

Judgments of a Relationship Partner: Specific Accuracy but Global Enhancement

Lisa A. Neff
Benjamin R. Karney
University of Florida

ABSTRACT How do partners in satisfying close relationships perceive each other? Some argue that relationships benefit from each partner having an accurate view of the other, while others maintain that partners benefit when they perceive each other in the most positive light possible. The current paper proposes that each of these benefits operates at a separate level of abstraction. Specifically, we propose that satisfied partners tend to be accurate in their specific perceptions of each other, but enhancing in their global evaluations. To address hypotheses derived from this model, global and specific perceptions of self and partner were obtained from a sample of 82 newlywed couples. Results indicate that: 1) trait perceptions assessed by different commonly used measures differ significantly in their breadth; 2) broader or more global traits are rated as significantly more desirable and important; 3) spouses in satisfying marriages describe their partners' positive traits in more global terms and their negative traits in more specific terms; and 4) spouses perceive each other more accurately on specific traits than global traits.

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Many of the phenomena that define close relationships are dependent on the way that intimates judge each other's traits and abilities. For example, intimates' perceptions of their romantic partners serve to shape their interactions with each other by defining intimates' expectations of their partners (e.g., Schlenker, 1984) and guiding their responses to specific partner behaviors (e.g., Snyder, Tanke, Berscheid, 1977). Intimates' perceptions of their romantic partners are associated with relationship satisfaction cross-sectionally and with changes in relationship satisfaction longitudinally (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Moreover, perceptions of a partner's qualities may be more strongly associated with relationship outcomes than the partner's actual qualities (Murray et al., 1996a; 1996b; Ruvolo & Veroff, 1997; Sternberg & Barnes, 1985). Thus, intimates' perceptions of each other appear to be inextricably and uniquely tied to their evaluations of their relationships overall.

Given the associations between intimates' perceptions and their relationship well-being, understanding how intimates perceive each other must be a central element of any theory of relationship development. But what kind of perceptions and judgments make for satisfying relationships? This question has sparked a long-standing debate in the close relationships literature, as two views have emerged to explain how satisfied intimates perceive their partners. Some theorists have argued that when judging a partner's qualities, the main goal of intimates is for their evaluations to offer relatively precise predictions of a partner's behavior (Swann, 1984; Swann et al., 1994). Thus, according to this *accuracy* perspective, intimates are motivated to hold accurate perceptions of their partners, regardless of whether those perceptions are positive or negative. As long as intimates understand their partners' strengths and weaknesses, their interactions should proceed smoothly and cooperative efforts to meet desired goals should prove successful (Swann et al., 1994). In fact, Swann and colleagues (1994) consistently have found that, among married couples, relationship satisfaction is higher the more intimates agree with their partners' self-perceived traits and abilities. Importantly, this finding holds even when agreement entails viewing the partner in a negative light. In other words, spouses were happier the more they agreed with their partners' negative self-perceived qualities.

Other theorists argue that satisfied intimates may be biased in their judgments of their partners' qualities (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b). To

the extent that an accurate perception of a partner may have negative implications for the relationship, intimates are suggested to be motivated to perceive their partners in a positively biased fashion (Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995). According to this *enhancement* perspective, positively biased perceptions of a partner's qualities promote happiness and security within the relationship, particularly at times when the relationship is threatened (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). In direct contrast to the accuracy perspective, Murray and colleagues (1996a, 1996b) found evidence suggesting that spouses report greater relationship satisfaction the more favorably they perceive their partners, even though these evaluations may be discrepant with their partners' self-views. When evaluating a partner's negative qualities, satisfied spouses not only view their partners favorably, but also seem to view their partners even more favorably than partners see themselves.

The apparent incompatibility between these perspectives has led to the development of several theories attempting to determine which motive has a greater influence over intimates' perceptions of each other. To date, however, the focus on whether accuracy goals or enhancement goals take priority within close relationships has not led to a deeper understanding of how intimates judge their relationship partners. For instance, several previous attempts to integrate accuracy and enhancement motives have involved proposing a hierarchy of motives, such that one motive is subsumed under the guiding principles of the other motive. Accuracy theorists argue that accuracy is the dominant motive, though individuals may satisfy their secondary enhancement strivings by holding positive perceptions of their partners' positive qualities. In this case, intimates may perceive their partners positively without sacrificing accuracy (Swann, Pelham & Krull, 1989). Enhancement theorists, on the other hand, suggest that enhancement is the primary motive; yet holding positive perceptions of a partners' positive qualities also may serve to satisfy less important accuracy goals (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Thus, researchers have failed to agree on the nature of the hierarchy, with researchers on both sides suggesting different organizations of motives. As a result, previous attempts at reconciliation have served to add to the debate rather than to resolve it (for a more detailed review of this literature, see Neff & Karney, in press).

To advance our understanding of how intimates perceive one another in close relationships, we argue that the central question is not

whether accuracy or enhancement dominates perceptions, but rather how accuracy and enhancement may operate simultaneously within the same relationships. The goal of the current study is to propose and evaluate a model that attempts to answer this question. To meet this goal, the remainder of this introduction is organized into two sections. The first section suggests a possible reconciliation between theories of accuracy and theories of enhancement that accounts for how both motives may simultaneously guide intimates' perceptions of their partners. This section argues that the specificity of the evaluation may influence the nature of intimates' perceptions. Satisfied intimates may perceive their partners accurately at the level of their specific perceptions and enhance their partners at the level of their global evaluations. The second section describes the current study, designed to evaluate this model by assessing intimates' global and specific judgments of their partners within a sample of satisfied, newlywed couples.

A Model of Specific Accuracy and Global Enhancement

Most research on how intimates perceive one another has not distinguished between perceptions at different levels of abstraction. Thus, comparisons across studies make the implicit assumption that traits assessed by different measures are interchangeable. In contrast, a premise of the current model is that perceptions of a partner vary meaningfully in their level of abstraction, from specific perceptions of behaviors and abilities to global evaluations of the person as a whole (Neff & Karney, 2001). Hampson, John, and Goldberg (1986) referred to this dimension as breadth, and operationalized it in terms of the diversity of possible behavioral referents for an impression. Thus, broad traits may be indicated by a wide range of distinct behaviors. By this definition, the perception that a partner is kind is relatively broad, because there are a number of different ways that this trait may be expressed. Concrete or specific traits, on the other hand, suggest a more limited range of behaviors. Thus, the belief that a partner is charitable is more specific, because, relative to the word *kind*, charitable suggests a more narrow set of behaviors (nonreciprocal giving) expressed toward people in need (John, Hampson, & Goldberg, 1991). Prior research has made similar distinctions between levels of trait perceptions, using a variety of different terms, such as

globality, abstractness, centrality, or visibility (e.g., Funder & Dobroth, 1987; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). Though these dimensions may not be identical, all of these labels appear to be referring to similar underlying property, suggesting, as Hampson, John, and Goldberg (1986) observed, that the dimensions are highly overlapping.

