

# Optimistic Expectations in Early Marriage: A Resource or Vulnerability for Adaptive Relationship Functioning?

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Do optimistic expectations facilitate or hinder adaptive responses to relationship challenges? Traditionally, optimism has been characterized as a resource that encourages positive coping efforts within relationships. Yet, some work suggests optimism can be a liability, as expecting the best may prevent individuals from taking proactive steps when confronted with difficulties. To reconcile these perspectives, the current article argues that greater attention must be given to the way in which optimistic expectancies are conceptualized. Whereas generalized dispositional optimism may predict constructive responses to relationship difficulties, more focused relationship-specific forms of optimism may predict poor coping responses. A multi-method, longitudinal study of newly married couples confirmed that spouses higher in dispositional optimism (a) reported engaging in more positive problem-solving behaviors on days in which they experienced greater relationship conflict, (b) were observed to display more constructive problem-solving behaviors when discussing important marital issues with their partner in the lab, and (c) experienced fewer declines in marital well-being over the 1st year of marriage. Conversely, spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism (a) reported engaging in fewer constructive problem-solving behaviors on high conflict days, (b) were observed to exhibit worse problem-solving behaviors in the lab—particularly when discussing marital issues of greater importance—and (c) experienced steeper declines in marital well-being over time. All findings held controlling for self-esteem and neuroticism. Together, results suggest that whereas global forms of optimism may represent a relationship asset, specific forms of optimism can place couples at risk for marital deterioration.

**Keywords:** optimism, positive expectations, conflict resolution, relationship satisfaction, marital quality

Many people agree that maintaining a satisfying marriage is one of the most important goals in life (Conger & Conger, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 2005). Unfortunately, the path to marital success is paved with numerous obstacles, and achieving this goal requires that spouses persist in their pro-relationship efforts despite inevitable periods of conflict and disenchantment (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Drawing from decades of research linking optimism (i.e., a tendency to expect favorable future outcomes) to more active and persistent goal pursuits (see Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010, for review), recently scholars have argued that optimistic expectancies for the future may serve as a motivating force that helps sustain adaptive

relationship maintenance efforts, even in the face of challenges (Assad, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007; Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006). In other words, an optimistic outlook should exert a protective influence on the marriage by suppressing any doubts about the relationship and rousing greater efforts to overcome relationship difficulties. On the contrary, if expectancies are sufficiently unfavorable, spouses may reduce their coping efforts or even disengage from the relationship entirely (Gordon & Baucom, 2009; Murray & Holmes, 1997).

In fact, research has shown that when discussing important relationship issues with a partner, optimists report engaging more constructively during the conflict, which both leads them to feel more satisfied with the resolution of the issue as well as increases the likelihood of relationship survival (Srivastava et al., 2006). Similarly, a 2-year study of couples revealed that optimists experienced fewer declines in satisfaction over time than did pessimists. This link between optimism and future satisfaction was mediated by intimates' self-reported cooperative problem-solving skills (Assad et al., 2007). In each of these cases, then, optimism was linked with more successful approaches to relationship conflict, resulting in greater relationship well-being. As a result, many researchers contend that optimistic expectancies for the future are an invaluable, and perhaps even necessary, resource for healthy relationship functioning.

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Yet, this conclusion overlooks the possibility that not all optimistic expectations may operate in similar ways. Within the broader optimism literature, some researchers have cautioned that rather than encouraging adaptive coping efforts, expecting the best can sometimes create a false sense of security that prevents individuals from taking proactive steps when confronted with difficulties (Radcliffe & Klein, 2002; Weinstein, 1989). Indeed, some studies indicate that highly optimistic expectancies can beget poor outcomes by creating a context in which problems are left unresolved, and thus grow more severe over time (Dillard, Midboe, & Klein, 2009). From this perspective, optimism has the potential to serve as a liability that interferes with constructive relationship maintenance efforts and renders the marriage prone to declines.

As the benefits of optimism have been called into question, the current article draws from theories of behavioral regulation (Scheier & Carver, 1985) to suggest that some types of optimistic expectations may be more likely to promote positive marital outcomes than others. According to this theoretical approach, highly optimistic expectations for the future may be adaptive only to the extent that individuals' experiences generally validate those expectations. On the one hand, the experience of expectancy confirmation should serve to justify optimistic beliefs and instill a greater confidence that one's efforts to achieve desired outcomes will be successful. This increased confidence in turn may propel spouses to approach future challenges with more determined and adaptive coping strategies, thereby increasing the likelihood of further positive outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1993). In this way, the confirmation of optimistic expectations can initiate a positive cycle that ultimately enhances marital quality. On the other hand, unmet expectations not only highlight the gap between expectations and reality, but also may introduce doubts as to whether desired goals are attainable. In other words, unmet expectations may thwart spouses' sense of prediction and control within the marriage; when relationship experiences continually fall short of positive expectations, spouses may be left feeling disappointed and uncertain regarding the fate of the relationship (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Berscheid, 1983). Unfortunately, when relational uncertainty increases, spouses frequently report lowered satisfaction and reduced commitment to maintaining the relationship (Knobloch, 2008).

If expectancy confirmation is key to understanding optimism effects, under what conditions are spouses' optimistic expectations most likely to be met? Though this question lies at the heart of the optimism debate, it is a question that has rarely been explored within the close relationships literature. One exception is a recent study arguing that expectancy confirmation may be facilitated when spouses possess the necessary skills and resources for attaining their relationship goals. Specifically, this study revealed that when relationships were characterized by ineffective communication skills and maladaptive attributional tendencies, two features which presumably should increase the likelihood that positive expectancies will be violated, spouses who were highly optimistic about their futures fared worse in the marriage over time than did spouses holding more modest expectations. Conversely, when couples exhibited more positive relationship skills, highly optimistic expectancies predicted greater marital quality (McNulty & Karney, 2004). However, the current article aims to build on this individual differences approach by developing a broader theoretical framework that identifies the *properties of the optimistic belief*

*itself* that may influence the likelihood of confirmation. Namely, positive expectancies can vary meaningfully in their level of generality, ranging from very global and diffuse beliefs that future successes are likely to highly specific positive expectancies regarding particular relationship events. Consistent with a burgeoning literature suggesting that global and specific relationship perceptions may operate quite differently (Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005), it is proposed that the effects of optimistic expectations on relationship well-being may vary according to the specificity of the expectation in question. Whereas maintaining globally optimistic views of the future may promote healthier relationships, holding highly positive expectations for specific relationship events could be a harbinger for relationship decline.

### Differentiating Between General and Specific Optimistic Expectations

Researchers within the broader optimism tradition have long argued for the importance of recognizing meaningful differences in the level of specificity of expectancy judgments (Armor & Taylor, 1998; Klein & Zajac, 2009; Scheier & Carver, 1992). At their most global level, optimistic expectations tap a general confidence that one will experience good outcomes and encounter few problems in life (e.g., "Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad," or "I'm always optimistic about my future"; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). Often referred to as dispositional optimism, these generalized expectancies capture a belief about the future that is relatively stable across time and context (Carver et al., 2010). On the other end of the spectrum, domain-specific or situational optimism reflects a confidence that one will experience good outcomes and encounter few problems in a particular life domain (Armor & Taylor, 1998; Radcliffe & Klein, 2002). For instance, one of the most commonly studied forms of situational optimism is health-specific optimism, which captures a belief that one is at low risk for experiencing poor health outcomes (e.g., "I am unlikely to get sick because my body is good at fighting off infections," or "If I had a serious illness, my treatment would be successful"; Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996). For the purposes of this study, relationship-specific optimism denotes an expectation that one is at low risk for experiencing aversive relationship events (e.g., "I expect my partner and I will always communicate well," or "I expect my partner and I will always be affectionate with one another"). Notably, general and domain-specific forms of optimism have been shown to predict divergent outcomes in an array of life domains. For instance, whereas global forms of optimism predict enhanced health promotion in the face of health threats, situational optimism often is associated with poor health management (Davidson & Prkachin, 1997; Klein & Steers-Wentzell, 2007; Radcliffe & Klein, 2002). Yet, although a growing literature has documented such dissimilarities, this literature has remained relatively silent regarding why different kinds of optimism can lead to strikingly different outcomes.

Inspired by theories of behavioral regulation, a premise of the current article is that this distinction between general and specific forms of optimism has two important implications for understanding when positive expectancies are likely to be confirmed. First, the specificity of the expectation should affect spouses' *ability* to affirm that belief. As expectancies become increasingly global, they also become relatively more abstract in nature and encompass

a wider range of distinct experiences (e.g., Hampson, John, & Goldberg, 1986). Accordingly, generalized expectancies allow for multiple avenues of belief confirmation as one has greater latitude to create idiosyncratic definitions of success (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). In other words, it should be rather easy for spouses to uphold their optimistic global beliefs for the future, even when confronted with potentially threatening information, due to the relative lack of objective standards for evaluating those beliefs. Perhaps for this reason, individuals higher in global forms of optimism often report lower levels of distress and depression following negative life events. For instance, dispositional optimists have been shown to exhibit better emotional adjustment following a variety of health stressors, such as cancer, coronary artery bypass surgery, and infertility, as well as in the face of achievement related challenges, such as adjusting to the first semester of college (see Carver et al., 2010, for review).

Conversely, because situational expectancies are tied to particular events, they are more concrete than global expectancies, and therefore are associated with a smaller range of criteria for evaluating success (e.g., Hampson et al., 1986). Consequently, as expectations become more specific, the gap between expectancies and experiences becomes more easily verifiable, and those expectancies can be more readily refuted. For example, spouses may find it difficult to support the belief that they will always have an affectionate relationship with their partner, particularly if the couple experiences an increase in stressors and conflicts that interfere with intimacy expressions. In this way, highly optimistic specific expectations may serve as a potentially unrealistic comparison standard by which spouses evaluate their marriage; accordingly, the violation of those expectations may elicit emotional distress (e.g., Afifi & Metts, 1998; Berscheid, 1983). In line with this reasoning, several studies outside of the close relationships domain confirm that when optimistic expectations are more concrete and potentially verifiable, the disappointment and negative affect experienced after difficult events is amplified (Armor & Taylor, 1998; McGraw, Mellers, & Ritov, 2004).

Second, the specificity of the expectation also may influence spouses' *motivation* to engage in the efforts necessary for attaining desired relationship outcomes. A long-standing and well-established literature indicates that global and specific forms of optimism differentially impact efforts to reach important goals (Davidson & Prkachin, 1997; Radcliffe & Klein, 2002; Klein & Zajac, 2009). For instance, because individuals higher in general, dispositional forms of optimism experience less distress when faced with adverse events, these individuals tend to maintain a greater confidence that these events can be surmounted (Carver et al., 2010). This confidence provides dispositional optimists with the motivation to persist in their goal pursuits even in the face of obstacles. As a result, individuals higher in dispositional optimism have been shown to respond to stressors with constructive coping strategies designed to reduce or manage the threat at hand. For example, dispositional optimism has been linked to the use of a variety of approach-focused problem-solving behaviors, such as planning behaviors and positive reframing/reinterpretation (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006).

Instead of providing the conviction that success is attainable, however, prior research indicates that situational optimism often creates a false sense of security that transforms into doubt and emotional distress once adverse events are encountered (Klein &

Steers-Wentzell, 2007). Consequently, situational optimism often dampens the motivation for enacting constructive efforts to overcome challenges, further reducing the likelihood that those optimistic expectations will be met (Davidson & Prkachin, 1997; Radcliffe & Klein, 2002). For instance, individuals higher in health-specific optimism generally respond to threatening situations with defensive or avoidant coping behaviors, such as discontinuing treatment for important health issues (Klein & Steers-Wentzell, 2007). Extrapolating such findings to the close relationships domain suggests that when negative relationship events call highly optimistic relationship-specific expectations into question, the doubt and uncertainty that ensues may encourage poor responses to those threats. In fact, relational uncertainty often leads spouses to behave in more critical, self-protective ways that serve to undermine relationship closeness, such as lashing out or distancing the self from the partner (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006).

Overall, then, dispositional and situational optimism may inspire different kinds of responses to relationship challenges and predict different marital outcomes. Nevertheless, prior research linking optimism to relationship well-being has failed to consider how the specificity of the expectation may influence relationship coping efforts. Thus, the first goal of the study was to examine the associations between each form of optimism and marital well-being within a single sample of newly-married couples. It was expected that spouses higher in dispositional optimism would exhibit more constructive coping responses when faced with relationship conflicts that may threaten a positive view of the marriage, as well as report fewer declines in marital well-being over the first year of marriage. Conversely, spouses high in situational, relationship-specific optimism (e.g., feeling confident that one is likely to experience positive relationship events) should disengage from threats to the relationship by displaying less productive responses to those marital challenges. Accordingly, relationship-specific optimism was expected to predict greater declines in marital well-being over time.

