wives'.)

Relating Marital Well-Being to Relationship Awareness

To test the hypotheses relating marital well-being to relationship awareness, two multiple regression equations were formulated. Proportion of relationship talk time to total talk time during the interview for each spouse was used as the measure of relationship awareness. Each hypothesis was tested separately for two dependent variables, marital well-being and contentment with life. First, the husband hypothesis was tested with the following equation: Marital well-being (MWB) = husband's relationship talk (HRT) + wife's relationship talk (WRT). This equation would allow for comparisons between the unique contribution made by the husband's relational talk and the unique contribution made by the wife's relational talk. For the husband hypothesis to be confirmed, HRT should be a significant predictor of MWB, and WRT should be nonsignificant. The significance of the entire model is not at issue in this case.

Next, the similarity hypothesis was tested with this equation: $MWB = HRT + WRT + |HRT - WRT|$. This

TABLE 1: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Wives' Marital Well-Being From Husbands' and Wives' Relationship Talk

Predictor	b	Beta	t
Husband relationship talk (HRT)	1.84	.38	2.04*
Wife relationship talk (WRT)	-.76	-.18	-.99

NOTE: $R = .31$, $R^2 = .10$, $F(2, 39) = 2.11$.

* $p < .05$.

equation takes into account the contribution made by the similarity between the spouses by examining the converse—absolute discrepancy. So the similarity hypothesis would predict a negative relationship between the discrepancy term and marital well-being.

When the equations were tested on the marital well-being of husbands and wives separately, the husband hypothesis was supported for wives only. Neither hypothesis was confirmed when the couple's average level of marital contentment/stability ($[H + W]/2$) was entered into the equation. Table 1 summarizes the results of the multiple regression analyses designed to test the husband hypothesis on wives' marital well-being.

Table 1 shows that when both husbands' and wives' relational talk is taken into account, it is husbands' relational talk only that is related to wives' marital well-being. Wives' relational talk was not significantly related to their own marital well-being. The b value (or regression coefficient) for HRT indicates that for every unit increase in relationship talk, wives' marital well-being is increased by 1.84 (although the other components of the equation also contribute to the total well-being score). The beta is a standardized regression coefficient, not a correlation coefficient. But its meaning roughly corresponds to a partial correlation in that the variance that overlaps with the other components of the equation is controlled.

In the second equation, the absolute discrepancy variable $|HRT - WRT|$ was added to the first equation in order to test the similarity hypothesis. But given the results of the first analysis, this hypothesis was not expected to be confirmed. Therefore, a negative relationship between the discrepancy term and wives' marital well-being was no longer expected. Instead, the opposite effect was discovered. Table 2 shows that the discrepancy term was positively related to wives' MWB; WRT was negatively related; and HRT was still a strong positive predictor. Thus the main effect of HRT is maintained, but with some modification.

To interpret the results graphically, the numerical values for wives' marital well-being were calculated for the varying configurations of husbands' and wives' rela-

TABLE 2: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Wives' Marital Well-Being From the Absolute Discrepancy Between Husbands' and Wives' Relationship Talk

Predictor	b	Beta	t
Husband relationship talk (HRT)	3.20	.66	3.05**
Wife relationship talk (WRT)	-2.05	-.49	-2.20*
HRT - WRT	2.95	.43	2.24*

NOTE: $R = .45$, $R^2 = .20$, $F(3, 38) = 3.22^*$.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .005$.

relationship talk. Three values of HRT and WRT were chosen to represent low, average, and high proportions of relationship talk. For each configuration of husbands' and wives' talk (e.g., husband-high RT and wife-low RT; or husband-low with wife-low) appropriate b weights were multiplied by the values (low = .20, average = .40, and high = .60) of the independent variables (HRT, WRT) plugged into the formulas. This calculation was done for the nine possible configurations of wives' with husbands' relationship talk (see Figure 1).

Here we see that the husband hypothesis is still supported while the similarity hypothesis is not. Figure 1 illustrates that the positive association between wives' marital well-being and husbands' relationship talk is even stronger when wives' relationship talk is low. That is, the less the wife talked about the relationship during the interview, the more her reports of marital well-being were positively related to how much the husband talked about the relationship during the interview.

If the wife was low in relationship talk, her happiness was positively related to the amount of relationship talk her husband did. If the wife was high in relationship talk, her husband's degree of relationship talk made less difference in her happiness with marriage, although the relation was still positive. These findings were consistent with wives' general life satisfaction as well. None of the husbands' well-being measures was found to be related to spouses' relationship talk.

