
The Dynamic Structure of Relationship Perceptions: Differential Importance as a Strategy of Relationship Maintenance

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How do couples maintain relationship satisfaction despite specific negative perceptions of their relationships? One way to minimize the global implications of negative perceptions is to attribute differential importance to positive and negative features of the relationship. As those features change over time, satisfied intimates may alter their perceived importance, ensuring that positive features are always more closely associated with global satisfaction than negative ones. The current study examined the specific perceptions of 82 newly married couples at five assessments across their first 3 years of marriage. A tendency to view positive perceptions as more important than negative perceptions was associated with higher marital satisfaction. Moreover, a tendency to alter the importance of specific perceptions as those perceptions changed over time was associated with more stable global satisfaction. These findings highlight the interplay between the content and the structure of intimates' perceptions in determining relationship outcomes.

Keywords: *relationship maintenance; cognitive structure; differential importance; marital quality*

Romantic relationships frequently begin optimistically, with both partners expressing highly positive evaluations of each other and the relationship. Satisfied intimates tend to describe their own relationship as superior to others' relationships (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995) and their partners' qualities as representative of their ideal partner (Ruvolo & Veroff, 1997). Despite their generally positive feelings, however, even the happiest couples may acknowledge specific problems and disappointments (McNulty & Karney, 2001). One challenge of maintaining a relationship, then, involves resolving positive global evaluations of the relationship with the specific negative perceptions and experiences that are likely to arise (Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). How is it that some

couples maintain their initial feelings of global satisfaction despite the presence of negative aspects of their relationships, whereas other couples do not?

Most answers to this question have focused on how intimates may alter the content of their specific perceptions to protect their global satisfaction. Intimates may reinterpret negative information to be consistent with a positive relationship evaluation in several ways. For instance, spouses often choose to view their partner's faults in a more positive light (Murray & Holmes, 1993) and may misremember the past to perceive improvement in the relationship (Karney & Coombs, 2000). Each of these strategies allows intimates to transform negative perceptions into nonthreatening, even positive, relationship perceptions.

What most of the existing literature on relationship cognitions has overlooked, however, is that change or stability in relationship quality may rest not only on the content of intimates' perceptions but also on the manner in which intimates integrate their positive and negative perceptions to form an overall impression of the relationship (Karney, McNulty, & Frye, 2001). Consideration of the structure of relationship perceptions may resolve the paradox of how intimates may maintain their global satisfaction while still acknowledging particularly salient or pervasive negative relationship perceptions

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that are not easily altered; namely, the implications of a specific perception on the global relationship evaluation should depend on how that perception is associated with the global evaluation within an overall representation of the relationship. When a specific relationship perception is positive, linking that perception to the global evaluation of the relationship will likely promote satisfaction. However, when a specific perception is negative, linking that perception to the global evaluation will likely result in a deterioration of relationship satisfaction (Murray & Holmes, 1999; Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). From this perspective, satisfied versus unsatisfied intimates may differ not only in the content of their specific relationship perceptions but also in the manner in which they organize and integrate those perceptions (e.g., Pelham & Swann, 1989; Showers & Kevlyn, 1999).

One structural feature intimates may use to organize positive and negative perceptions within a globally positive relationship evaluation is to attribute great importance to positive relationship perceptions while dismissing the importance of negative perceptions (Pelham, 1995; Pelham & Swann, 1989). The primary goal of this article is to explore the implications of differentially weighting positive and negative specific perceptions, or differential importance, for the maintenance of marital satisfaction over time.

DIFFERENTIAL IMPORTANCE AS AN ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SPECIFIC PERCEPTIONS AND GLOBAL EVALUATIONS

As relationships progress, intimates witness a wide variety of behaviors from each other in a number of different situations (Miller & Read, 1991). Over time, intimates may witness specific behaviors that are inconsistent with a positive evaluation of the relationship (Holmes & Murray, 1995). Nevertheless, although intimates acquire a diverse amount of relationship-relevant knowledge over time, they may not value all of this information equally (Pelham & Swann, 1989). Rather, intimates may weight certain specific perceptions and experiences more heavily than others when forming global impressions of the relationship. As originally proposed by William James (1890), only those specific perceptions about which individuals care deeply should influence the global evaluation. Viewing a perception as important should serve to link that perception to a global evaluation, whereas viewing a perception as unimportant should minimize the impact of that perception on the global evaluation.