### Moderating Role of Problem Importance

Another limitation of the existing literature is a failure to consider the nature of the challenges that spouses face in the marriage. Generally speaking, investing energy into constructive coping strategies should prove beneficial for managing relationship stress and enhancing marital well-being. Yet, time and effort constraints demand that as individuals juggle multiple challenges, they learn to distinguish between issues that are worthy of persistent, effortful coping attempts and those that are not (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Investing energy into marital issues that are of less importance may simply squander coping resources that could be put to better use addressing more pressing problems (e.g., Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schultz, 2003). Thus, the most adaptive coping strategy may be a flexible one in which resources are directed toward more important issues.

Some evidence suggests that global, dispositional optimists will tailor their coping responses to the demands of the particular stressor (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). For instance, these individuals have been shown to disengage from an unsolvable puzzle task faster than less optimistic individuals (Aspinwall & Richter, 1999). Furthermore, a series of studies examining dispositional optimism

and goal engagement demonstrated that high optimists are more likely than low optimists to actively pursue goals that are deemed of higher value, while disengaging from goals that are a low priority. In fact, when presented with low importance goals, the behaviors of high and low optimists tended not to differ (Geers, Wellman, & Lassiter, 2009). Situational optimism, however, may be unlikely to lead to such adaptively balanced effort expenditures. Although no empirical work has examined this question, the fact that individuals high in this type of optimism often experience greater distress when their expectancies are challenged (Klein & Steers-Wentzell, 2007) suggests that the coping responses of situational optimists may become especially maladaptive for more threatening situations; that is, when confronted with issues of greater importance.

Drawing from these initial findings, the second goal of the study was to examine the potential moderating role of problem importance for the links between optimistic expectations and relationship functioning. It was expected that spouses higher in dispositional optimism would allocate their coping resources wisely, such that these individuals would be more likely to engage in constructive problem-solving efforts compared to low optimists, particularly when the stressor at hand was of greater importance. Alternatively, spouses higher in situational, relationship-specific optimism were expected to behave in less constructive ways, especially when coping with more pressing issues.

### Overview of the Current Study

The current study aimed to extend prior work by examining whether global and specific forms of optimism may be differentially associated with marital processes and outcomes. Notably, the current perspective dovetails nicely with accumulating evidence in the marital literature indicating that positively biased views may confer greater benefits on the marriage when those views are held at the global rather than the specific level. Recent work examining the kinds of perceptions that make for satisfying relationships revealed that when evaluating a relationship partner, happily married spouses are positively biased in their assessments of their partners' overall global worth, while simultaneously demonstrating an accurate knowledge of their partners' specific positive and negative attributes (Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005). In fact, viewing a partner with both global adoration and specific accuracy was associated with better support provision in the relationship and a lower likelihood of divorce during the early years of marriage (Neff & Karney, 2005). Although this prior work offers a new perspective on the benefits of positive illusions within relationships, this research is nonetheless limited in that only one aspect of the traditional positive illusions trilogy was examined (i.e., idealized images of the partner). Consequently, the current article provides an important test of the generalizability of the global versus specific distinction by examining a new component of spouses' positive illusions (e.g., optimistic expectations for the future) as well as a new potential mechanism for the effects (e.g., coping responses to relationship conflict). In this way, the current study seeks to further illuminate the potential boundary conditions surrounding the adaptiveness of positively biased views for relationship outcomes.

Newlywed couples participating in a broader study of marital development provided information concerning their dispositional

optimism, relationship-specific optimism, responses to relationship conflict, and marital quality. The use of a sample of newlyweds provided several advantages. First, a newlywed sample allows for the opportunity to examine links between optimistic expectations and coping responses to relationship challenges in spouses who are not yet experiencing marital distress. Understanding the factors associated with maladaptive relationship functioning in this generally happy sample could be useful for identifying couples who may be at risk for deterioration. Second, newlywed couples are an appropriate sample for studying adaptations to conflict as marital instability tends to be at its highest during the early years of marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001).

Analyses of these data addressed three specific questions. First, do global and specific optimistic expectations differentially predict spouses' problem-solving responses to naturally-occurring, daily relationship conflict? At the beginning of the marriage, couples completed a 12-day daily diary in which they were asked to report on the relationship conflicts experienced that day as well as the problem-solving behaviors they enacted in response to those conflicts. It was predicted that on days when spouses experienced more conflict and negativity within the relationship, those higher in global, dispositional optimism would respond by engaging in more constructive problem-solving behaviors. However, spouses higher in situational, relationship-specific optimism were expected to react to such disconfirming, negative events with less adaptive responses. All results were anticipated to hold when controlling for self-esteem and neuroticism, two factors often associated with both optimism (Scheier et al., 1994) and relationship quality (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2006).

Second, does the importance of the conflict issue moderate the association between optimistic expectations and problem-solving responses to relationship conflicts? To examine this idea, couples were asked to engage in videotaped discussions regarding sources of tension in the marriage. This methodology provides a conceptual replication of the daily diary task as it allows us to examine the links between each form of optimism and coping responses to a lab-induced conflict discussion. Moreover, the utilization of observed problem-solving behaviors provides an important extension of prior work in the area, which generally has examined the links between optimism and self-reported relationship coping (e.g., Assad et al., 2007; Srivastava et al., 2006). It was predicted that spouses higher in global, dispositional optimism would be rated by independent observers as exhibiting more constructive problem-solving behaviors compared to spouses lower in global optimism, particularly when discussing marital issues that were of greater importance. On the contrary, the opposite interaction was predicted for spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism. These spouses were expected to display fewer constructive problem-solving behaviors during the conflict task, especially when discussing issues of greater versus lesser importance.

Third, do global and specific optimistic expectations differentially predict changes in marital well-being over time? Specifically, we examined whether optimism may be linked to changes in the severity of marital problems, as well as changes in overall marital satisfaction, during the first year of marriage. If global, dispositional optimism is associated with more adaptive responses to relationship conflict, this form of optimism should help prevent relationship issues from growing worse over time. Consequently, it was predicted that spouses higher in global, dispositional optimism



would exhibit fewer increases in marital problems and more stable (i.e., less decline in) marital satisfaction as the marriage progressed. Conversely, the poorer coping responses of spouses reporting greater levels of relationship-specific optimism are likely to create an environment where marital issues are allowed to fester. These spouses, then, were expected to exhibit greater increases in the severity of their marital problems and steeper declines in overall satisfaction during the 1-year period.

## Method

### Participants

Couples were recruited for this study using two methods. First, advertisements were placed in community newspapers and bridal shops. Second, letters were sent to couples who had applied for marriage licenses in the surrounding community. Couples responding to either method of solicitation were screened in a telephone interview to determine whether they met the following criteria: (a) this was the first marriage for each partner, and (b) the couple had been married less than 6 months. The final sample consisted of 61 couples.

On average, husbands were 25.6 ( $SD = 3.8$ ) years of age and had completed 15.8 ( $SD = 2.4$ ) years of education. Seventy-four percent of husbands were employed full time, and 20% were full time students. Wives averaged 23.5 ( $SD = 4.3$ ) years of age and had completed 15.9 ( $SD = 2.3$ ) years of education. Sixty-one percent of wives were employed full time, and 23% were full time students. Sixty-four percent of the sample was Christian, and approximately 85% of spouses were White. The median income of couples was between \$25,000 and \$35,000 per year.

### Procedure

Within the first 6 months of marriage, couples were scheduled to attend a laboratory session. Prior to this session, couples were mailed a packet of questionnaires containing self-report measures of optimism (global, dispositional and situational, relationship-specific), self-esteem, neuroticism, marital problems and marital satisfaction, as well as a letter instructing them to complete all questionnaires independently of one another. Couples were asked to bring these questionnaires to the lab session. During this session, couples engaged in two videotaped 10-min discussions designed to assess behavior when discussing a source of conflict in the marriage. For each discussion, one spouse was asked to identify an area of difficulty in the marriage and to discuss the problem with the partner, with the goal of working toward some resolution on the issue. Spouses were encouraged not to choose the same issues. Prior to each discussion, spouses also completed a questionnaire regarding the importance of the problems they were about to discuss. Couples were paid \$70 for participating in this part of the study.

At the end of the lab session, couples were asked to participate in a 12-day daily diary task. This diary assessed spouses' daily relationship conflict, as well as the behaviors spouses enacted in order to resolve relationship conflict. Each spouse was given all 12 nights of the diary along with a set of pre-stamped envelopes. Couples were instructed to independently fill out one diary each night before going to bed, and to drop that diary in the mail the

next morning. Couples were paid an additional \$30 for participating in this part of the study.

Overall, 52 (85%) wives and 50 (82%) husbands chose to participate in the daily diary portion of the study. Analyses were conducted to determine whether spouses who completed the diary task differed from spouses who did not on any of the variables of interest in the study. No significant differences were found for husbands. However, wives who completed the diary were higher in dispositional optimism ( $M = 22.7$  and  $18.7$ , respectively),  $t(59) = 2.2$ ,  $p = .03$ , 95% CI [0.43, 7.58], and marginally lower in relationship-specific optimism ( $M = 30.3$  and  $36.1$ , respectively),  $t(59) = -1.9$ ,  $p = .06$ , 95% CI [-11.80, 0.15], than wives who opted out of the diary task. Thus, analyses involving wives' diary data relied on a somewhat restricted range of optimism scores. Of those who completed the diary, 77% (40) of wives and 80% (40) of husbands completed all 12 days of diary data. Furthermore, 96% (50) of wives and 92% (46) of husbands completed at least 6 days. Only two spouses completed fewer than 3 days. In total, 1,109 days of diary information were collected. Spouses who completed all 12 days did not differ from spouses providing less data on any variable of interest. Importantly, as data were examined using multilevel modeling techniques, participants who did not provide all 12 days of data could be included in the analyses (Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett, 1995). Thus, diary results reported are based on data from all spouses who chose to participate in the diary task.

Two longitudinal follow-up assessments were conducted 6 months and 1 year after the initial lab session to determine change in marital quality over time. At each of these two assessments, spouses were asked to report on the severity of their marital problems and their overall marital satisfaction. At the 1-year follow-up assessment, 53 (87%) wives and 51 (84%) husbands provided data. Couples who provided data at all three assessments did not differ from couples who did not on any variable of interest. Again, however, as data were examined using multilevel modeling techniques, participants who did not provide all three data assessments could be included in the analyses (Raudenbush et al., 1995). Thus, results based on these longitudinal follow-up assessments are based on data from all 61 couples.

### Materials

**Global marital satisfaction.** Many commonly used measures of marital satisfaction (e.g., the Marital Adjustment Test; Locke & Wallace, 1959) contain items that assess spouses' evaluations of specific areas of potential conflict as well as items assessing spouses' appraisals of the relationship as a whole. To ensure that these two ideas were not confounded in the current study, satisfaction was measured at all three assessments with an instrument that obtains global evaluations of the relationship exclusively. Specifically, spouses completed the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983). This measure asks spouses to indicate the extent to which they agree with six relationship statements, such as "We have a good marriage," and "Our marriage is strong." Scores on the measure can range from 6 to 45, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. Internal consistency of this measure was high across the three assessments, ranging from .90 to .94 for both spouses.

**Severity of marital problems.** The severity of marital problems was assessed at all three assessments using the Marital

Problems Inventory (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). This measure lists 19 potential problem areas in a marriage (e.g., communication, solving problems, making decisions, trust, jealousy, showing affection, sex) and asks participants to rate each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*not a problem*) to 11 (*major problem*). Composite scores could range from 19 to 209, with higher scores representing more severe marital issues. Internal consistency of the measure was high across the three assessments, ranging from .83 to .93 for both spouses.

**Global, dispositional optimism.** The Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985) was used to assess spouses' global, dispositional optimism at the beginning of the marriage. Spouses were asked to indicate their agreement with eight items (plus four filler items) on a scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). To create composite scores, negatively worded items (e.g., "I rarely count on good things happening to me"; "If something can go wrong for me, it will") were reverse scored and summed with positively worded items (e.g., "I'm always optimistic about my future"; "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best"). As items on the scale are "extremely" worded (e.g., "always"; "rarely"), individuals who fully endorse the items are reporting a view of the future in which good things will happen and problems will rarely arise. Scores on this measure can range from 0 to 32, with higher scores reflecting greater dispositional optimism. Internal consistency was high for both husbands (coefficient  $\alpha = .83$ ) and wives (coefficient  $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Situational, relationship-specific optimism.** An eight-item questionnaire was created to assess optimistic expectations specific to relationship events. Items were heavily based on items found in measures of positive expectancies for relationships used in prior research (McNulty & Karney, 2004; Murray & Holmes, 1997). Similar to the measure of global optimism described above, existing measures of relationship-specific optimism rely on extremely worded items to capture variability in optimism for future relationship events. Following this convention, example items on the current measure include "I expect my partner and I will always be able to resolve our disagreements," "I expect my partner will always be affectionate," and "I expect my partner and I will always communicate well." The complete measure is presented in the Appendix. Thus, parallel to the LOT, which captures the extent to which individuals believe problems will rarely arise in life, the current measure captures the extent to which spouses believe problems will rarely arise in their relationship.<sup>1</sup> When first married, spouses were asked to consider the next 4 years of their marriage and rate their agreement with the items on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Scores were rescaled to a 0–6 interval, and a composite score was created by summing item responses. Thus, scores can range from 0 to 48, with higher scores indicating greater levels of relationship-specific optimism. Internal consistency was high (coefficient  $\alpha = .84$  for both husbands and wives).