Acknowledging the variability in the breadth or globality of perceptions has two important implications for understanding intimates' judgments of their partners' qualities. First, the breadth of the trait being perceived may affect the *ability* of intimates to enhance their partners on that dimension. As mentioned, global perceptions can be defined by a large number of distinct behaviors, whereas specific perceptions can be defined by relatively few distinct behaviors. As a result, global perceptions of a partner may be better suited for enhancement than specific perceptions. Global views allow intimates to consider a broader range of behavioral criteria than specific views when evaluating their partners on that attribute (Hampson, et al., 1986). When individuals have more criteria to consider, they also have more latitude to place their partners in a positive light (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). In other words, as views of a partner become more global, it should become easier for intimates to enhance their partners' status on that trait due to the relative lack of objective standards for evaluating global views. While intimates may easily construct positively biased perceptions of a partner's dependability, they may find it difficult to justify such biases when evaluating that partner's punctuality, particularly if the partner frequently arrives late to engagements. Thus, positively biased perceptions of a romantic partner are more likely to be found when examining beliefs at higher levels of abstraction.

Second, in addition to influencing the ease with which intimates may enhance their partners, the breadth of the trait being perceived may affect the *motivation* of the intimate to enhance a partner on that attribute. The alignment of partner perceptions along a global/specific dimension suggests that these views can be represented in a hierarchical structure (Hampson et al., 1986; John et al., 1991). Global perceptions serve to integrate related specific perceptions into an organized associative network (e.g., Baldwin, 1992). For instance, the perception that a partner is dependable would be located higher in the hierarchy than the perception that a partner is punctual. Though punctuality represents one means of being dependable, the reverse is not true (e.g., Hampson, et al., 1986). Thus, as views become more

global, they will subsume a greater number of specific perceptions and thus become more evaluative in nature. That is, at the global level, "behavior is represented so abstractly that there remains little more than one feature, the general evaluation of the behavior to which the term refers" (John, et al., 1991 p. 351). For instance, whereas the specific attribute *punctual* is relatively descriptive of one's behavior, the global attribute *good* simply evaluates how positive or desirable one is. Consequently, intimates may be more motivated to enhance their partners on global rather than specific attributes (cf. Sedikides, 1993). Holding the perception that one's partner is a kind person should be more important to general relationship satisfaction than holding the perception that one's partner is charitable. Similarly, a negative, but perhaps accurate, perception of a partner should have fewer implications for overall satisfaction if the negative perception is restricted to a lower level of abstraction. Evidence suggests that when describing the disliked behaviors of a hypothetical liked other, individuals tend to describe these behaviors using attributes that are relatively specific in nature (John et al., 1991; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989). Using a specific attribute to describe negative behaviors narrows the range of behaviors that are inconsistent with the overall liking of the target. Consequently, a liked other may be perceived as uncharitable, but never as unkind (John et al., 1991). Motives for enhancement, then, should operate more strongly when evaluating a partner's global attributes than when evaluating a partner's specific attributes.

From this perspective, accuracy and enhancement processes may operate at different levels of abstraction within the same relationship, depending on the nature of the traits being evaluated. Satisfied intimates may be accurate at the level of their specific perceptions, such that intimates understand their partners' self-perceived specific strengths and weaknesses, helping the relationship to run smoothly. At the same time, satisfied intimates may enhance their partners at the level of their global perceptions, such that intimates will view their partners as generally good individuals, regardless of how their partners view themselves, in order to maintain a positive evaluation of their relationship. Thus, a model that acknowledges variability in the specificity of perceptions offers a way that intimates simultaneously may achieve accuracy and enhancement within the same satisfying relationships. In fact, one may argue that demonstrating an accurate knowledge of a partner's specific qualities while also perceiving the partner as a good, worthwhile person may represent "true love."

Intimates who display specific accuracy, coupled with global enhancement, communicate to their partners that they are both loved and understood.

Overview of the Current Study

Evaluating a model of specific accuracy and global enhancement in perceptions of relationship partners requires attention to two important methodological issues. First, perceptions must be measured at varying levels of abstraction. To address this issue, the current study asked intimates to rate their perceptions of their partner's specific attributes and their perceptions of their partner's global worth. In addition, breadth ratings for each of the specific attributes measured in the study were obtained so that the relationship between perceptions of a partner and the level of abstraction of the perceptions could be examined both across measures and across traits. Second, evaluation of the model requires a clearly delineated criterion of accuracy. Researchers have long argued what the gold standard is for determining the accuracy of personality judgments (e.g., Funder & Dobroth, 1987). Given current lack of consensus, in the present paper, partners' self-perceptions were used as the standard of accuracy. The current study assessed both self-perceptions and partner perceptions in a sample of first-married newlywed couples. In this way, the discrepancy between self-perceptions and partner perceptions could be examined. The accuracy of a perception was defined in terms of the agreement between spouses' perceptions of their partners and partners' self-perceptions. In comparing these two scores, a raw difference close to zero would indicate that spouses agreed on their perception of a particular trait. Enhancement was similarly defined as the degree to which spouses' perceptions of their partners exceed their partners' self-appraisals. A large and positive difference between the two scores would indicate that spouses were enhancing their partners' self-perceptions by viewing their partners more positively than partners viewed themselves. This study examined perceptions within newlywed couples to ensure that all couples were at a similar marital duration and that the motivation to perceive the marriage as positive was strong and fairly uniform across spouses.

Analyses of these data addressed three specific questions. First, do spouses consider global traits to be more important than specific traits? The current model argues that spouses should be more likely to

enhance their partners on global traits than on specific traits. However, this argument partly is based on the premise that global traits should be more important to intimates' relationship satisfaction than specific traits, thereby leading intimates to be more motivated to enhance their partners at this level. Consequently, the first goal of the study was to assess this premise. Given that global views tend to summarize a number of specific views and thus be more evaluative than specific views, spouses are expected to rate global perceptions of a partner as more influential to the relationship than specific perceptions of a partner. In particular, when evaluating their partners' qualities, broader traits should be rated as more important to the relationship than specific traits.

Second, does the bias with which spouses perceive their partners' qualities vary reliably according to the specificity of the perception? If global perceptions are in fact more important than specific perceptions, then spouses should be more enhancing (i.e., less accurate) in their global perceptions of their partners than in their specific perceptions of their partners. This relationship between biases in perceptions and the specificity of the perceptions was examined two ways. First, it was predicted that the bias with which spouses perceived their partners would vary across different well-established measures of self-views. Thus, spouses should tend to agree with their partners' self-perceptions on measures that tap specific traits and qualities, while enhancing their partners' self-perceptions on measures designed to tap global qualities. Second, it was predicted that the bias with which spouses perceived their partners would vary reliably across the traits within a single measure of self-views. In other words, the degree of bias in spouses' perceptions was expected to be positively associated with the breadth of the trait being evaluated.

Finally, will spouses use traits that vary in specificity to describe their partners' positive and negative qualities? In addition to examining spouses' perceptions of their partners on established trait measures, the current study examined the types of traits spouses spontaneously generate when asked to provide open-ended descriptions of their partner's qualities. Given that global perceptions of a partner should have greater implications for the relationship than specific perceptions, it was predicted that spouses in satisfying relationships would use more specific traits to describe negative qualities and more global traits to describe positive qualities. In this way, the impact of perceptions that may threaten a positive view of the

relationship would be limited, as negative perceptions would be confined to lower levels of abstraction.