Post hoc analyses were conducted to help explain the significance of the discrepancy term. A plausible explanation is that husbands who talked a lot about the relationship were saying nice things about the relationship. This hypothesis was tested by performing separate analyses focusing on responses to the question about the "nice things" in their lives since the couples had been married. The correlation between the proportion of relationship statements the husband made in response to the "nice" question and the total number of overall relationship statements made by the husband was examined. The same correlation was performed for relational talk time. These analyses would reveal whether the husbands

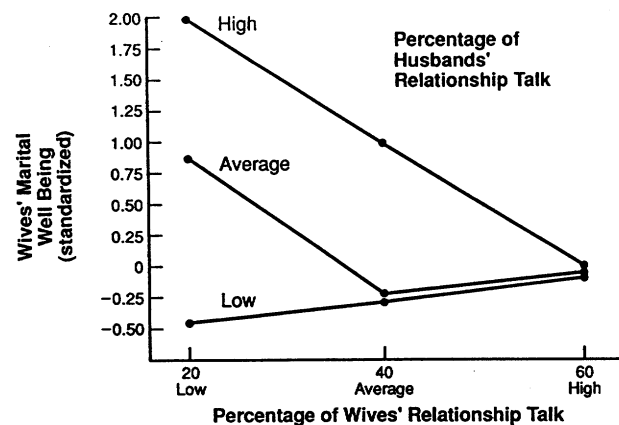


Figure 1 Wives' marital well-being as a function of husbands' and wives' relationship talk.

who were high in relationship talk in general were talking more about positive aspects of the relationship. If this were so, a significant positive correlation would be expected. Neither of the correlations approached significance.

Another possibility is that, in response to the "nice" question, the husbands who talked a lot about the relationship were paired with wives who did not talk much about the relationship. In other words, a negative correlation between "nice" HRT and "nice" WRT would be expected. To explore this possibility, correlations were examined within the context of the "nice" question only. The correlation between the husbands' and wives' numbers of relational statements was .46 ($p < .01$). The correlation between their proportions of time spent talking about their relationship was .37 ($p < .05$). Therefore, this explanation was not supported.

In sum, the husband hypothesis received support from the results for wives. The association between husbands' relationship talk and wives' marital well-being was strongest for wives who talked very little about their relationship. For wives who talked a great deal about their relationship, husbands' relationship talk was positively, but moderately, related to wives' marital well-being. The similarity hypothesis was not supported. Neither hypothesis was supported by the husbands' data.

DISCUSSION

Wives talked more about their marital relationships than husbands did. Burnett (1984, 1987) had found that men, compared with women, are less interested in and thoughtful and communicative about relationships. If relationship maintenance is considered part of a wife's role, then it makes sense that she would attend more to the marital relationship than her husband.

Some evidence was found for the husband hypothesis: The degree to which husbands talked about their relationship was positively associated with wives' marital well-being. No effects were found for wives' talk. This finding is consistent with earlier studies showing that husbands' interpersonal skills and intimacy maturity are positively related to marital well-being whereas such skills in wives are not (Kalin & Lloyd, 1985; Murstein & Williams, 1985; Noller & Venardos, 1986; White et al., 1986). Talking about the relationship may be regarded as commonplace for wives but more unusual for husbands. A husband's talking about the relationship may thus be more salient to a wife's assessment of the relationship than her talking would be to his.

Perhaps relationship talk is associated with a woman's feelings about her marriage and her life more than a man's because her sense of self may be more closely linked to her relationships. Several scholars have demonstrated that the female's identity or sense of self is more relationally oriented than that of a male (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Jordan & Surrey, 1986; Markus & Cross, 1990; Miller, 1976, 1984). Therefore, the focus of attention on the marital relationship might be construed by a wife, in part, as attention paid to herself.

Findings also indicated that the husband hypothesis was especially strong when wives did not talk a lot about the relationship. This pattern would indicate that the husband, rather than the wife, is attending more to the relationship and suggests that wives are happiest when the conventional roles for men and women are reversed. This role reversal may relieve the wife of taking on the bulk of the relationship "work" (Fishman, 1978) and foster her satisfaction with the relationship. Although the role reversal describes a portion of the findings, it does not explain why the husband hypothesis is weaker for wives who were high in relationship talk.

If the parallel between the relationship and the self can be extended further, a more complete explanation of the results could be based on Linville's work (1985). Linville demonstrated that the more complex a person's representation of the self, the less extreme will be the person's swings in affect and evaluations of the self. If we assume that persons with high relationship awareness have a more complex representation of their relationship, then the spouse with higher relationship awareness may be less extreme in his or her feelings about and evaluations of the relationship.