**Self-esteem.** To assess self-esteem, spouses completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1965). Scores on the measure can range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. The internal consistency of the 10 items was adequate for both spouses (coefficient  $\alpha = .86$  for husbands and .85 for wives).

**Neuroticism.** To assess neuroticism, spouses completed the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1978).

This 23-item questionnaire asks spouses to answer yes or no questions about their negative affectivity. Composite scores could range from 0 to 23, with higher scores indicating higher neuroticism. The internal consistency of the measure was high for both husbands (coefficient  $\alpha = .86$ ) and for wives (coefficient  $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Behavioral observation coding.** To assess the positivity of spouses' problem-solving behaviors when resolving conflicts in the lab interaction task, a slightly modified version of the Verbal Tactics Coding Scheme (VTCS; Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982) was used. Each 10-min interaction was divided into speaking turns, and each speaking turn was then coded. Using this version of the coding scheme, each speaking turn may receive one of four codes: positive, negative, neutral, or avoidant. Thus, a neutral category was added to the original VTCS. Positive codes are given to constructive behaviors that further the resolution of the conflict, such as behaviors that help define the problem, suggest a plan of coping with the issue, convey understanding and support to the partner, or provide encouragement and affection to the partner. Negative codes are assigned to behaviors that directly criticize, fault, or reject the partner, as well as to behaviors that indirectly criticize the partner through hostile sarcasm, deflecting responsibility, or hostile questioning. Avoidant codes are given to behaviors that move the discussion away from the problem at hand, such as topic shifting and topic avoidance. Finally, neutral codes are given to behaviors relevant to the problem but factual in nature. To analyze the codes in subsequent analyses, the number of times each code was assigned to each spouse was divided by the total number of speaking turns of that spouse. Thus, each code was analyzed as a proportion of the total speaking turns to control for variation across spouses in the number of speaking turns.

Four research assistants were trained to code the interactions independently using the coding scheme. Interrater reliability was assessed by having randomly selected pairs of observers code a randomly selected 18% of the interactions. Degree of agreement between raters was assessed using two methods. First, the more conservative Cohen's kappa, which assesses turn-by-turn agreement, indicated good interrater reliability ( $\kappa = .61$ ). Second, a one-way random effects intraclass correlation comparing the proportions of each code observed by each rater across the interactions was estimated. These correlations also indicated adequate interrater reliability for the codes analyzed here (for husbands, intraclass correlation coefficients [ICCs] = .60 for positive, .78 for

<sup>1</sup> Some readers may wonder how this measure of relationship-specific optimism relates to measures of unrealistic relationship beliefs commonly used in the literature. For example, the Relationships Beliefs Inventory (RBI; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982) taps a form of dysfunctional thinking that has been shown to predict poor marital outcomes. The current measure differs from the RBI in two important ways. First, rather than assessing expectations about future relationship events, the RBI taps beliefs about how relationships "should" or "generally" function (e.g., "If your partner expresses disagreement with your ideas, he/she probably does not think highly of you"). Second, in the current sample, relationship-specific optimism and unrealistic beliefs were strongly negatively correlated for husbands ( $r = -.42, p < .01$ ) and trended negative for wives, though this correlation did not reach significance ( $r = -.11, p > .05$ ). Thus, spouses who agreed with the items of the relationship-specific optimism measure were less likely to agree with the unrealistic beliefs of the RBI, suggesting that our measure is not tapping the type of dysfunctional thinking assessed in the unrealistic beliefs literature.

negative, and .75 for avoidant; for wives, ICCs = .60 for positive, .86 for negative, and .89 for avoidant).

To create an index of spouses' problem-solving behavior, we examined husbands' and wives' behavior during the discussion of their own chosen topic. This approach allowed for a more focused examination of whether optimism may affect problem-solving behavior when spouses are discussing relationship issues in which they are personally invested. Specifically, as positive and negative/avoidant behaviors were significantly negatively correlated for both spouses (for husbands,  $r = -.31$ ,  $p = .02$ ; for wives,  $r = -.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ), we subtracted the proportion of negative and avoidant behaviors from the proportion of positive behaviors. Higher scores indicate that spouses exhibited a greater proportion of constructive problem-solving behaviors.

**Problem importance.** Prior to discussing their chosen topic, spouses were asked to indicate the importance of the problem (i.e., "How important is the problem you are about to discuss?") on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

**Daily diary.** The daily diary assessed two phenomena of interest to the current study. First, to assess the experience of daily relationship conflict, spouses were presented with a checklist of five negative behaviors (e.g., "your partner criticized or blamed you"; "your partner showed anger or impatience toward you") and asked to indicate whether or not their partner had engaged in any of the behaviors that day (1 = yes, and 0 = no). Spouses then were asked to report whether they themselves had engaged in any of those same behaviors toward their partner (e.g., "you criticized or blamed your spouse"). Two summed composite scores of negative behaviors were created for each spouse on each day, one score for behaviors given and one score for behaviors received. Higher scores indicate a greater number of negative behaviors reported.

Second, spouses reported on the types of problem-solving behaviors they enacted in response to any relationship conflict encountered that day. Four items tapped into two forms of daily problem-solving behaviors similar to those assessed in the lab interaction task: constructive/positive behaviors (e.g., "I made a plan of action to try and work through the problem") and negative/avoidant behaviors (e.g., "I decided to distract myself/act as if the problem didn't happen"). For each item, spouses indicated whether or not they had engaged in the behavior that day (1 = yes, and 0 = no). As positive and negative behaviors tended to be negatively associated (daily correlations ranged from  $-.24$  to  $.08$  for both spouses), we assessed the predominance of constructive behaviors relative to destructive behaviors by creating a composite score on each day in which negative/avoidant behavior was subtracted from positive behavior. Thus, higher scores indicate more constructive problem-solving responses to daily relationship conflict.

## Data Analysis

Examining whether responses to daily relationship conflict, as well as long-term changes in marital well-being over time, are moderated by dispositional and relationship-specific optimism requires both within-subject and between-subjects analyses. Due to the three-level nested structure of the daily diary and longitudinal data (e.g., observations are nested within persons and persons are nested within dyad), multilevel modeling analyses were conducted using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Bryk, Raudenbush, & Congdon, 1994). To account for the interdependence present

within that data, we followed procedures described by Laurenceau and Bolger (2005) for analyzing daily diary/longitudinal data from couples, which are based on recommendations by Raudenbush et al. (1995). Specifically, husbands' and wives' effects were estimated simultaneously for all analyses and dummy variables were used to nest husband and wife data within each couple. This approach allows for straightforward tests of gender differences in coefficients of interest (a 1-*df*  $\chi^2$  test). In cases where no significant gender differences were found, we then constrained the coefficients to be equal for husbands and for wives, according to procedures outlined by Barnett, Marshall, Raudenbush, and Brennan (1993; see also Murray, Griffin, et al., 2006). The significance test of such a constrained coefficient is more powerful than tests for gender-specific coefficients (Barnett et al., 1993). When no gender differences emerged, we present these constrained coefficients. To facilitate comparisons of coefficients of interests (e.g., the size of the effect of each form of optimism), all variables were standardized prior to analyses.

Importantly, in contrast to the daily diary and longitudinal data, all variables used in the analysis of the observational data were assessed at the between-subjects rather than the within-subjects level. Thus, the two-level nested structure of this data (e.g., persons nested within dyad) required a slightly different analytic strategy. When modeling this data, we followed the standard pooled approach for two-level nested data outlined by Campbell and Kashy (2002). To account for the interdependence present within the data in this case, gender was effect coded (1 for men,  $-1$  for women). The interactions between gender and each of the predictor variables then were added to the model in order to test for any gender differences. When no gender differences emerged, results were presented pooled across gender. Again, all variables were standardized prior to analyses to ease interpretation of results.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for key measures. Not surprisingly, these newlywed couples generally held highly positive views of the marriage, were observed to exhibit relatively positive problem-solving behaviors during the in-lab conflict interactions, and reported experiencing relatively few marital problems. Moreover, couples seemed quite optimistic about their futures as scores on both global, dispositional optimism and relationship-specific optimism were quite high. In fact, 90% of spouses reported a relationship-specific optimism score that fell above the midpoint of the scale. Thus, these newly-married couples ranged from moderately optimistic to extremely optimistic about the future of the relationship. To examine for possible gender differences on any of the variables of interest, paired sample *t* tests were conducted. Several differences emerged. Husbands reported higher levels of relationship-specific optimism than did wives,  $t(60) = 3.46$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [1.88, 7.03]. Husbands also reported experiencing more marital problems at the beginning of the marriage,  $t(60) = 2.14$ ,  $p = .04$ , 95% CI [0.43, 13.18], and reported engaging in more positive problem-solving behaviors across the diary days,  $t(49) = 2.24$ ,  $p = .03$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.28], than did wives. Finally, wives scored higher in neuroticism than did husbands,  $t(60) = -4.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [ $-5.34$ ,  $-2.01$ ].



Table 1  
Means and Standard Deviations

Variable	Husbands		Wives	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Initial marital satisfaction	41.23	3.98	42.07	4.11
Initial marital problems	49.51	22.47	42.70	16.75
Dispositional optimism	22.07	5.30	22.05	5.33
Relationship-specific optimism	35.69	8.05	31.22	8.84
Neuroticism	6.46	4.97	10.13	5.12
Self-esteem	34.30	5.01	33.80	4.79
Observed problem-solving behavior	0.24	0.28	0.26	0.29
Conflict importance ratings	5.57	1.23	5.26	1.61
Average daily negativity—Received	0.32	0.38	0.32	0.37
Average daily negativity—Given	0.27	0.36	0.36	0.33
Average daily problem-solving behavior	0.36	0.43	0.22	0.38
Marital satisfaction (6-month follow-up)	40.52	4.33	39.74	5.84
Marital satisfaction (1-year follow-up)	39.40	5.15	40.80	4.48
Marital problems (6-month follow-up)	49.88	23.75	48.55	18.01
Marital problems (1-year follow-up)	53.98	26.62	46.58	18.38

*Note.* Marital satisfaction scores could range from 6 to 45. Marital problem scores could range from 19 to 209. Dispositional optimism could range from 0 to 32, and relationship-specific optimism could range from 0 to 48. Neuroticism scores could range from 0 to 23, and self-esteem scores could range from 10 to 40. Observed problem-solving behavior could range from 0 to 1, and conflict importance ratings could range from 1 to 7. Finally, daily negativity could range from 0 to 5, and daily problem-solving behavior could range from -2 to 2. For all measures other than marital problems, neuroticism, and daily negativity, higher values indicate more positive appraisals and behaviors.

Examination of the correlations between spouses' optimism and their initial relationship variables revealed several significant results (see Table 2). Spouses who reported higher levels of dispositional optimism were initially more satisfied in their marriage and were rated by independent observers as exhibiting more constructive problem-solving behaviors during the lab interactions. Spouses who reported greater levels of relationship-specific optimism also were initially more satisfied in their marriage and reported experiencing less severe marital problems at the beginning of the marriage.

Further examination revealed that dispositional and situational, relationship-specific optimism were not significantly associated for either spouse. This finding is consistent with the broader optimism literature (e.g., Klein & Zajac, 2009), as global and specific forms of optimism often are only weakly correlated.<sup>2</sup> However, dispositional optimism was positively correlated with self-esteem and negatively correlated with neuroticism for both spouses, highlighting the importance of controlling for these factors when examining the unique effects of global optimism. Relationship-specific optimism was not significantly associated with self-esteem or neuroticism for either spouse.

In sum, preliminary analyses indicate that all measures performed generally as expected. In line with prior work on newlywed marriage (Neff & Karney, 2005), these couples began the marriage with rather idealistic views of their relationship and the future. Nevertheless, these findings do not address whether such views are adaptive for marital well-being over time.