METHOD

Participants

Newlywed couples were recruited for this study using two methods. First, advertisements were placed in community newspapers and bridal shops, offering up to \$300 to couples willing to participate in a study of the early years of marriage. Second, letters were sent to couples who had applied for marriage licenses in Alachua County, Florida. 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, (b) the couple had been married less than 6 months, (c) neither partner had children, (d) each partner was at least 18 years of age, and wives were less than 35 years of age (to allow that all couples were capable of conceiving children over the course of the study), (e) each partner spoke English and had completed at least 10 years of education (to ensure comprehension of the questionnaires), and (f) the couple had no immediate plans to move away from the area. The final sample consisted of 82 couples. Analyses revealed no significant differences in age or years of education between couples recruited through the different types of solicitations (D'Angelo & Karney, 1999).

On average, husbands were 25.1 ($SD = 3.3$) years old. Forty percent of husbands were employed full time and 54% were full-time students. Wives averaged 23.7 ($SD = 2.8$) years old. Thirty-nine percent were employed full time, and 50% were full-time students. Slightly over 70% of the sample were Christian (over 45% were Protestant) and 83% of husbands and 89% of wives were white. Moreover, on the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1986), a marital satisfaction scale with a possible range of 6 to 45, the average satisfaction score for husbands and wives was 42.1 ($SD = 4.0$) and 42.0 ($SD = 5.3$), respectively. In fact, about 50% of the sample had a perfect score on this measure. Thus, the intimates in the sample were highly satisfied with their marriages.

Procedure

Couples were mailed a packet of questionnaires to complete at home every 6 months over a 2-year period. This packet contained self-report measures and a letter instructing couples to complete all questionnaires independently of one another. Couples were paid \$25 each time they returned the questionnaires via

mail. At Time 2, 76 couples completed and returned their packets. At Time 4, 62 couples completed and returned their packets. Thus, over 75% of the sample was retained over the 2-year period. Analyses revealed no differences at Time 1 between couples who completed all four waves of data and those who did not on any of the measures tapping spouses' perceptions of themselves and their relationship partners.

Measures

Global Perceptions of the Self and Partner

To assess intimates' global perceptions of themselves and their spouses, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire (SEQ) and the Revision of Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire (R-SEQ) were used (Rosenberg, 1965). Spouses completed these measures at Time 1, within the first 6 months of their marriage. The R-SEQ includes the same items of the original scale, reworded such that intimates completed it with regard to the esteem in which they held their spouses. For instance, the item "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" was reworded to say "I feel that my spouse has a number of good qualities." Items were rated on a 1 to 4 scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*). The internal consistency of the 10 items was adequate for self-ratings (coefficient alpha = .86 for husbands and .88 for wives) and lower for partner ratings (coefficient alpha = .77 for husbands and .52 for wives). The lower alpha for wives' ratings of their partners may be due to the lower variability in responses across wives (e.g., all wives strongly agreed with the statement indicating that their partner possessed a number of positive qualities). Composite scores for these scales could range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. Average composite self-perceptions were 34.4 ($SD = 4.7$) for husbands and 33.2 ($SD = 5.1$) for wives. Average composite perceptions of a partner were 38.2 ($SD = 2.9$) for husbands' views of their wives and 38.8 ($SD = 1.7$) for wives' views of their husbands.

Specific Perceptions of the Self and Partner

Intimates' specific perceptions of both themselves and their spouses were assessed with a version of the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Swann, et al., 1994). This measure was given to spouses at Time 1, within the first 6 months of their marriage. The SAQ asks intimates to rate themselves and their spouses on six relatively specific qualities: intellectual capability, physical attractiveness, athletic ability, social skills, organization, and tidiness. Though this measure includes attributes that seemingly vary in their specificity, the SAQ nevertheless represents a measure that is more specific in nature than the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire. For each

attribute, participants rated themselves and their partners relative to other people of the same age and gender on graduated interval scales ranging from 1 (the bottom 5%) to 19 (the top 5%). The internal consistency of the ratings was adequate for ratings of self (coefficient alpha = .77 for husbands and .74 for wives) and lower for ratings of partner (coefficient alphas = .53 for husbands and .67 for wives).¹ The six items were examined separately and also as a summed composite score with a possible range of 6 to 114, with higher scores reflecting more positive views. Average composite self-perceptions were 85.0 ($SD = 14.2$) for husbands and 84.8 ($SD = 13.5$) for wives. Average composite perceptions of a partner were 89.3 ($SD = 10.9$) for husbands' views of their wives and 88.2 ($SD = 13.7$) for wives' views of their husbands.

Written Descriptions of a Partner

To assess the types of attributes spouses use when spontaneously describing their partners' qualities, spouses were asked to write an open-ended paragraph describing how they thought about and viewed their partners. Spouses completed this paragraph at Time 2, which occurred approximately 1 year following the marriage. Specifically, spouses were asked to write whatever came to mind in response to the following questions: "What do you think of your spouse?" and "what kind of person is he or she?" A team of coders read the paragraphs and identified all terms and phrases that spouses used to describe their partners. For example, one spouse wrote "My wife is extremely creative and highly intelligent, but modest and very approachable..." Thus, the terms *creative*, *intelligent*, *modest* and *approachable* were identified from this sentence. Husbands used an average of 6.6 ($SD = 3.1$) terms when describing their wives, while wives used an average of 10.4 ($SD = 4.7$) terms to describe their husbands.

Trait Breadth and Desirability

To assess the breadth and desirability of partner-descriptive attributes, a list of frequently used terms to describe a spouse was compiled (Neff & Karney, 2001). The list of terms was generated from two sources. The first source

1. The reliability of partner perceptions was lower than the reliability of self-perceptions across measures of global and specific perceptions. This difference in the reliability, however, does not seem to be a threat to the interpretation of the analyses presented in this paper. The difference in reliability is roughly equivalent across measures of global and specific perceptions, yet a different pattern of results was found for measures of global perceptions than for measures of specific perceptions. Together, this suggests that the slightly lower reliability of partner perceptions did not give rise to the pattern of results in the present paper.

was the written paragraphs described above. All of the terms identified by the coders were placed on the list. The second source of terms consisted of existing measures frequently used in studies of relationships. Thus, for example, research on cognitive complexity in relationships has used a card-sorting task, asking couples to organize 40 trait descriptors into groups that describe their partners (e.g., Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). Each of these terms that did not already appear in spouses' open-ended descriptions was added to the list. Also included were the items measured in prior studies of partner perception. Thus, the descriptors from Swann's Specific Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Swann, et al., 1994) and from Murray and Holmes' Interpersonal Qualities Scale (IPQ; Murray & Holmes, 1996) were added to the list. The result was a list of 678 terms and phrases.

Introductory psychology students, participating for course credit, then rated the terms for either their breadth or their desirability. Of the 49 participants, 30 rated the terms for their breadth and 19 rated the terms for their desirability. The instructions given to participants closely mirrored the instructions used in a similar study by Hampson, Goldberg, and John (1987). Thus, those participants completing the breadth-rating questionnaire were provided with a description of the dimension as well as several examples. A portion of these instructions is as follows:

This questionnaire presents you with a number of terms and phrases that may be used to describe a romantic partner. We would like for you to think about how broad or specific these terms and phrases are. By broad, we mean that the word or phrase includes in its meaning a *wide* range of behaviors. For instance, the word "good" could include in its definition a large number of distinct behaviors. In contrast, narrow words or phrases include in their meaning a very limited range of behaviors. For instance, the word "punctual" refers to very few distinct behaviors. For each term or phrase, please consider how many different behaviors the term could include in its meaning, then please indicate how broad (abstract, general, global) the term is.