Hence, a wife who is low in relationship awareness may be more extreme in her feelings about her marriage than a wife who is high in relationship awareness. And, without an articulated basis for judgment, she is also likely to be more dependent on her husband's input into shaping her evaluation of the relationship. In a similar

vein, the wife who is high in relationship awareness is less extreme in her feelings about her marriage and also less dependent on her husband's relationship awareness for marital satisfaction. Furthermore, if she sees the relationship as more complex than the wife who is low in awareness, her feelings about her marriage may be more moderate in the sense that she views the marriage as neither all good nor all bad but somewhere in between.

Of course, the possibility that other factors correlate with both relationship awareness and marital well-being must be considered. These factors, then, could be the forces behind the significant relationships found in this study. For example, literature on marital satisfaction and conflict resolution (e.g., Bernal & Baker, 1979; Kalin & Lloyd, 1985) suggests that interpersonal skills, perspective taking, and even the complexity of relational thinking (Martin, 1990) are associated with more constructive and cooperative styles of resolving conflict. Spouses who are high in relationship awareness may have the skill to resolve conflicts smoothly and contribute to a happy marriage. As men are traditionally accorded more status than women in our society, husbands' cooperative style of resolving conflict may have a greater impact on marital satisfaction than that of wives.

Some methodological considerations and implications for future research deserve mention. Talking about the relationship in response to general, open-ended questions is more spontaneous and natural than a response to a more direct question that simply asks couples how much they think about their relationships. For this reason, coding such talk was considered a better assessment of relationship awareness than tabulation of answers to more direct questions. A respondent who claims to think about relationships may actually be thinking about something else. As Cate, Koval, and Lloyd (1989) have shown, people quite often report thinking about the individual partner when asked to describe what they think about when thinking about relationships. However, future work on relationship awareness could be expanded by using both direct and indirect measures.

The spouses in the marital pair were interviewed together, not separately. Consequently, the interview data for each spouse are not independent. This could be seen as a limitation if the aim were to assess relationship awareness for each individual apart from his or her spouse. However, observing the spouses together gives the investigator the advantage of seeing how their orientation toward their relationship is expressed (or not expressed) in each other's presence. As the purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of relationship awareness on relationship satisfaction, it was deemed more valuable to assess such an awareness within the context of the relationship. Moreover, the respondents

were married couples talking about their lives together, rather than separate individuals reporting on attitudes and feelings about their relationships. Too often, relationship research is more about individuals' attitudes and feelings than about relationships.

Yet, it would be valuable for future work to examine how relationship awareness is expressed independently of the partner. Maybe spouses who are less satisfied with their marriages feel they have more to hide from each other and would be more willing to talk about the relationship without their partners present. A testable hypothesis is that the discrepancy between talking about the relationship with and without the partner present predicts marital satisfaction.

The concept of relationship awareness is useful for stimulating other research questions. For example, how important is relationship awareness in other types of relationships? Friends may be less inclined than spouses to think and talk about their relationships (Wiseman, 1990), and the effects of such thinking and talking on friends may differ from the effects on spouses. Furthermore, an imbalance in relationship awareness is expected to be great for parents and young children (parents having more awareness than the child), and the imbalance is expected to decrease as the child matures. Developmental studies could test the hypothesis that relationship awareness progressed in stages such that private self-consciousness and perspective taking (Franzoi et al., 1985) are necessary precursors. Testing such questions could be aided by the use of a measure that assesses level of relationship awareness, such as Martin's Relational Cognition Complexity Instrument (Martin, 1991).

The concept has clinical implications as well. While explicitly striving for smoother conflict resolution, more effective communication skills, and reciprocal self-disclosure, many marital therapists often implicitly seek to teach couples to be more aware of their relationships (Acitelli & Duck, 1987). Although the present study suggests that wives may gain the most when their husbands learn such lessons, other research has indicated that the effects of thinking and talking about relationships can be moderated by situational variables (Acitelli, 1988; Cate et al., 1989; Martin, 1990). Although Cate et al. (1989) have found a positive correlation between relational thinking and conflict among premarital couples, Martin (1990) has demonstrated that the salience of the topic discussed moderates the effects of relationship thinking. Moreover, Acitelli (1988) has shown that the benefits of relationship talk depend on whether the situation is pleasant or unpleasant. More work is being planned that aims to delineate the situational contexts and underlying factors that determine the consequences

of relationship awareness for individual and relationship well-being.

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