## Optimistic Expectations and Problem-Solving Responses to Daily Relationship Conflict

The first goal of the study was to examine whether global, dispositional and relationship-specific optimism were associated with different kinds of coping responses to daily relationship conflict. Specifically, it was predicted that on days when spouses experienced more conflict within the relationship, those higher in global, dispositional optimism would report engaging in more positive problem-solving behaviors, while those higher in situational, relationship-specific optimism would report engaging in less constructive problem-solving behaviors. To examine this hypothesis, the within-person association between spouses' experiences of daily relationship conflict and the behaviors they reported using to manage that conflict was modeled according to the following HLM equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Daily problem-solving behavior} = & \beta_{0j}(\text{husband}) + \beta_{1j}(\text{wife}) \\ & + \beta_{2j}(\text{husband day}) + \beta_{3j}(\text{wife day}) \\ & + \beta_{4j}(\text{husband experience of daily relationship conflict}) \\ & + \beta_{5j}(\text{wife experience of daily relationship conflict}) \\ & + \text{error}, \quad (1a) \end{aligned}$$

where day was centered within-persons for each spouse. In this equation,  $\beta_{0j}$  and  $\beta_{1j}$  represent an estimate of the spouse's average problem-solving behaviors across the 12 diary days.  $\beta_{2j}$  and  $\beta_{3j}$  capture the slope of a spouse's problem-solving behaviors over the course of the diary task. Including day in the model controlled for the possibility that factors such as habituation can influence how spouses complete diary materials over time (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003).  $\beta_{4j}$  and  $\beta_{5j}$  examine whether experiencing more or less conflict on a given day is associated with changes in a spouse's problem-solving behaviors. To address the potential role of self-report biases, two separate models were estimated: one using spouses' self-reports of daily conflict (i.e., did spouses report receiving negativity from their partner that day) and one using their partner's reports of daily conflict (i.e., did partners report

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the broader optimism literature, domain-specific forms of optimism are often uncorrelated or weakly correlated with global forms of optimism (for reviews, see Geers, 2000; Klein & Zajac, 2009). For instance, studies assessing optimistic expectancies in domains such as task performance (Nes, Segerstrom, & Sephton, 2005), recovery from cancer (Winterling, Glimelius, & Nordin, 2008), and weight loss (Benyamini & Raz, 2007) have all failed to find significant correlations between the LOT and these more specific forms of optimism. However, correlations between the LOT and composite measures of specific optimism that average across several different domains can be more substantial (Davidson & Prkachin, 1997). Consequently, Scheier and Carver (1992) once noted that, "generalized optimism may be more of an emergent phenomenon, arising out of domain specific expectancies, but being somewhat separate from them" (p. 216). Similarly, Armor and Taylor (1998) have suggested the literature on global and specific attitudes may shed light on the failure to find correlations between global and specific measures of optimism. Although measures of global and specific attitudes are often uncorrelated and have different predictive abilities, each of these measures undoubtedly assesses a type of attitude. The same pattern seems to be true of global and specific optimism. Consequently, the lack of a significant correlation between the measures of global and specific optimism assessed here is not necessarily surprising, nor does it speak to the validity of the optimism measures.



Table 2  
*Within-Spouse and Between-Spouse Correlations for Time 1 Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Initial marital satisfaction	<b>.42**</b>	-.68**	-.03	-.21	.28*	.30*	.38**	-.16	-.22	-.05	.21
2. Initial marital problems	-.48**	<b>.22†</b>	-.08	.09	-.14	-.40***	-.42***	.25†	.24†	.10	-.12
3. Observed problem-solving behavior	.10	-.14	<b>.26*</b>	.09	.42***	-.03	.14	.07	-.07	-.01	-.10
4. Conflict importance	.05	.04	.09	<b>-.13</b>	-.02	.09	-.02	.10	.20	.12	.16
5. Dispositional optimism	.30*	-.16	.23†	-.09	<b>.34*</b>	-.09	.51***	-.48***	.05	-.05	.10
6. Relationship-specific optimism	.24†	-.25*	-.19	-.15	.16	<b>.29*</b>	.10	-.09	.13	-.04	-.25†
7. Self-esteem	.21	-.23†	.06	-.10	.74***	.16	<b>.16</b>	-.49***	.01	-.15	-.03
8. Neuroticism	-.27*	.36**	-.07	-.04	-.65***	-.07	-.70***	<b>.17</b>	.04	.38**	.15
9. Average daily conflict—Received	-.47***	.44***	-.26†	-.07	-.09	-.18	-.13	.20	<b>.56***</b>	.37**	.01
10. Average daily conflict—Given	-.49***	.44***	-.29*	-.10	-.14	-.01	-.16	.13	.70***	<b>.35*</b>	.11
11. Average daily problem-solving behavior	.12	-.15	.06	.27*	-.18	-.18	-.05	-.05	-.11	.06	<b>.34**</b>

Note. Husbands' correlations are above the diagonal, and wives' correlations are below. The diagonal (in bold) contains between-spouse correlations.

†  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

enacting negativity toward the spouse that day). On average (pooled across gender) results revealed a tendency for spouses to report engaging in fewer constructive problem-solving behaviors to resolve relationship negativity on days in which they perceived greater conflict,  $b = -.07$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(51) = -1.94$ ,  $p = .06$ , 95% CI  $[-0.15, 0.00]$ . However, the link between spouses' problem-solving behaviors and their partners' reports of daily conflict was not significant,  $b = -.02$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(48) = -0.64$ ,  $p = .52$ , 95% CI  $[-0.08, 0.04]$ .

To examine whether global, dispositional and relationship-specific optimism moderated these results, the following equations were added at the between-subjects level of the HLM analysis:

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_{0j}(\text{i.e., husbands' average problem-solving behavior}) &= \gamma_{00} \\ &+ \gamma_{01}(\text{husbands' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{02}(\text{husbands' relationship-specific optimism}) \\ &+ \text{error} \quad (1b) \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_{1j}(\text{i.e., wives' average problem-solving behavior}) &= \gamma_{10} \\ &+ \gamma_{11}(\text{wives' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{12}(\text{wives' relationship-specific optimism}) \\ &+ \text{error} \quad (1c) \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_{4j}(\text{i.e., husbands' problem-solving response to conflict}) &= \gamma_{40} \\ &+ \gamma_{41}(\text{husbands' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{42}(\text{husbands' relationship-specific optimism}) \\ &+ \text{error} \quad (1d) \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_{5j}(\text{i.e., wives' problem-solving response to conflict}) &= \gamma_{50} \\ &+ \gamma_{51}(\text{wives' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{52}(\text{wives' relationship-specific optimism}) + \text{error} \quad (1e) \end{aligned}$$

Thus, Equations 1a–1e were estimated in a single model. For the purpose of these analyses, the final two equations contain the primary parameters of interest. These equations capture the asso-

ciation between spouses' problem-solving behaviors on days of greater conflict and spouses' optimism, controlling for the associations between each form of optimism and spouses' average problem-solving behavior across the diary days.

Table 3 presents the results of analyses using both self-reports and partner-reports of daily relationship conflict. Results revealed that neither dispositional optimism nor relationship-specific optimism was associated with average problem-solving behavior across the diary days. However, as seen in the top half of the table, both forms of optimism predicted the covariance between spouses' own reports of daily relationship conflict and their problem-solving behaviors in the hypothesized directions. Further analyses were conducted to ensure results held when controlling for neuroticism, self-esteem, and initial marital satisfaction. To do this, these control variables were added to the between-subjects level of the model (i.e., Equations 1b–1e). Neither neuroticism nor self-esteem predicted the covariance between daily conflict and problem-solving behavior,  $b = -.01$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(46) = -0.25$ ,  $p = .81$ , 95% CI  $[-0.07, 0.05]$ , and  $b = -.02$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t(46) = -0.44$ ,  $p = .66$ , 95% CI  $[-0.12, 0.08]$ , respectively. Initial satisfaction did emerge as a significant predictor,  $b = .07$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t(46) = 3.53$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[0.03, 0.11]$ , such that spouses reporting greater levels of initial marital satisfaction were more likely to engage in constructive problem-solving behaviors on high conflict days. However, the effects of both forms of optimism remained significant when including these control variables.

Predicted means for spouses with higher (+1 SD) and lower (–1 SD) levels of optimism are plotted across the full range of daily conflict scores reported by participants (i.e., 0–3 instances) in Figures 1A and 1B. Simple slope analyses (see Table 4) indicated that among spouses with higher levels of global, dispositional optimism, the effect of daily relationship conflict on problem-solving behavior was not significant. However, spouses lower in dispositional optimism were less likely to engage in constructive problem-solving behaviors on days in which they experienced higher versus lower relationship conflict. In addition, although the behavior of spouses higher and lower in dispositional optimism did not differ on days of low conflict, on days of high conflict spouses higher in dispositional optimism reported enacting more constructive behaviors compared to spouses lower in this form of optimism. The opposite

Table 3

*Optimism as a Moderator of the Within-Person Association Between Daily Relationship Conflict and Spouses' Daily Problem-Solving Behaviors in the Diary Task*

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI	
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Results for self-reports of daily conflict ( <i>df</i> = 49)					
Average problem-solving behavior (Intercept)					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.03	.06	−0.55	−0.15	0.09
Relationship-specific optimism	−.06	.06	−1.10	−0.18	0.06
Covariation between relationship conflict and problem-solving behavior (Slope)					
Global, dispositional optimism	.08	.04	2.20*	0.01	0.16
Relationship-specific optimism	−.11	.04	−2.70**	−0.19	−0.03
Results for partner-reports of daily conflict ( <i>df</i> = 46)					
Average problem-solving behavior (Intercept)					
Global dispositional optimism	−.02	.06	−0.40	−0.14	0.10
Relationship-specific optimism	−.02	.06	−0.32	−0.13	0.10
Covariation between relationship conflict and problem-solving behavior (Slope)					
Global, dispositional optimism	.07	.03	2.05*	0.01	0.13
Relationship-specific optimism	−.02	.04	−0.67	−0.10	0.05

Note. All variables were standardized for analyses. All coefficients presented are pooled across gender. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

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

pattern of results emerged when examining situational, relationship-specific optimism. In this case, spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism were less likely to engage in constructive problem-solving behavior on high conflict days compared to low conflict days. Among spouses lower in relationship-specific optimism, the effect of daily conflict on problem-solving behavior did not reach significance. Moreover, whereas higher and lower relationship-specific optimists did not differ in their behavior on low conflict days, a significant difference was found on high conflict days; spouses' higher in relationship-specific optimism enacted fewer constructive behaviors than did spouses lower in relationship-specific optimism.<sup>3</sup>

Analyses relying on partner reports rather than self-reports of daily relationship conflict revealed a pattern of results generally consistent with, though somewhat weaker than, the previously described findings (see bottom half of Table 3). Global, dispositional optimism significantly moderated the link between spouses' reports of their daily problem-solving behaviors and their partner's reports of daily conflict. Plotting these results revealed a pattern virtually identical to the pattern presented in Figure 1A. Again, simple slope analyses (see Table 5) revealed a trend such that spouses lower in dispositional optimism were less likely to engage in constructive problem-solving behaviors on days in which they experienced greater levels of relationship conflict. Moreover, on days of greater conflict, spouses higher in dispositional optimism tended to report enacting more constructive behaviors compared to spouses lower in dispositional optimism. The opposite interaction pattern was found for relationship-specific optimism, although the effects of this form of optimism did not reach significance. As before, all findings held controlling for neuroticism, self-esteem, and initial marital satisfaction.