Participants rated each term on a 7-point scale, where 1 was defined as *very specific* and 7 was defined as *very broad*.

Participants who completed the desirability-rating questionnaire were given the following instructions:

This questionnaire presents you with a number of terms and phrases that may be used to describe a romantic partner. For the following task, we would like for you to think about how positive or negative these terms and phrases are when describing a romantic partner. In other words, for each term or phrase, please ask yourself the following question: How desirable is it for a romantic partner to possess this quality?

Participants rated each term on a 7-point scale, where -3 was defined as *very undesirable*, 0 was defined as *neutral*, and 3 was defined as *very desirable*. Due to the length of the questionnaire, all participants were given the opportunity to complete the questionnaires at home. Participants returned the questionnaire at a designated time 4 days later.

Following the procedure outlined by John et al. (1987), the reliability of the breadth and the desirability ratings was assessed by examining the extent to which raters cohered across the traits. In other words, rather than representing the coherence of items on a test, Cronbach's alpha in this instance represents the coherence of raters across traits. Thus, each rater was treated as an item, and an alpha coefficient was computed for the whole data set across traits. For the breadth ratings, the corrected-item total correlations revealed that three raters had low correlations with the other raters (i.e., below .30) and thus were dropped from further analyses. The remaining 27 raters demonstrated an alpha of .92. For the desirability ratings, the corrected-item total correlations revealed that one rater had a low correlation with the other raters (i.e., below .30) and so was dropped from further analyses. The remaining 18 raters demonstrated an alpha of .98.

To provide the most meaningful comparison data free from the constraints of the metric used to measure breadth and desirability, z -scores were computed for each term. Examples of the broadest terms include: *good*, *great*, *fine*, *excellent* and *nice*, with scale values between 2.5 and 3 SD above the mean. Some examples of the most specific terms include: *doesn't pay bills on time*, *cuddles baby with soft, soothing, loving voice*, and *obsessed with science fiction*, with scale values between 2 and 3 SD below the mean. Likewise, examples of the most desirable terms include: *good friend*, *good listener*, *faithful*, and *trustworthy*, with scale values 1 SD above the mean. Examples of the most undesirable terms include: *worthless*, *rude*, *bad-tempered*, and *unreliable*, with scale values between 2 and 3 SD below the mean.

To investigate the similarity of the current ratings to those found previously by Hampson et al., (1987), the z -scores of the 111 terms appearing on both the current list and the list provided by Hampson and colleagues were correlated. Results suggest that both the breadth and the desirability ratings generated here are comparable to those found in the earlier study ($r = 0.66$, $p < .01$ and $r = .96$, $p < .01$, respectively). Furthermore, as found by Hampson et al., (1987), the desirability ratings were moderately positively correlated with the breadth ratings ($r = .23$, $p < .01$), indicating that the desirable characteristics found on the list tend to be somewhat broader than undesirable characteristics.

Attribute Importance

At Time 4, approximately 2 years into their marriages, spouses were asked to complete the Relationships Values Questionnaire (RVQ). The RVQ was

designed for the current study and presents partners with 24 attributes that may be used to describe a partner. These terms were selected from the list of partner-descriptive terms discussed above and chosen to represent a range of breadth. Thus, the terms that had been rated as relatively broad include *successful*, *understanding*, and *attractive*, and the terms that had been rated as relatively specific include *organized*, *patient*, and *intelligent*. For each term, spouses were asked to indicate how important it was to them for their spouse to possess the quality (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *very important*). The average importance attributed to a quality was 5.3 ($SD = 1.4$) for husbands and 5.4 ($SD = 1.4$) for wives.

Data Analysis

Examination of many of the hypotheses derived from a model of specific accuracy and global enhancement requires within-subjects analyses. A within-subjects approach allowed us to examine variability in the bias of spouses' perceptions of their partners' qualities, controlling for spouses' idiosyncratic tendencies to view partners more or less favorably. To address hypotheses at the within-subjects level, data were examined with Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992), implemented using the HLM/2L computer program (Bryk, Raudenbush, & Congdon, 1994). This approach was adopted for several reasons. First, HLM provides reliable estimates of within-subject associations, even when sample sizes are relatively small. Second, HLM provides maximally efficient estimates of these associations by weighting individual parameter estimates by their precision, according to empirical Bayes theory. For instance, the parameters of individuals who provide data at every wave of assessment will be estimated more reliably than those with missing data. HLM therefore weights the parameter estimates for these individuals more heavily than the parameter estimates for individuals who provided less data. Thus, the final estimate relies heavily on the individual data only when the associations for an individual can be estimated precisely. When these associations cannot be estimated precisely for an individual, the final estimate relies more heavily on the mean of the sample. Because the most precise estimates therefore contribute more to the final estimated variance of the sample, variances estimated in this way tend to be smaller and more conservative than those obtained through traditional OLS methods.

For all of the following analyses, parameters describing husbands' and wives' data were estimated simultaneously to control for the nonindependence of couple data, according to procedures described by Bryk and Raudenbush (1992). In general, the analyses proceeded in two stages. First, data from each spouse was used to estimate the association between that spouse's perception of a partner and the specificity of the trait being

evaluated. Next, the significance of the average association between spouses' perceptions and trait specificity across spouses was estimated.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents the correlations between the composite global and the composite specific perceptions of the self and of the partner. As expected, global and specific views of the self were significantly and positively correlated (see upper left quadrant of Table 1; for husbands' self-views, $r = .27$ and for wives' self-views, $r = .36$). Likewise, global and specific perceptions of the partner were also significantly and positively correlated (see lower right quadrant of Table 1; for husbands' views of wives, $r = .32$ and for wives' views of husbands, $r = .32$). However, specific views accounted for only a small proportion of the variance in global views, suggesting that the measures were not redundant. Significant associations between global and specific views were not expected to affect the hypotheses of the study.

Do Spouses Consider Global Traits More Important Than Specific Traits?

Prior research has suggested that global perceptions summarize a large number of specific perceptions and thus tend to be more

Table 1
Within-Spouse Correlations Among Perceptions of Global Worth and of Specific Attributes

	Self-Perceptions		Perceptions of Partner	
	Global	Specific	Global	Specific
Self-Perceptions				
Global	–	.36**	.14	.15
Specific	.27*	–	.28*	.43**
Perceptions of Partner				
Global	.34**	.10	–	.32**
Specific	.07	.16	.32**	–

Note. Correlations for wives are presented above the diagonal; correlations for husbands are presented below the diagonal. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

evaluative in nature than specific perceptions (Hampson et al., 1986). Consequently, a premise of a model of specific accuracy and global enhancement is that global perceptions should be viewed as more influential to relationship satisfaction than are specific perceptions. The first goal of these analyses was to assess the validity of this assumption. It was predicted that when rating the importance of a variety of partner attributes, spouses would rate global attributes as being more important for their relationship than specific attributes. More specifically, when examining the traits of the RVQ, the breadth of the trait was expected to be positively associated with ratings of importance, even after controlling for the desirability of the trait.