Together, these results generally supported the idea that although global, dispositional optimism may serve as a relationship resource, situational, relationship-specific optimism may function as a relationship vulnerability. When confronted with daily rela-

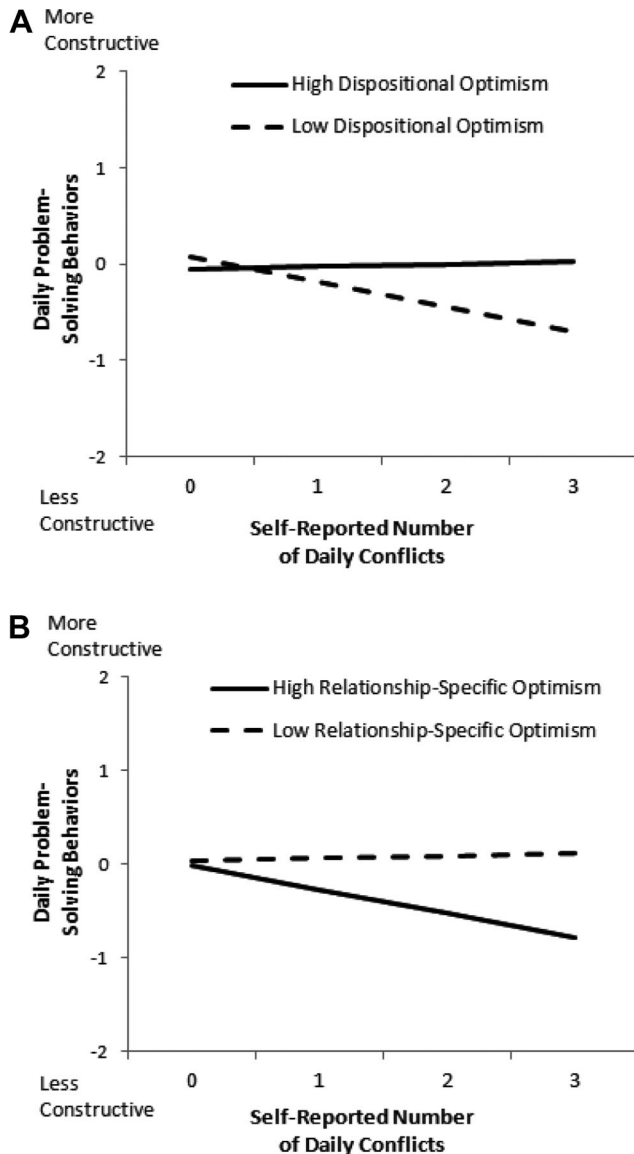
tionship conflicts, being higher in dispositional optimism seemingly promoted more adaptive problem-solving behaviors, whereas being higher in relationship-specific optimism predicted less constructive coping responses which are likely to put the couple at risk for poor marital outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

### Optimistic Expectations and the Importance of Relationship Conflicts

The second goal of the study was twofold: (1) to replicate and extend the findings from the daily diary portion of the study by examining the links between optimism and observed coping responses during a lab-induced conflict discussion and (2) to exam-

<sup>3</sup> In addition to predicting behavioral responses, prior research suggests that global and relationship-specific forms of optimism may also be differentially associated with emotional responses to negative and potentially disconfirming relationship events (e.g., *Armor & Taylor, 1998; McGraw et al., 2004; Scheier & Carver, 1993*). As daily mood was also assessed in the daily diary task, we were able to examine whether spouses reported higher levels of negative mood (i.e., sadness, frustration, discouragement, and irritation) on days in which they experienced greater relationship conflict, as well as whether this association was moderated by each type of optimism. The results generally supported the proposed theoretical framework. On days of greater relationship conflict, spouses reported increases in their negative mood,  $b = .44$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(51) = 10.15$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.36, 0.52]. However, this association was weaker for those higher in global, dispositional optimism,  $b = -.05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t(49) = -1.97$ ,  $p = .055$ , 95% CI [-0.09, 0.00], and somewhat stronger for those higher in relationship-specific optimism,  $b = .05$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(49) = 1.64$ ,  $p = .10$ , 95% CI [-0.01, 0.11]. This pattern of results is consistent with the idea that spouses higher in global, dispositional optimism experience less frustration and discouragement when confronted with relationship challenges, whereas spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism tend to experience greater frustration and discouragement when faced with conflicts that may challenge their positive expectations.

<sup>4</sup> In all analyses presented in the article, we also explored whether global, dispositional and relationship-specific forms of optimism interacted to predict marital coping and outcomes. No significant interactions were found.



*Figure 1.* The interaction of optimism and daily relationship conflict predicting spouses' daily problem-solving behavior. *Figure 1A* represents the results for dispositional optimism, and *Figure 1B* represents the results for relationship-specific optimism. To produce these predicted means, the dependent variable and optimism were standardized. Daily conflict was left on its original metric (actual range of scores is 0–3 in this sample).

ine whether the link between optimistic expectations and problem-solving behaviors may be moderated by the importance of the relationship issue being discussed. Using data from the videotaped conflict resolution interactions, it was predicted that spouses higher in global, dispositional optimism would exhibit more constructive problem-solving behaviors compared to less optimistic spouses, especially when discussing marital issues that were of greater importance. Conversely, spouses higher in situational, relationship-specific optimism were expected to display less constructive problem-solving behaviors, particularly when the issue being confronted was more important.

To examine this idea, we modeled a spouse's observed problem-solving behavior from the individual's level of dispositional optimism, the individual's level of relationship-specific optimism, the individual's rating of problem importance, and the interactions between each form of optimism and problem importance. Moreover, gender and the interactions between gender and each of the predictor variables were also added in order to test for any gender differences. As no gender differences emerged, all results presented are pooled across gender. In this model, the intercept was specified as a function of both a fixed and random component. However, no random component was specified for any of the slope parameters, a required constraint given the fact that each couple involves only two individuals (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

As seen in the top half of *Table 6*, a marginal main effect of problem importance on problem-solving behaviors emerged, such that spouses discussing more important marital issues tended to exhibit more positive problem-solving behaviors during the conflict interaction. As expected, the main effects of global, dispositional and relationship-specific optimism on problem-solving behaviors were in opposing directions. Whereas spouses higher in dispositional optimism were rated by independent observers as behaving more constructively during the interaction, there was a trend for spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism to be rated as behaving less constructively. Contrary to predictions, the interaction of problem importance and dispositional optimism was not significant; however, a significant interaction between problem importance and relationship-specific optimism was found. These findings held when controlling for initial marital satisfaction,  $b = -.07$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t(48) = -0.67$ ,  $p = .63$ , 95% CI  $[-0.29, 0.15]$ ; neuroticism,  $b = .18$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t(48) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .11$ , 95% CI  $[-0.04, 0.40]$ ; and self-esteem,  $b = .11$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t(48) = 0.93$ ,  $p = .36$ , 95% CI  $[-0.13, 0.35]$ .

The interaction of problem importance and relationship-specific optimism was examined more closely using procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991) for two continuous variables, with comparisons made at 1 *SD* from the mean. As seen in *Figure 2*, the overall pattern of results was consistent with hypotheses. Simple slope analyses (see bottom half of *Table 6*) confirmed that among spouses discussing more important topics, spouses who reported greater levels of relationship-specific optimism exhibited less constructive problem-solving behaviors than did spouses who were lower in this form of optimism. Among spouses discussing less important topics, the behaviors of higher and lower relationship-specific optimists did not significantly differ. In addition, results revealed a trend ( $p = .056$ ) for spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism to exhibit worse problem-solving behaviors when discussing topics of greater importance compared to less important topics. Spouses reporting lower levels of relationship-specific optimism, however, exhibited more constructive behaviors when discussing more important topics.

Again, results support the idea that global forms of optimism are more adaptive for relationship maintenance efforts than are specific forms of optimism. Although global, dispositional optimism predicted more constructive responses to relationship conflict regardless of the topic importance, relationship-specific optimism was found to be problematic for effective coping,



Table 4  
Simple Effects for Interactions Between Spouses' Optimism and Their Self-Reported Daily Conflict Presented in Table 3

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (49)	95% CI	
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Results for self-reports of daily conflict					
Effect of conflict at high optimism (+1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	.02	.05	0.36	−0.08	0.12
Relationship-specific optimism	−.18	.06	−3.08**	−0.31	−0.06
Effect of conflict at low optimism (−1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.15	.06	−2.71**	−0.27	−0.03
Relationship-specific optimism	.05	.05	0.92	−0.05	0.15
Effect of optimism at low conflict (0 conflicts)					
Global dispositional optimism	−.07	.06	−1.17	−0.19	0.05
Relationship-specific optimism	−.01	.06	−0.23	−0.13	0.11
Effect of optimism at high conflict (3 conflicts)					
Global, dispositional optimism	.29	.16	1.78†	−0.03	0.41
Relationship-specific optimism	−.48	.18	−2.61**	−0.12	−0.84

Note. All variables were standardized for analyses. All coefficients presented are pooled across gender. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

† *p* < .10. \*\* *p* < .01.

especially when couples were contending with more important marital issues.

### Optimistic Expectations and Marital Development Over Time

The final goal of the study was to examine whether each form of optimism was associated with changes in the severity of marital problems as well as changes in general marital satisfaction over the first year of marriage. Given that global, dispositional optimism was associated with more constructive responses to relationship issues, it was predicted that spouses higher in dispositional optimism would experience fewer increases in the severity of marital problems and exhibit more stable (i.e., less decline in) levels of satisfaction over time. In contrast, previous analyses confirmed that spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism engaged in less constructive

coping responses when faced with relationship conflict. Thus, consistent with the notion that situational optimism may put individuals at risk for poor outcomes by creating a context in which problems are allowed to fester (Dillard et al., 2009), spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism were expected to report greater increases in marital problems as well as steeper declines in their satisfaction as the marriage progressed. To address these hypotheses, we first estimated the linear trajectory of the severity of marital problems over time using the following HLM equation:

$$\text{Marital problem severity} = \beta_{0j}(\text{husband}) + \beta_{1j}(\text{wife}) \\ + \beta_{2j}(\text{husband time}) + \beta_{3j}(\text{wife time}) + \text{error}, \quad (2a)$$

where  $\beta_{0j}$  and  $\beta_{1j}$  capture the intercept, or spouses' initial level of marital problems, and  $\beta_{2j}$  and  $\beta_{3j}$  capture the slope of problem severity over time. On average (pooled across gender),

Table 5  
Simple Effects for Interactions Between Spouses' Optimism and Their Partner's Reports of Daily Conflict Presented in Table 3

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (46)	95% CI	
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Results for partner reports of daily conflict					
Effect of conflict at high optimism (+1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	.05	.06	0.73	−0.07	0.17
Effect of conflict at low optimism (−1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.09	.05	−1.89 <sup>†</sup>	−0.18	0.01
Effect of optimism at low conflict (0 conflicts)					
Global dispositional optimism	−.06	.06	−0.95	−0.18	0.06
Effect of optimism at high conflict (3 conflicts)					
Global, dispositional optimism	.26	.15	1.72 <sup>†</sup>	−0.04	0.56

Note. All variables were standardized for analyses. All coefficients presented are pooled across gender. Simple effects for the interaction of spouses' relationship-specific optimism and their partners' reports of daily conflict are not reported as this interaction did not reach significance. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

† *p* < .10.

Table 6

*Interaction of Optimism and Problem Importance Predicting Observed Problem-Solving Behavior*

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (51)	95% CI	
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Results of overall model					
Global, dispositional optimism	.23	.08	3.00**	0.07	0.39
Relationship-specific optimism	−.12	.07	−1.69 <sup>‡</sup>	−0.27	0.02
Problem importance	.12	.07	1.68 <sup>‡</sup>	−0.02	0.27
Dispositional Optimism × Problem Importance	.06	.06	1.04	−0.06	0.18
Relationship-Specific Optimism × Problem Importance	−.30	.09	−3.45**	−0.48	−0.12
Results of simple slope analyses					
Problem importance at high relationship-specific optimism (+1 <i>SD</i> )	−.18	.09	−1.96 <sup>‡</sup>	−0.36	0.00
Problem importance at low relationship-specific optimism (−1 <i>SD</i> )	.42	.13	3.20**	0.16	0.68
Relationship-specific optimism at high importance (+1 <i>SD</i> )	−.42	.09	−4.60***	−0.60	−0.24
Relationship-specific optimism at low importance (−1 <i>SD</i> )	.18	.13	1.34	−0.08	0.44

Note. All variables were standardized for analyses. All coefficients presented are pooled across gender. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

spouses reported significant increases in the severity of marital problems during the first year of their marriage,  $b = .15$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t(60) = 2.70$ ,  $p = .009$ , 95% CI [0.05, 0.25]. To examine whether global, dispositional and relationship-specific optimism moderated the slope of problem severity over time, the following equations were added to the between-subjects level of the HLM analysis:

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_{0j} \text{ (i.e., husbands' initial problem severity)} &= \gamma_{00} \\ &+ \gamma_{01}(\text{husbands' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{02}(\text{husbands' relationship-specific optimism}) \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} &+ \gamma_{03}(\text{wives' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{04}(\text{wives' relationship-specific optimism}) + \text{error} \\ \beta_{1j} \text{ (i.e., wives' initial problem severity)} &= \gamma_{10} \\ &+ \gamma_{11}(\text{wives' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{12}(\text{wives' relationship-specific optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{13}(\text{husbands' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{14}(\text{husbands' relationship-specific optimism}) + \text{error} \quad (2c) \\ \beta_{2j} \text{ (i.e., husbands' slope)} &= \gamma_{20} \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} &+ \gamma_{21}(\text{husbands' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{22}(\text{husbands' relationship-specific optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{23}(\text{wives' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{24}(\text{wives' relationship-specific optimism}) + \text{error} \quad (2d) \\ \beta_{3j} \text{ (i.e., wives' slope)} &= \gamma_{30} \\ &+ \gamma_{31}(\text{wives' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{32}(\text{wives' relationship-specific optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{33}(\text{husbands' dispositional optimism}) \\ &+ \gamma_{34}(\text{husbands' relationship-specific optimism}) + \text{error} \quad (2e) \end{aligned}$$

Thus, Equations 2a–2e were estimated in a single model. The parameters of the final two equations capture the associations between each form of optimism and changes in the severity of marital problems over time, controlling for the associations between each form of optimism and the intercept (i.e., initial problem severity). Moreover, to provide a more comprehensive examination of these links, the model estimates both actor effects (i.e., does spouses' optimism predict their own reports of marital problems) and partner effects (i.e., does spouses' optimism predict their partners' reports of marital problems).