To control for each spouse's idiosyncratic tendency to rate traits as more or less important, this hypothesized relationship was examined at the within-subjects level using HLM. Thus, the first analysis examined the within-spouse tendency to attribute more importance to global rather than specific attributes according to the following model:

$$y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{desirability}) + \beta_{2j} (\text{breadth}) + r_{ij} \quad (1)$$

In this equation, y_{ij} represents the importance spouse j attributes to trait i . β_{0j} , the intercept, estimates the expected importance spouse j attributes to the traits when desirability and breadth are zero. β_{1j} estimates the association between the importance ratings and the desirability ratings across the attributes for spouse j , controlling for each spouse's general tendency to rate the traits as important and for trait breadth. In other words, β_{1j} represents the extent to which a spouse attributes greater importance to more desirable traits, controlling for the breadth of the trait. β_{2j} estimates the association between the importance ratings and the breadth ratings across the attributes for spouse j , controlling for both a spouse's general tendency to rate the traits as important and trait desirability. In other words, β_{2j} represents the extent to which a spouse attributes greater importance to global traits than to specific traits, controlling for the desirability of each trait. Finally, r_{ij} is the residual variance in importance ratings for spouse j , assumed to be independent and normally distributed across spouses. This equation was estimated for

each spouse and the significance of the average β_1 and β_2 terms across spouses was investigated.²

As expected, trait importance was significantly associated with trait desirability for husbands and wives (for husbands, $\beta_1 = 1.42$, $t(59) = 10.0$, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .80$; for wives, $\beta_1 = 1.79$, $t(59) = 16.1$, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .90$). Thus, on average, husbands and wives rated more desirable traits as being more important to the relationship than less desirable traits. However, controlling for this association, trait importance was also significantly associated with trait breadth for both spouses (for husbands, $\beta_2 = .33$, $t(59) = 10.4$, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .80$; for wives, $\beta_2 = .34$, $t(59) = 13.4$, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .87$). Thus, on average, husbands and wives rated broader traits as being more important to their relationships than specific traits, even when controlling for the desirability of the traits.

Does the Bias in Perceptions of a Partner Vary at Different Levels of Abstraction

The second goal of these analyses was to examine the bias in spouses' perceptions of their partners across different levels of abstraction.

2. For ease of presentation, the equations presented throughout the paper represent simplified versions of the complete models that were estimated for each analysis (see Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992, for more detailed information). For instance, the complete model for this analysis is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
 y_{ij} = & \beta_{0j} \text{ (husbands)} + \beta_{0j} \text{ (wives)} + \beta_{1j} \text{ (husbands' desirability)} \\
 & + \beta_{2j} \text{ (wives' desirability)} + \beta_{3j} \text{ (husbands' breadth)} \\
 & + \beta_{4j} \text{ (wives' breadth)} + r_{ij}
 \end{aligned}$$

Next, the significance of the average β terms across spouses was estimated using the following equations:

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \mu_{1j}$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \mu_{2j}$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \gamma_{30} + \mu_{3j}$$

$$\beta_{4j} = \gamma_{40} + \mu_{4j}$$

In each of these equations, γ represents the average association across spouses between spouses' importance ratings and the trait properties (e.g., desirability or breadth).

Previous research argues that spouses should be better able to enhance their partners at global rather than specific levels of perceptions (e.g., Dunning et al., 1989). Moreover, given that global traits are in fact perceived as more important to relationship satisfaction than are specific traits, satisfied spouses should be more likely to perceive their partners' global qualities in a more positively biased fashion than their partners' specific traits in order to maintain their relationship satisfaction. Global and specific perceptions were operationalized in two ways. First, the bias with which spouses' perceive their partners on separate measures of global esteem and of specific attributes was examined. Perceptions of a partner were expected to vary systematically across these different measures. Second, the bias with which spouses perceive their partners across specific attributes was examined. In this case, perceptions of a partner were expected to vary systematically according to the specificity of the particular trait being judged.

Enhancement Across Separate Measures

To determine whether spouses' perceptions of their partners would vary across separate measures of global and specific perceptions, the difference in composite scores between spouses' evaluations of their partners and partners' self-evaluations was computed on both the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scales and the Specific Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ). Spouses were considered to be enhancing their partners if the resulting difference score was large and positive.

On the measure assessing perceptions of global worth (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), the average difference between husbands' evaluations of their wives and wives' self-appraisals was 4.41 ($SD = 4.9$), and the average difference between wives' evaluations of their husbands and husbands' self-appraisals was 5.0 ($SD = 5.3$). For both spouses, one sample t -tests indicated that average difference scores were significantly greater than zero (for husbands, $t(81) = 8.1$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.8$; for wives, $t(81) = 8.5$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.9$). Thus, on average, spouses were significantly enhancing in their perceptions of their partners' global worth, viewing their partners as more worthwhile than partners viewed themselves.

Parallel analyses on the measure assessing perceptions of specific traits (SAQ), however, revealed a different pattern. The average difference between wives' evaluations of their husbands and husbands' self-appraisals was 2.51 ($SD = 14.61$), while the average

difference between husbands' evaluations of their wives and wives' self-appraisals was 1.32 ($SD = 13.95$). One sample t -tests indicated that neither average difference score differed significantly from zero (for husbands, $t(77) = 1.52, p = .13$, Cohen's $d = .35$; for wives, $t(80) = .85, p = .40$, Cohen's $d = .19$). Thus, in contrast to the results using the measure of global worth, these results failed to indicate a systematic bias toward enhancement on the measure of specific traits.

These results are particularly noteworthy, given that spouses' perceptions of their partners on the SAQ and the Rosenberg scale were significantly correlated. Nevertheless, despite the fact that global and specific perceptions of a partner were clearly related, the degree of systematic bias in spouses' perceptions tended to vary across measures. Thus, as the current sample consisted of spouses who were highly satisfied in their marriages, these findings suggest that spouses in satisfying relationship tend to be more enhancing of their partners' global worth than of their partners' specific traits and abilities.

Accuracy Across Traits

Though the SAQ represents a more specific measure than the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, a closer look at the SAQ suggests that the attributes being measured vary in terms of their specificity. To examine the degree of accuracy and bias in spouses' perceptions more precisely, the discrepancy between spouses' perceptions of their partners and partners' self-perceptions was computed for each of the attributes of the SAQ. Table 2 presents the average discrepancy, breadth, and desirability for each of attributes, in the order of largest discrepancy to smallest discrepancy. Importantly, the order of the attributes is virtually identical when comparing how wives view husbands to how husbands view wives. This identical ordering in the accuracy of perceptions suggests that the manner in which spouses view their partners may be the result of some property inherent within the attributes being evaluated.

Our model suggests that spouses' perceptions should be most accurate when judging the more specific traits on the SAQ and most enhancing when judging the more global traits. To address the association between accuracy and the breadth of the attributes on the SAQ, the absolute discrepancy between spouses' perceptions and partners' self-perceptions was examined for each attribute. Absolute discrepancies allow for the assessment of pure accuracy, without regard

Table 2
Average Discrepancy, Breadth, and Desirability for Each of the SAQ Attributes

Attribute	Wives' perceptions of husbands			Attribute	Husbands' perceptions of wives		
	Discrepancy	Breadth	Desirability		Discrepancy	Breadth	Desirability
Attractiveness	3.1 (3.4)	.95	.69	Attractiveness	3.8 (3.1)	.95	.69
Intellectual Ability	1.4 (2.8)	.10	.69	Intellectual Ability	1.6 (2.3)	.10	.69
Social Skills	.35 (3.9)	.02	.63	Social Skills	.57 (3.8)	.02	.63
Athletic Ability	.07 (3.1)	-.18	.07	Athletic Ability	.15 (3.4)	-.18	.07
Tidiness	-.83 (3.8)	-.10	.20	Organization	-.70 (3.2)	-.70	.50
Organization	-.93 (4.1)	-.70	.50	Tidiness	-.88 (3.8)	-.10	.20

to the direction of any inaccuracy in perceptions. Thus, a small absolute discrepancy indicates relative accuracy, whereas a large discrepancy indicates either positively or negatively biased inaccuracy.

To determine whether variance in the accuracy of spouses' perceptions may be explained by the breadth of the attribute being evaluated, the association between accuracy and attribute breadth for each spouse was modeled using HLM, according to the following equation:

$$y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{desirability}) + \beta_{2j} (\text{breadth}) + r_{ij} \quad (2)$$

In this equation, y_{ij} represents the absolute discrepancy between spouse j 's perception of a partner and a partner's self-perception on attribute i as measured by the SAQ. The intercept, β_{0j} , therefore estimates the expected absolute discrepancy between spouse j 's perception of a partner and the partner's self-perception when breadth and desirability are zero (i.e., the general tendency of each spouse to perceive the partner accurately). To control for the possibility that the variability in accuracy across traits may be associated with the desirability of the attribute, β_{1j} estimates the within-spouse association between spouse's accuracy on each attribute and the desirability of each attribute. Thus, a positive value of this coefficient would indicate that spouses tend to perceive their partners less accurately the more desirable the attribute. The coefficient of central interest to these analyses, however, is β_{2j} , which estimates the within-spouse association between the accuracy of spouse's perceptions and the breadth of each attribute, controlling for a spouse's general tendency to be accurate and the desirability of the attribute. A positive value of this coefficient would indicate that spouses tend to perceive their partners less accurately on broader attributes, independent of the desirability of the attribute. Again, r_{ij} is the residual variance in the discrepancies for spouse j , assumed to be independent and normally distributed across spouses.

Equation 2, then, modeled the accuracy with which spouses perceive their partners on a specific attribute as a function of the desirability and the breadth of the attribute. Results indicated that the association between accuracy of perceptions and trait desirability was not significant for either spouse (for husbands, $\beta_1 = .04$, $t(80) = .08$, $p = .93$; for wives, $\beta_1 = -.14$, $t(80) = -.34$, $p = .75$). Thus, the accuracy with which spouses viewed their partners did not seem to be associated with the desirability of the attribute being evaluated.

However, the association between accuracy of perceptions and trait breadth was significant (for husbands, $\beta_2 = .47$, $t(80) = 1.8$, $p = .07$, effect size $r = .20$, for wives, $\beta_2 = .80$, $t(80) = 2.7$, $p < .01$, effect size $r = .29$). Given that the association for husbands was only marginally significant, a model was specified in which the size of the association between accuracy and trait breadth was constrained to be equal for husbands and wives (see Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). This allowed us to determine whether the strength of the association between accuracy and trait breadth was significantly stronger for wives than for husbands. This model fit the data as well as the unconstrained model ($\chi^2(1) = .60$, $p > .50$), suggesting that the difference in the size of the effect for husbands and for wives was not significant. Thus, spouses' perceptions of their partners tended to be more accurate (i.e., similar to partner's self-perceptions) on specific traits relative to global traits, even after controlling for the desirability of the trait.

Enhancement Across Traits

To evaluate whether spouses' perceptions would become more positively biased at higher levels of abstraction, the raw discrepancy between spouses' perceptions of their partners and partner self-perceptions was examined. Unlike the absolute discrepancy examined above, the raw discrepancy provides information concerning the direction of inaccuracy. Given that all the traits on the SAQ were rated as fairly desirable (see Table 2), a positive raw discrepancy indicates that spouses are viewing their partners more positively than partners are viewing themselves, whereas a negative raw discrepancy indicates that spouses are viewing their partners less positively than partners are viewing themselves. The association between the raw discrepancy on each attribute and the breadth of the attribute was modeled for each spouse using the following equation:

$$y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{desirability}) + \beta_{2j} (\text{breadth}) + r_{ij} \quad (3)$$

In this equation, parallel to Equation 2, y_{ij} represents the raw discrepancy between spouse j 's perception of a partner and a partner's self-perception on attribute i , as measured by the SAQ. The intercept, β_{0j} , estimates the expected raw discrepancy between spouse j 's perception of a partner and the partners' self-perception when breadth

and desirability are zero. To control for possible associations between enhancement and desirability, β_{1j} estimates the within-spouse association between the degree of positive bias in spouse's perceptions of each attribute and the desirability of that attribute. The coefficient of central interest, however, is β_{2j} , which estimates the within-spouse association between the degree of positive bias in spouse's perceptions of an attribute and breadth of the attribute, controlling for each spouse's general tendency to hold positively biased perceptions of a partner and for the desirability of the attribute. In this case, a positive coefficient indicates that spouses are more likely to enhance their partners on more global attributes, even after controlling for the desirability of each attribute. Finally, r_{ij} is the residual variance in the discrepancies for spouse j , assumed to be independent and normally distributed across spouses.

Thus, Equation 3 models the degree of enhancement in spouses' perceptions of their partners on a specific attribute as a function of the breadth and the desirability of the attribute. The association between enhancement and trait desirability was significant for both spouses (for husbands, $\beta_1 = 1.7$, $t(80) = 3.3$, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .35$; for wives, $\beta_1 = 1.8$, $t(80) = 2.6$, $p < .01$, effect size $r = .28$), such that spouses tended to enhance their partners more the more desirable the trait. Controlling for this association, the tendency of both spouses to enhance their partners on a particular attribute was also associated with the breadth of that attribute (for husbands, $\beta_2 = 2.2$, $t(80) = 7.5$, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .64$; for wives, $\beta_2 = 2.6$, $t(80) = 9.0$, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .71$). Thus, even when controlling for the desirability of the trait and for each spouse's general tendency to perceive his or her partners positively, spouses' perceptions of their partners tended to be more enhancing (i.e., more positive than partners' self-perceptions) on global traits relative to specific traits.

How Do Spouses Describe Their Partners' Positive and Negative Qualities?

The results thus far have relied on forced-choice measures presenting spouses with a limited range of traits. The final goal of these analyses was to examine the types of traits satisfied spouses generate when asked to describe their partners spontaneously. Given that spouses consider global traits as more important to their relationship than specific traits, it was predicted that when describing their partners' qualities in an

open-ended question, spouses in satisfying marriages would tend to describe their partners' positive qualities using relatively global traits and their partners' negative qualities using relatively specific traits. Again, as specific traits subsume fewer behaviors, using specific traits to describe a partner's negative qualities would narrow the range of behaviors inconsistent with a positive overall evaluation of the partner.