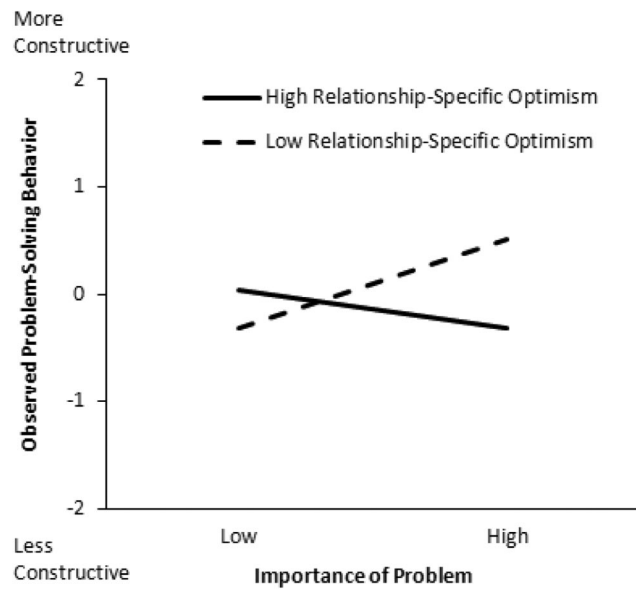


Figure 2. The interaction of relationship-specific optimism and problem importance predicting spouses' observed problem-solving behaviors. To produce these predicted means, the dependent variable and all predictor variables were standardized.

Table 7

*Optimism as a Predictor of Changes in the Severity of Marital Problems Over Time*

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (56)	95% CI	
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Results for self-reports of severity of marital problems (Actor effects)					
Initial marital problems (Intercept)					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.11	.08	−1.52	−0.27	0.05
Relationship-specific optimism	−.38	.08	−5.06***	−0.54	−0.22
Change in marital problems (Slope)					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.13	.04	−2.87**	−0.21	−0.05
Relationship-specific optimism	.10	.04	3.44*	0.02	0.18
Results for partner reports of severity of marital problems (Partner effects)					
Initial marital problems (Intercept)					
Global, dispositional optimism	.07	.09	0.80	−0.11	0.25
Relationship-specific optimism	.12	.08	1.52	−0.04	0.28
Change in marital problems (Slope)					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.09	.04	−2.03*	−0.17	0.01
Relationship-specific optimism	.11	.04	2.84**	0.03	0.19

Note. All variables were standardized for analyses. All coefficients presented are pooled across gender. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

As seen in Table 7, spouses' dispositional optimism was not significantly associated with either spouses' own reports or their partners' reports of the severity of marital problems experienced at the beginning of the marriage. Interestingly, spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism initially reported experiencing less severe problems in the marriage. This rosy assessment was not corroborated by their partners however, as spouses' relationship-specific optimism was not significantly associated with their partners' reports of initial marital problems. More importantly, and consistent with hypotheses, dispositional and relationship-specific optimism differentially predicted changes in both self-reports and partner reports of the severity of marital problems during the first year of marriage (see Figures 3A and 3B and Figures 4A and 4B). Further analyses were conducted to ensure results held when controlling for neuroticism and self-esteem. Spouses' neuroticism did not predict changes in their own reports or their partner's reports of marital problems over time,  $b = -.01$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t(52) = -0.13$ ,  $p = .90$ , 95% CI [-0.11, 0.09], and  $b = -.01$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t(52) = -0.17$ ,  $p = .86$ , 95% CI [-0.13, 0.11], respectively. Oddly, there was a trend for spouses higher in self-esteem to report greater increases in the severity of their problems during the first year of marriage,  $b = .10$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t(52) = 1.72$ ,  $p = .09$ , 95% CI [-0.02, 0.22]. However, spouses' self-esteem was not significantly associated with changes in their partners' reports of marital problems,  $b = .02$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t(52) = 0.43$ ,  $p = .67$ , 95% CI [-0.10, 0.14]. All previous results held when including these control variables.

Simple slope analyses (see Table 8) revealed that among spouses exhibiting higher levels of global, dispositional optimism, neither they nor their partners reported increases in the severity of marital problems over time. However, both members of the couple reported notable increases in their marital problems if spouses exhibited lower levels of global optimism. The opposite pattern of results emerged when examining situational, relationship-specific optimism. Here, both spouses and their partners agreed that the severity of marital problems rose sharply during the first year of marriage if spouses held more optimistic relationship-specific expectations. Among spouses

exhibiting lower levels of relationship-specific optimism, no significant changes in marital problems were reported.

We next examined links between optimism and changes in general marital satisfaction. To do this, Equations 2a–2e were run again with overall marital satisfaction as the outcome variable. Results revealed that on average, satisfaction significantly declined over the first year of marriage,  $b = -.20$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t(60) = -3.56$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-0.32, -0.08]. As seen in the top half of Table 9, both dispositional and relationship-specific optimism were associated with spouses' own reports of initial marital satisfaction, such that spouses higher in optimism reported greater levels of satisfaction at the beginning of the marriage. Consistent with hypotheses, results also revealed marginal trends suggesting that spouses' dispositional and relationship-specific optimism may differentially moderate changes in their own satisfaction over time. However, spouses' optimism did not predict the intercept or slope of their partners' marital satisfaction. Again, further analyses were conducted to ensure results held controlling for neuroticism and self-esteem. Neither spouses' neuroticism,  $b = .05$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t(54) = 1.14$ ,  $p = .26$ , 95% CI [-0.05, 0.15], nor self-esteem,  $b = -.01$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t(54) = -0.09$ ,  $p = .93$ , 95% CI [-0.15, 0.13], predicted the slope of spouses' own marital satisfaction. The inclusion of these variables did not alter the previous results.

Although the effects of spouses' optimism on the slope of their own marital satisfaction were only marginally significant, the general pattern of results is illustrated in Figures 5A and 5B for comparison purposes. As indicated in Table 10, simple slope analyses revealed that whereas spouses higher in dispositional optimism maintained relatively stable levels of marital happiness over the 1-year period, spouses lower in dispositional optimism exhibited significant declines in their satisfaction as the marriage progressed. Conversely, although spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism exhibited steeper declines in marital satisfaction, spouses lower in this form of optimism did not report significant changes in their satisfaction over time.



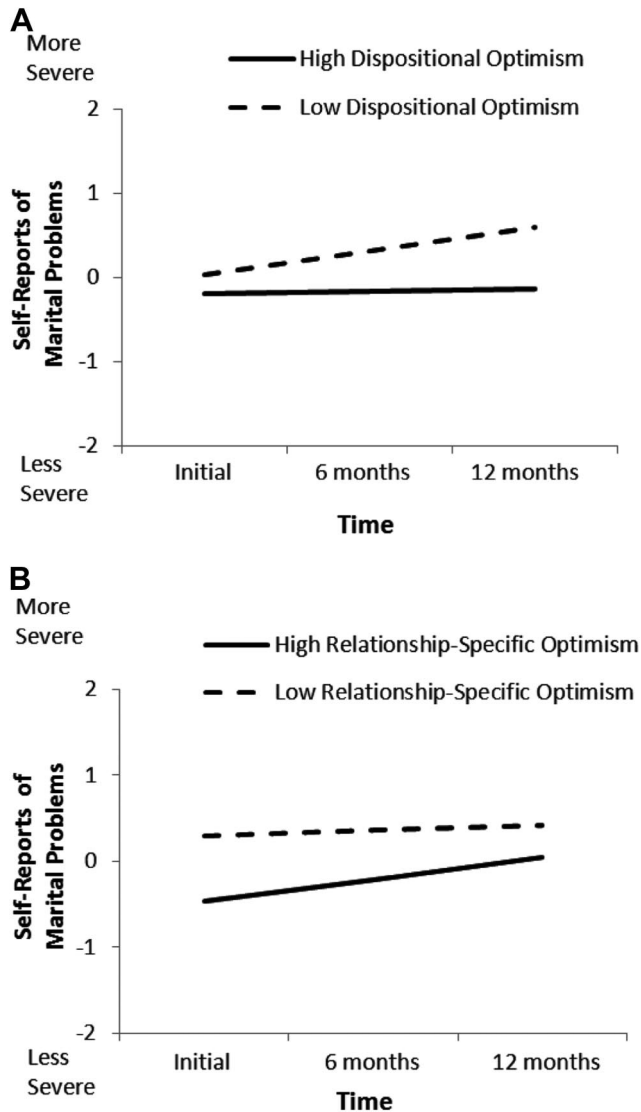


Figure 3. The interaction of spouses' optimism and time predicting spouses' own reports of marital problems. Figure 3A represents results for dispositional optimism, and Figure 3B represents results for relationship-specific optimism. To produce these predicted means, the dependent variable and optimism were standardized.

Overall, then, these results support the notion that whereas maintaining globally optimistic views of the future may promote healthier and happier relationships, holding highly positive expectations for specific relationship events can serve as a harbinger for marital troubles and disillusionment.

### Exploratory Mediational Analyses

Further analyses were conducted to examine whether the coping behaviors enacted in response to relationship conflict mediated the links between each form of optimism and changes in the severity of marital problems over time. For example, in the daily diary task, both global and relationship-specific optimism interacted with daily conflict experiences to predict daily problem-solving behav-

iors. Thus, we conducted a test of mediated moderation in which daily problem-solving behaviors mediated the link between this interaction and the trajectory of marital problems during the first year of marriage. Unfortunately, the data did not support this model. Given the complex nature of these analyses, the failure to find direct evidence for this mediated moderation may have resulted from low power to detect these associations.

Examining the potential mediating role of the problem-solving behaviors enacted in response to the lab-induced conflict task allowed for simpler mediation models. As previously reported, whereas spouses higher in global, dispositional optimism exhibited more constructive behaviors during the conflict discussion task, spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism behaved in a less constructive manner. When estimating a model in which observed problem-solving behavior, dispositional optimism,

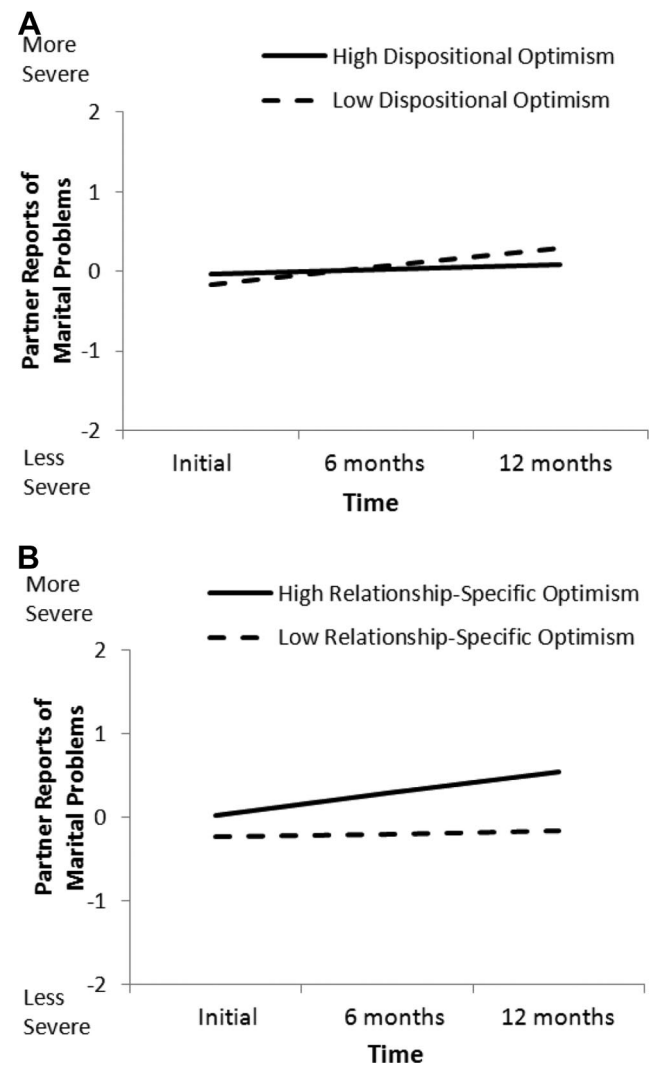


Figure 4. The interaction of spouses' optimism and time predicting partners' reports of marital problems. Figure 4A represents results for dispositional optimism, and Figure 4B represents results for relationship-specific optimism. To produce these predicted means, the dependent variable and optimism were standardized.