To address this prediction in a way that controlled for the idiosyncratic tendency of each spouse to use more or less global descriptors, the within-spouse tendency to describe a partner's desirable qualities using broad terms and a partner's less desirable qualities using specific terms was estimated through HLM. Thus, the association between the breadth and the desirability of the traits used by spouses to describe their partners was examined with the following model:

$$y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{breadth}) + r_{ij} \quad (4)$$

In this equation, y_{ij} represents the desirability of trait i used by spouse j . β_{0j} , the intercept, estimates the expected desirability of the traits used by spouse j when breadth is zero. β_{1j} estimates the association between breadth and desirability across the attributes for spouse j , controlling for each spouse's general tendency to use more or less desirable traits when describing their partner. In other words, β_{1j} represents the extent to which a spouse used broader traits to describe more desirable qualities. Finally, r_{ij} is the residual variance in desirability ratings for spouse j , assumed to be independent and normally distributed across spouses.

The average intercepts estimated from Equation 4 indicated, not surprisingly, that spouses in these early marriages tended to describe their partners rather favorably (for husbands, $\beta_0 = .33$, $t(67) = 5.2$, $p < .001$; for wives, $\beta_0 = .47$, $t(67) = 9.0$, $p < .001$). However, the association between trait desirability and trait breadth also was still significant for both spouses (for husbands, $\beta_1 = .29$, $t(67) = 6.4$, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .62$; for wives, $\beta_1 = .24$, $t(67) = 9.0$, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .74$). Thus, when describing their partners' qualities, these satisfied spouses tended to describe their partners' positive aspects using significantly more global terms and their partners' negative aspects using significantly more specific terms. In this way, spouses appeared to limit the implications of their partners' negative traits on the overall relationship by confining their perceptions of their partners' negative qualities to lower levels of abstraction.

DISCUSSION

Rationale and Summary of Results

The nature of intimates' perceptions of their romantic partners has important consequences for relationship outcomes. Nevertheless, the manner in which satisfied intimates judge one another has not been clearly understood. Though the close relationship literature argues that powerful motives guide intimates' impressions of their partners (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b; Swann et al., 1994), whether intimates are motivated to hold accurate or positively biased views of their partners has remained a source of contention. One obstacle to resolving this debate may be the fact that perceptions of a partner have typically been measured without regard for the distinction between global and specific perceptions. Distinguishing between these two levels of perceptions raises the possibility that perceptions of a romantic partner may vary according to the level of abstraction of the attributes being evaluated. Spouses may be better able and more motivated to enhance their partners at the level of global traits than at the level of specific traits, leading satisfied spouses to view their partners with specific accuracy and global enhancement.

To evaluate this model, global and specific perceptions of a partner were assessed in a sample of satisfied, newlywed couples. The first goal of this study was to examine the importance spouses attributed to global and specific perceptions of a partner. Analyses confirmed that global traits are rated by spouses as more important to the relationship than specific traits. These findings are consistent with the premise that global traits have greater implications for relationship satisfaction, as these traits tend to be more evaluative in nature than specific traits (Hampson et al., 1986). Thus, these data provide some support for the idea that the motive to view a partner positively should operate more strongly on global traits than on specific traits.

The second goal of this study was to determine whether the breadth of the attributes being evaluated accounts for differences in the degree of accuracy and bias in spouses' perceptions of their partners. Results revealed that the accuracy with which spouses perceived their partners varied across different measures of global and specific perceptions. On a measure of global worth, spouses tended to enhance their partners, viewing their partners more positively than partners viewed themselves. On a measure of specific attributes, on the other hand, spouses displayed no systematic bias in their perceptions, generally agreeing

with partners' self-appraisals of their attributes. Moreover, the breadth of the attributes in question was found to account for differences in accuracy and bias across specific attributes. Spouses tended to be more accurate when evaluating their partners on relatively specific attributes, and more enhancing, or less accurate, when evaluating their partners on relatively global attributes. Given that spouses in the current study were highly satisfied with their marriages, these findings suggest that satisfied spouses tend to view their partners with specific accuracy and global enhancement.

Given that global qualities were found to be more important to relationship satisfaction than specific qualities, the final goal of this study was to assess the types of traits spouses use when spontaneously describing their partners' positive and negative qualities. Examination of the breadth and the desirability of these traits revealed that satisfied spouses relied on relatively global traits when identifying their partners' positive attributes, and relatively specific traits when describing their partners' negative attributes. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that individuals will choose terms that are lower in their level of abstraction when indicating the negative behaviors of a hypothetical target liked other (John et al., 1991). However, the present results extend this previous research by examining the within-subjects association between trait breadth and trait desirability on the traits spouses generated themselves to describe their partners. Using specific terms to characterize negative attributes reduces the impact of those attributes on the overall evaluation of the relationship. In this way, satisfied spouses may acknowledge their partners' negative traits, while shielding their overall evaluation of the relationship from the implications of those traits.

Overall, a model of specific accuracy and global enhancement seems to tie together current research and theory on perceptions within close relationships by suggesting how accuracy and enhancement processes may occur simultaneously within the same satisfying relationships. Satisfied intimates may recognize their partners' abilities and limitations, while enhancing their partners' status on global qualities central to relationship satisfaction. Thus, perceiving a partner with specific understanding and global enhancement serves to satisfy intimates' desires both to predict their partners' behavior accurately (e.g., Swann, 1984) and to protect the relationship from doubt (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b). Prior research on these processes has described this sort of enhancement in terms of "positive

illusions,” but the current perspective suggests that this term may be misleading. Rather than maintaining an illusion, perceivers may have some latitude in the way they combine their realistic perceptions of specific traits into a global impression of the partner. In this manner, maintaining the general belief that a partner is the “right one” would not interfere with the realistic understanding of a partner’s traits and abilities. Overall, then, intimates who globally enhance and specifically understand one another should provide each other with both the loving encouragement and the specific knowledge necessary to achieve relationship goals.

Alternative Theories of Personality Judgment

The current model argues that the nature of intimates’ perceptions depends on the breadth of the attribute being evaluated. This approach to understanding perception in relationships is consistent with a common theme found in more recent models of interpersonal perception (Funder & Drobth, 1987; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). Several studies have demonstrated that traits vary in a number of important properties, allowing for some traits to be judged more accurately than other traits. For instance, Funder and Drobth (1987) suggest that traits vary meaningfully in their visibility. Easily visible traits refer to overt behaviors able to be seen directly in a number of situations (e.g., talkative). Consequently, easily visible traits tend to be judged relatively accurately. In contrast, less visible traits cannot be seen directly and appear in few situations (e.g., tends to fantasize), thus yielding less accurate judgments. Similarly, Kenny and Acitelli (2001) propose that perceptions vary in their centrality to the relationship. Intimates tend to be more accurate in their perceptions when the judgment is less central, and thus less threatening, to the relationship (e.g., a partner’s job satisfaction). When the perception is more closely linked to the relationship (e.g., how close does your partner feel toward you), however, intimates tend to be more biased in their views, assuming that their partners’ feelings are more similar to their own feelings than reality suggests. Though each of these models emphasizes a different trait dimension, trait breadth, trait visibility, and trait centrality likely represent overlapping constructs. A broad trait, such as *kind*, seems less visible and more central to a relationship, leading each model to predict greater inaccuracy when judging a partner’s kindness. Likewise, a specific trait, such as *tidy*,

appears easily visible and less central to a relationship, allowing tidiness to be judged with greater accuracy. In other words, though these dimensions may not be perfectly identical, they nevertheless appear highly related to one another, allowing for the same predictions to be made, regardless of the label given to the dimension. The current paper, then, complements other recent approaches to personality judgment by arguing that attention to the properties differentiating traits is critical for the advancement of our understanding of personality judgments in close relationships.