Table 8

Simple Effects for Interactions Between Time (i.e., Slope of Marital Problems) and Optimism Presented in Table 7

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (56)	95% CI	
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Results for self-reports of severity of marital problems (Actor effects)					
Effect of time at high optimism (+1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	.03	.06	0.48	−.09	.15
Relationship-specific optimism	.18	.06	2.77**	.06	.30
Effect of time at low optimism (−1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	.28	.08	4.21***	.12	.44
Relationship-specific optimism	.06	.06	0.97	−.06	.18
Effect of optimism 1 year into marriage					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.37	.10	−3.64***	−.57	−.17
Relationship-specific optimism	−.16	.09	−1.77 <sup>†</sup>	−.34	.02
Results for partner reports of severity of marital problems (Partner effects)					
Effect of time at high optimism (+1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	.06	.06	1.02	−.06	.18
Relationship-specific optimism	.26	.06	4.31***	.14	.38
Effect of time at low optimism (−1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	.23	.06	2.80***	.11	.35
Relationship-specific optimism	.03	.06	0.56	−.09	.15
Effect of optimism 1 year into marriage					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.11	.10	−1.09	−.31	.09
Relationship-specific optimism	.35	.09	3.88***	.17	.53

Note. All variables were standardized for analyses. All coefficients presented are pooled across gender. The fourth simple effect (e.g., the effect of optimism at the beginning of the marriage) is presented in Table 7 as the intercept effect. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit. †  $p < .10$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

and relationship-specific optimism were entered to predict both the intercept and the trajectory of marital problems over the first year of marriage, results revealed that spouses who exhibited more constructive behavior during the conflict task reported fewer increases in the severity of marital problems over time,  $b = -.10$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t(45) = -1.96$ ,  $p = .05$ , 95% CI [−0.20, 0.00]. The online spreadsheet ([www.quantpsy.org](http://www.quantpsy.org)) provided by Bauer, Preacher, and Gil (2006) was then used to calculate the indirect effects and confidence intervals. The average indirect effect was estimated to be −.02, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.00], for dispositional

optimism, and .02, 95% CI [0.00, 0.04], for relationship-specific optimism, suggesting that observed problem-solving behavior during the lab-induced conflict task may account (at least marginally) for the associations between optimism and changes in the severity of marital problems over time.

Analyses also were conducted to examine whether spouses' reports of changes in the severity of marital problems over time mediated the link between spouses' optimism and changes in their own marital satisfaction. Although the direct effect of optimism on changes in marital satisfaction over time was marginally signifi-

Table 9

Optimism as a Predictor of Changes in Marital Satisfaction Over Time

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (56)	95% CI	
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Results for own marital satisfaction (Actor effects)					
Initial marital satisfaction (Intercept)					
Dispositional optimism	.19	.08	2.37*	0.03	0.35
Relationship-specific optimism	.17	.08	2.10*	0.01	0.33
Change in satisfaction (Slope)					
Dispositional optimism	.11	.07	1.68 <sup>‡</sup>	−0.02	0.25
Relationship-specific optimism	−.07	.04	−1.76 <sup>‡</sup>	−0.14	0.01
Results for partners' marital satisfaction (Partner effects)					
Initial marital satisfaction (Intercept)					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.04	.10	−0.71	−0.24	0.16
Relationship-specific optimism	−.01	.08	−0.15	−0.17	0.15
Change in marital satisfaction (Slope)					
Global, dispositional optimism	.04	.07	0.67	−0.10	0.18
Relationship-specific optimism	−.03	.04	−0.71	−0.11	0.05

Note. All variables were standardized for analyses. All coefficients presented are pooled across gender. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

†  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ .

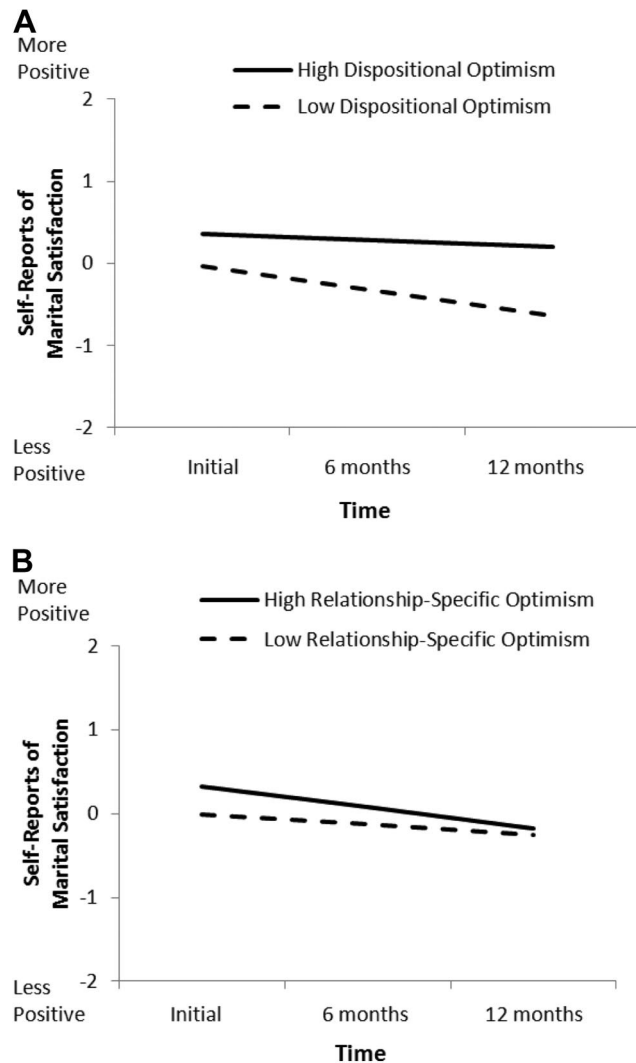


Figure 5. The interaction of spouses' optimism and time predicting spouses' own reports of marital satisfaction. Figure 5A represents results for dispositional optimism, and Figure 5B represents results for relationship-specific optimism. To produce these predicted means, the dependent variable and optimism were standardized.

cant, Shrout and Bolger (2002) have argued for relaxing the requirement that the direct effect be statistically significant when one is examining more distal, long-term processes. Thus, each spouse's slope of marital problems was added to the between-subjects level of the model estimating the links between optimism and the trajectory of marital satisfaction. Results indicated that spouses who reported greater increases in marital problems also exhibited steeper declines in their marital satisfaction over time,  $b = -.17$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t(54) = -2.72$ ,  $p = .009$ , 95% CI  $[-0.29, -0.05]$ . The average indirect effect was estimated to be .02, 95% CI  $[0.01, 0.05]$ , for dispositional optimism, and  $-.02$ , 95% CI  $[-0.04, -0.01]$ , for relationship-specific optimism, suggesting that changes in the severity of marital problems may account for the associations between optimism and changes in satisfaction over time.

## Discussion

### Rationale and Summary of Results

Are optimistic expectations for the future an invaluable resource for sustaining healthy relationships or a herald of disappointment and dysfunction? The current findings indicate that the answer to this question depends on the manner in which optimistic expectancies are conceptualized. Positive expectancies can range from highly generalized beliefs that one will experience good outcomes in life to very specific expectancies regarding particular relationship events (Armor & Taylor, 1998). Consistent with theoretical perspectives suggesting that spouses may be better able and more motivated to achieve their global expectancies than their specific expectancies (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005), global, dispositional forms of optimism appeared more adaptive for marital well-being than did situational, relationship-specific optimism. Put another way, the effects of optimistic expectations varied according to the specificity of the expectations in question.

For instance, results supported the idea that global and relationship-specific optimism may encourage different kinds of responses to relationship challenges. Global, dispositional optimism served as an important coping asset, as spouses higher in this form of optimism consistently engaged in more constructive responses to relationship conflict, regardless of the situational context. Results of the daily diary portion of the study indicated that on days when spouses received greater negativity from their partner, spouses higher in dispositional optimism reported enacting more positive problem-solving responses to that conflict compared to spouses lower in dispositional optimism. In fact, consistent with theories of behavioral regulation, which suggest that spouses holding unfavorable expectancies may reduce their coping efforts when faced with challenges (Carver et al., 2010), the problem-solving behavior of spouses lower in dispositional optimism grew significantly worse as negativity increased. Further analyses utilizing observational assessments of problem-solving behaviors revealed that spouses higher in global, dispositional optimism also were rated by independent observers as exhibiting more constructive problem-solving behaviors when discussing marital issues with a partner. Contrary to predictions, this link between global optimism and problem-solving behavior was not moderated by the importance of the problem at hand. Thus, the current results failed to corroborate prior work in which global, dispositional optimists were found to invest greater energy into higher-priority goals (Geers et al., 2009). This prior work, however, examined behavioral engagement in numerous non-relational goals that varied greatly in their self-relevance (e.g., aerobic exercise, GPA). Given the centrality of marriage in most individuals' lives (Karney & Bradbury, 2005), it is possible that dispositional optimists simply assign higher priority to their relationship-oriented goals than to their other life goals. As a result, global optimism may rouse greater efforts to overcome all relationship difficulties.

Contrary to the findings for global optimism, relationship-specific optimism generally operated as a coping liability. On days of greater relationship conflict, spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism were less likely to engage in adaptive problem-solving behaviors than were spouses lower in this form of optimism. Moreover, and consistent with perspectives arguing for the potential of highly favorable expectancies to undermine effecting



Table 10  
Simple Effects for Interactions Between Time (i.e., Slope of Marital Satisfaction) and Optimism  
Presented in Table 9

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (56)	95% CI	
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Results for self-reports of marital satisfaction					
Effect of time at high optimism (+1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.09	.10	0.93	−0.29	0.11
Relationship-specific optimism	−.24	.08	−3.01**	−0.40	−0.08
Effect of time at low optimism (−1 <i>SD</i> )					
Global, dispositional optimism	−.30	.11	−2.69**	−0.52	−0.08
Relationship-specific optimism	−.14	.08	−1.63	−0.30	0.02
Effect of optimism 1 year into marriage					
Global, dispositional optimism	.42	.12	3.45***	0.18	0.66
Relationship-specific optimism	.04	.08	0.43	−0.12	0.20

*Note.* All variables were standardized for analyses. All coefficients presented are pooled across gender. The fourth simple effect (e.g., the effect of optimism at the beginning of the marriage) is presented in Table 9 as the intercept effect. Simple effects for the interaction of time and partners' reports of marital satisfaction are not reported, as these slopes did not reach even marginal levels of significance. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

\*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

coping (Radcliffe & Klein, 2002), spouses holding greater levels of relationship-specific optimism reported worse problem-solving behaviors on high conflict days compared to low conflict days. Although this pattern of results emerged as significant only when examining spouses' own reports of daily relationship conflict, the effects when examining spouses' optimism and their partner's reports of relationship conflict were in the same direction. As expected, spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism also tended to exhibit worse problem-solving behaviors during the observed conflict resolution tasks, especially when discussing issues of greater versus lesser importance. In other words, higher levels of relationship-specific optimism appeared particularly problematic when couples faced more serious challenges.

Further results revealed that global and relationship-specific optimism also differentially predicted future marital outcomes. As expected given their more adaptive coping responses to relationship issues, spouses higher in global, dispositional optimism experienced fewer increases in the severity of marital problems during the first year of marriage. On the contrary, spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism experienced greater increases in marital problems over time. This latter finding is particularly notable given that many of the relationship domains assessed on the measure of relationship-specific optimism (e.g., communication, sex) overlapped with the domains on the measure of marital problems. Thus, holding highly optimistic expectations about a particular relationship domain did not confer a greater likelihood of overcoming problems in that domain. Rather, highly optimistic specific expectations seemingly allowed problems in these areas to fester and grow worse with time.

In order to directly examine whether spouses' coping in the face of relationship challenges accounted for the links between optimism and changes in marital problems over time, additional mediational analyses were conducted. Although mediational models utilizing daily problem-solving responses to naturally-occurring conflicts were not supported, models using the observed problem-solving behaviors were encouraging. Consequently, while we acknowledge that future research is necessary to more fully understand mediational processes,

we are hesitant to rule out the possibility that coping responses to relationship conflict may represent one mechanism through which optimism may influence marital outcomes. The larger pattern of results is consistent with the general theory that global and specific forms of optimism shape responses to relationship difficulties, which ultimately should make the marriage more or less resilient to problems over time.