Strengths and Limitations

Our confidence in the results of this study is enhanced by a number of strengths in its methodology and design. Foremost among these was the use of within-subjects analyses to examine the associations between specific relationship perceptions and the specificity of the attributed being judged. Second, the HLM approach allowed for the estimation of the association between spouses' perceptions and trait specificity, controlling for the influence of trait desirability, ensuring that these parameters were not confounded. Third, in contrast to much prior close relationship research that has addressed samples varying widely in marital duration, the analyses reported here examine data from a relatively homogeneous sample of couples, reducing the likelihood that the effects observed here result from uncontrolled differences in marital duration. Finally, the predictions derived from a model of specific accuracy and global enhancement were confirmed across both forced-choice and open-ended measures, enhancing our confidence that these results are not tied to any particular measurement approach.

Despite these strengths, several factors nevertheless limit interpretations of the current findings. First, the current study assessed only a limited number of positive and desirable traits. It is possible that the inclusion of a wider range of traits would alter the results. We speculate, however, that the inclusion of a wider range of traits, and, in particular, more undesirable traits, would not substantially affect the results of the study. The current paper suggests that intimates should view broader traits as more important to relationship satisfaction. As a result, satisfied intimates should be more likely to enhance their partners on broad traits rather than specific traits in order to maintain their satisfaction. The same logic applies to negative traits. As more global negative traits are considered, these traits should also be viewed as more influential to

judgments of relationship satisfaction than more specific traits (e.g., perceiving a partner as unkind should be more important to satisfaction than perceiving a partner as uncharitable). It follows that satisfied intimates should be more likely to enhance their partners' standing on unkindness (e.g., view partners as less unkind than partners view themselves) than their partners' standing on stinginess.

Similarly, the traits examined in the present study varied in both their specificity and their content domain (e.g., intellectual ability is both broader and different in content than tidiness). Examining traits that vary in specificity within the same content domain (e.g., dependable versus punctual) may provide an even stronger test of hypotheses about the association between trait specificity and biases in perceptions, as this analysis would minimize possible confounds between level of specificity and trait content. Again, however, we would not expect the examination of traits within the same content domain to change the pattern of results found in the present study.

A second limit to the current study involves the use of a relatively homogeneous sample of satisfied couples. In the current sample, intimates likely were motivated to maintain their current levels of satisfaction. However, the way distressed spouses perceive their partners' global and specific qualities may be very different from the satisfied couples examined here. For couples that do not have the same motivation to perceive the relationship positively, for instance, perceptions of a partner's global qualities may be less enhancing. Similarly, spouses in unhappy relationships may describe their partners using negative global qualities rather than positive global qualities. Future research is necessary to compare the perceptions of distressed versus nondistressed spouses.

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

Methodological Refinements for Research on Relationship Perceptions

The broader literature on person perception has long acknowledged the importance of considering trait properties when examining

individuals' perceptions of others (e.g., Funder & Dobroth, 1987). However, to date, most research on perceptions in close relationships has overlooked the properties of the perceptions being assessed. The current findings argue for the value of independently operationalizing global and specific levels of measurement. These data indicated that intimates' perceptions of their partners vary reliably across separate, frequently used measures of specific attributes and of global worth. Thus, future research may benefit from attending to the specificity of the qualities being tapped in traditional perception measures.

Attention to the specificity of perception measures may prove particularly important when global and specific perceptions are confounded within a single measure. For instance, the most frequently administered measures of relationship satisfaction (e.g., the Dyadic Adjustment Scale or the Marital Adjustment Test) include items that assess intimates' overall evaluations as well as items assessing perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship (e.g., evaluation of communication skills; cf. Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). Creating a simple sum across these kinds of items assumes that beliefs at different levels of abstraction are interchangeable. However, the current findings question this assumption, suggesting instead that perceptions at different levels of abstraction may have categorically different implications for relationship outcomes. As a result, the confounding of global and specific perceptions prevents a clear interpretation of the factors affecting relationship maintenance. In order to disentangle the unique effects of global and specific perceptions on relationship quality, scales measuring perceptions of a similar breadth may prove informative.

Longitudinal Implications for Reconciling Specific and Global Perceptions

Given that the motives shaping partner perceptions may vary at different levels of abstraction, how do intimates combine their perceptions of their partners' specific attributes to form a global impression? In other words, how do global and specific perceptions interact throughout the development of an ongoing relationship? If different processes operate at the global and specific levels, then specific perceptions should be responsive to daily fluctuations in the relationship in a way that global views are not (Karney, McNulty, & Frye, 2001). The present data indicate that perceptions of a partner's specific attributes tend to be less positively biased than perceptions of

global attributes, even in the happiest marriages. Thus, one challenge of maintaining a positive global evaluation of a partner involves reconciling that positive evaluation with the specific negative views that inevitably arise. The difference between relationships that stay happy and relationships that deteriorate may lie in the way that specific perceptions are linked to global evaluations of the relationship. For instance, understanding how global and specific views interact may involve the importance weightings perceivers place on their partners' specific attributes. When evaluating their partner's specific qualities, spouses may attribute great importance to their partners' best traits and little importance to their worst traits (e.g., Pelham, 1991). In this way, positive perceptions would be more closely linked to an overall evaluation of the relationship than negative perceptions. Moreover, as specific views change to no longer support the global view, spouses may shift their ratings of the specifics in a manner that will preserve a positive global view. Thus, the motivation to enhance at the global level may result in a strategic shifting of the importance of specific attributes over time.

Given that partners in close relationships possess a strong motive to preserve and enhance global evaluations of their partner, how do global evaluations nonetheless change over time? That is, how does this process of combining specific views to form a global impression relate to the trajectory of satisfaction experienced during the course of a relationship? As specific perceptions are more likely to reflect accurate representations of a partner, changes in global evaluations should follow from changes in specific perceptions. In other words, the deterioration of relationship satisfaction may represent a bottom-up process. As specific perceptions fail to support the global evaluation, global evaluations may still deteriorate, despite the motives operating to enhance at that level. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how the timing and nature of the specific negative perceptions accumulated in a relationship predict future satisfaction or dissolution. Hence, a key future direction for this area is longitudinal research that examines how perceptions of a partner are linked to relationship outcomes over time.

CONCLUSIONS

Research on personality judgments in close relationships frequently treats all perceptions concerning a romantic partner as interchangeable. The present findings challenge this assumption by suggesting

that perceptions vary meaningfully in their level of abstraction. Positive and negative perceptions at different levels of abstraction may have different implications for relationship outcomes. Thus, data on the specificity of relationship perceptions may prove useful in expanding the issues explored in studies of relationships. Acknowledging variability in belief specificity draws attention to the importance of the structure of intimates' relationship perceptions. Further understanding of relationship quality is likely to depend on the study of not only the content of intimates' relationship perceptions, but also the manner in which intimates organize and integrate those perceptions.

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