Finally, trends also emerged suggesting that spouses higher in dispositional optimism exhibited more stable (i.e., less declines in) marital satisfaction as the marriage progressed. Alternatively, though spouses higher in relationship-specific optimism began the marriage reporting higher levels of marital satisfaction, these spouses also experienced steeper declines in satisfaction over the 1-year period. This latter pattern of results is especially interesting in light of prior marital research indicating that couples who begin a marriage reporting exceptionally high levels of affection and love followed by steep declines in that affection and love are at high risk for future divorce (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). Nevertheless, further research is needed to examine links between optimism and changes in marital satisfaction over a longer time-frame. The slightly weaker results found when examining changes in satisfaction may be due to the fact that the current study assessed outcomes during the early "newlywed phase" of marriage. If global and relationship-specific optimism differentially predict coping responses to relationship conflict, changes in the severity of marital problems may represent a more immediate and proximal consequence of these coping responses. Thus, in time the effects of spouses' optimism on both their own and their partners' satisfaction may become stronger. Consistent with this notion, changes in the severity of marital problems emerged as a mediator of the links between optimism and trajectories of satisfaction.

### Is Relationship-Specific Optimism Always Detrimental?

Although higher levels of relationship-specific optimism proved detrimental to marital functioning, it would be misleading to infer

that spouses should be urged to simply lower their relationship expectations for two reasons. First, the implications of these findings must be considered with respect to the range of optimism scores exhibited in the current sample. These newlywed spouses reported relationship-specific expectations that ranged from moderately positive to extremely positive, which prevents us from drawing firm conclusions regarding the role of low expectations for marital well-being. Drawing from the broader literature on positive illusions, it is possible that moderately positive expectations represent the “optimal” level of relationship-specific optimism for mobilizing adaptive relationship functioning (Baumeister, 1989). Accordingly, departures from this optimal level in either direction may create difficulties for the relationship. For instance, truly unfavorable relationship expectancies are unlikely to inspire confidence in the relationship and thus may lead spouses to quickly abandon their efforts to resolve relationship issues (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1997). Likewise, extremely favorable expectancies may be associated with an overconfidence in relationship success that serves to undermine effective responses when those expectancies are challenged (Radcliffe & Klein, 2002). Future research should explore possible curvilinear associations between relationship-specific optimism and marital functioning. If found, such associations would serve to further distinguish the effects of relationship-specific optimism from the linear effects of global optimism on relationship well-being.

Second, some evidence indicates that highly positive relationship-specific expectancies may not be harmful for marital well-being if couples happen to possess the necessary skills and/or resources for confirming those expectations. As previously reviewed, highly positive, optimistic expectations should predict worse relationship outcomes to the extent that couples’ experiences invalidate those expectations. Based on this idea, the current article provides a theoretical framework for identifying the types of optimistic expectations that should be more or less problematic for relationship success. On average, the concrete nature of relationship-specific expectations should render them more difficult to verify compared to more abstract global expectations. However, prior research suggests that if couples possess good relationship skills, which should increase the likelihood of achieving positive relationship expectancies, then even spouses who hold highly optimistic relationship expectations may not experience declines in marital well-being over time (McNulty & Karney, 2004). These prior findings together with the current results suggest that although most couples enter marriage with a certain degree of optimism, marital declines should occur when spouses hold expectations that are rather untenable—either because those expectations are too specific in nature or because they lack the skills to make those expectations a reality, or perhaps a combination of both.

### Optimistic Expectations: Enduring or Ephemeral?

Of course, the implications of optimistic expectations on long-term marital outcomes ultimately may depend on whether such expectations are conceived as an invariant aspect of the person or as malleable beliefs which are responsive to changing circumstances. The question of whether optimistic expectations are trait-like or state-like has received considerable attention within the broader optimism literature. Global, dispositional optimism is generally regarded as a stable, individual difference variable that

regulates behavior across time and contexts (Carver et al., 2010). In fact, evidence suggests that this form of optimism is at least partially heritable (Plomin et al., 1992). Consistent with this perspective, further analysis of our own data revealed that spouses’ levels of global optimism remained quite stable over the first year of marriage.

The origins of relationship-specific optimism, however, may be more multifaceted as specific expectancies are thought to reflect a constellation of cognitive, motivational, and affective processes (Armor & Taylor, 1998; Klein & Zajac, 2009). In fact, at least some prior evidence indicates that relationship optimism may be rooted in both intimates’ actual experiences within the relationship as well as their idiosyncratic hopes and ideals for the future of the relationship (Murray & Holmes, 1997). In principle, then, relationship-specific optimism should be more amenable to future relationship experiences. For instance, highly optimistic expectations may begin to dissipate if spouses repeatedly encounter relationship issues that refute those expectations. Alternatively, optimism may grow stronger in cases where spouses are able to successfully overcome relationship challenges. If relationship-specific optimism is responsive to marital experiences, it is possible that the findings of the current study simply capture the “growing pains” of newlywed marriage. In other words, although many spouses began the marriage with rather lofty expectations, for some spouses those expectations may dampen to more modest levels as the marriage progresses. As a result, declines in marital well-being may start to slow or even reverse.

In practice, however, specific optimistic biases have proven to be remarkably stubborn in the face of contradictory information (e.g., Kunda, 1990). Research on the planning fallacy, for example, demonstrates that people continue to make overly optimistic predictions for their future goals, even when reminded of their past failures to meet expectations (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994). Moreover, interventions aimed at reducing optimistic biases have been largely unsuccessful (see Klein & Zajac, 2009, for review). Likewise, additional analyses of the current data confirmed the tenacity of spouses’ relationship expectations. Spouses’ relationship-specific optimism did not decline over the first year marriage, even though spouses holding more optimistic relationship expectations were reporting greater increases in the marital problems they faced during that period. Thus, future research is needed to illuminate the conditions under which overly optimistic expectations for the relationship may break down. Nonetheless, the stability of optimistic expectations found in this newlywed sample underscores the important role initial expectations play in setting the course of marital development during the early years of marriage.

### Strengths and Limitations

The current study contained a number of strengths in its methodology and design which served to enhance our confidence in the results. Foremost among these strengths was the use of complementary data (i.e., daily diary, observational, and longitudinal) to examine the hypotheses. The utilization of several different methodologies not only enhanced the generalizability of the findings, but also served to limit the possibility of third variables influencing the results. For instance, though observational techniques captured spouses’ relationship coping behaviors in a limited context, the use

of such techniques ensured that the association between spouses' optimism and their marital functioning would not be artificially inflated due to shared method variance. To examine responses to relationship conflict across time and contexts in the daily diary portion of the study, within-person analyses were used to examine the association between spouses' reports of their coping behavior and their perceptions of relationship conflict. A within-subject approach allowed us to examine the covariation between relationship conflict and coping responses controlling for spouses' idiosyncratic tendencies to view their daily relationship exchanges more or less favorably. As an additional precaution, analyses controlled for several personality factors known to influence spouses' relationship functioning and marital satisfaction when examining these optimism effects. Inclusion of these controls indicated that optimism uniquely predicts relationship functioning above and beyond these other variables. Finally, it is worth noting that the same general pattern of results was found when using partner reports rather than self-reports of daily relationship conflict and marital problems, again suggesting that effects were not simply driven by self-reporting biases.

Second, in contrast to much prior research that has addressed samples varying widely in marital duration, the analyses reported here examined data from a relatively homogeneous sample of newlywed couples, reducing the likelihood that these effects resulted from uncontrolled differences in marital duration. Examining predictors of relationship coping efforts in this sample of couples not yet experiencing marital distress may be useful for identifying couples who may be at risk for deterioration and divorce. Moreover, the use of a fairly homogeneous sample provided a more conservative test of our hypotheses.

Despite these strengths, the study was limited in several ways. First, in order to examine the effects of global and specific forms of optimism on marital well-being, the current study assessed two types of optimism that were quite discrepant in their level of specificity. While items tapping global expectancies represented spouses' general outlook on life, items tapping specific expectancies assessed appraisals of particular relationship events. If optimistic expectancies can be placed on continuum of specificity, then it stands to reason that spouses are likely to hold expectancies that fall in between these two extremes. For example, spouses may form global, generalized expectations that are more directly relevant to the marriage (e.g., "I expect my marriage will always be good" or "I'm always optimistic about the future of my marriage"). Examining expectations that vary in specificity yet are equally marriage relevant may provide an even stronger test of the current hypotheses. If global expectancies increase the likelihood of expectancy confirmation, then global, yet marriage relevant optimism should be more adaptive than specific, marriage relevant optimism. In other words, we would expect global marriage optimism to function similarly to dispositional optimism, though whether the effects would be slightly weaker (due to the greater specificity of global marriage optimism compared to dispositional optimism) or slightly stronger (due to the greater focus on the relationship) is an open question. Research that further differentiates levels of optimism may provide a richer understanding how optimistic expectancies shape marital well-being over time.

Along similar lines, a second potential limitation surrounding the conceptualization of optimism in the current study involves the use of extreme language (e.g., "I am always optimistic about my

future"; "My partner and I will always communicate well") to capture spouse's optimistic forecasts. Notably, the use of such language is quite conventional within studies of optimism; as most people, particularly newlyweds, tend to be quite optimistic about their futures, extremely worded items allow researchers to better capture variability in optimism (Carver et al., 2010; McNulty & Karney, 2004). Thus, the current findings map onto the existing literature quite well. Yet, this language may raise questions regarding whether measures of domain-specific optimism are capturing an element of perfectionism. As optimistic expectations become more specific and concrete, they also may become more perfectionistic as the range of criteria for evaluating whether the expectation has been confirmed becomes quite small. Further research is needed to untangle potential links between specific forms of optimism and perfectionism.

Finally, the study utilized a relatively small sample of couples, thereby lowering the power of our analyses. Nevertheless, the fact that many of our predictions were supported, despite the conservative nature of our tests, suggests the current findings are robust.

### Additional Directions for Future Research

The current study drew from work on expectancy confirmation to suggest that highly optimistic specific expectations can create problems within relationships due to the disappointment and uncertainty that may ensue when those expectancies are (perhaps inevitably) challenged (Afifi & Metts, 1998). In other words, the potential danger of relationship-specific optimism lies in the fact that expectancy disconfirmation signals important limitations in spouses' ability to predict and control the future of the relationship, and thus may undermine spouses' sense of security within the relationship. This insecurity in turn is likely to impede effective responses to relationship conflict (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Although the mood analyses presented in Footnote 3 are consistent with this perspective, additional work is needed to examine the emotional responses that may serve as the mechanism linking relationship-specific optimism to poor coping behaviors.

Future research also should extend the current findings linking optimism to behavioral coping responses by examining whether global and specific forms of optimism may differentially influence attention to and interpretation of negative relationship information. Growing evidence indicates that global, dispositional optimists are more likely to attend to threatening information in their environment compared to less globally optimistic individuals (Carver et al., 2010). Furthermore, dispositional optimists seem to correctly interpret that threatening information as potentially harmful (Chang, 1998). Thus, global optimists may be more likely to attend to negative information in the relationship and to view that information as diagnostic of a problem that needs attention. As a result, these optimists should engage in more constructive coping efforts, leading to better relationship outcomes. Turning to domain-specific optimism, some work suggests that individuals high in this type of optimism often shy away from threatening situations by avoiding negative information (Klein & Steers-Wentzell, 2007; though see Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996, for an exception). Conversely, relationship-specific optimists may be less likely to attend to relationship threats, and this inattention may result in less constructive coping efforts and greater disappointment as those problems continue to fester.

## Conclusions

Though the close relationships literature argues that expectations play an integral role in shaping marital development (e.g., [Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003](#)), the question of whether it is adaptive for spouses to hold highly optimistic expectancies for the future has not been adequately explored. The current findings argue that the role of optimistic expectations for marital development cannot be fully understood unless greater attention is given to the way in which optimistic expectancies are conceptualized. Distinguishing between global and specific forms of optimism provides a clearer picture of when it may be advisable to expect the best.

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(Appendix follows)

### Appendix

#### Measure of Relationship-Specific Optimism

For each of the following items, fill in the circle (O) that best describes YOUR EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUR MARRIAGE OVER THE NEXT FOUR YEARS.	<i>Strongly disagree</i>		3	4	5	<i>Strongly agree</i>	
	1	2				6	7
1. I expect my partner and I will always communicate well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I expect my partner will always be interested in how my day went.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. I expect my partner will always be attractive to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. I expect my sexual relationship with my partner will always be satisfying.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. I expect my partner and I will always be able to resolve our disagreements.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. I expect that my partner will never intentionally hurt me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. I expect my partner and I will always agree about family issues.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. I expect my partner will always be affectionate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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