How, then, do spouses weight the importance of their specific relationship perceptions? The broader literature on social judgment and attitude formation argues that negative information often carries more weight in individuals' global evaluations (e.g., Taylor, 1991). Indi-

viduals tend to weight negative information more heavily than positive information when forming impressions of others (Fiske, 1980). Furthermore, some evidence on marital interactions suggests that it takes 5 times as much positive information to outweigh the influence of negative information (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). This greater salience and weighting of negative information suggests that negative relationship perceptions may be viewed as particularly diagnostic and thus may be closely linked to global relationship evaluations.

Conversely, the motivation to protect a positive global impression of the relationship may lead individuals to weight their specific perceptions in a more relationship-enhancing manner. Given that perceptions of the relationship have strong and significant implications for intimates, the process of forming judgments about a close relationship may be strongly affected by intimates' motives and relationship goals. Unfavorable perceptions of the relationship are likely to be distressing or anxiety provoking, raising questions about the future of the relationship. One way intimates may diffuse the threat of negative information is to weight negative perceptions as less important than positive perceptions. Differentially attributing more importance to positive specific perceptions than to negative specific perceptions should work to maintain relationship satisfaction independent of the content of those perceptions by reducing the impact of salient negative perceptions on global evaluations of the relationship. For instance, if Jane shares many of John's interests but is not very physically affectionate, John should be happier in the relationship if he considers sharing interests to be more important for their relationship than demonstrations of affection. By viewing Jane's lack of physical affection as unimportant, John is in effect limiting the impact of this negative specific view on his global evaluation of the relationship. In this way, differential importance should influence relationship outcomes by ensuring that positive perceptions contribute more to relationship satisfaction than do negative perceptions.

Although research on close relationships has not examined the role of differential importance on global satisfaction, research on the self-concept offers evidence that individuals may weight specific perceptions in a self-enhancing manner. When comparing themselves to others, individuals consider their personal talents as being unique while dismissing their lack of talent in a particular dimension as common and inconsequential (Campbell, 1986). Moreover, individuals who perceive their negative qualities as unimportant report higher self-esteem than those who are unable to discount those qualities (Rosenberg, 1979). Perhaps the most direct test of the role of differential importance in predicting self-esteem adopted an idiographic approach to the assess-

ment of perception importance by examining the importance individuals attribute to a particular self-view relative to their other self-views. Pelham and Swann (1989) created an index of differential importance by computing the within-person correlations between individuals' specific self-views and the importance attributed to those self-views. A high score on this index indicates that the self-views individuals personally consider their most favorable also are viewed as their most important. Results indicated that differential importance contributed to individuals' self-esteem beyond the contribution made by a simple composite measure of individuals' specific self-views. Thus, the translation of specific perceptions into a global evaluation seemed to represent an idiosyncratic process in which the global evaluation depends not only on the specific perceptions one holds but also on the framing of those perceptions.

Similar to attitudes toward the self, attitudes toward a relationship are likely to be highly ego-involving, perhaps even representing an extension of the self (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Thus, perceptions about the relationship may be integrated in much the same manner as perceptions about the self. On average, spouses may attribute more importance to those aspects of the relationship viewed most positively. Moreover, a stronger tendency to attribute more importance to positive than to negative perceptions should be associated with greater relationship satisfaction, because positive perceptions would be more closely linked to overall satisfaction than are negative perceptions.

THE FLEXIBILITY OF DIFFERENTIAL IMPORTANCE OVER TIME

The use of differential importance to cope with negative specific perceptions is complicated by the fact that intimates' perceptions of specific aspects of their relationships tend to vary over time (McNulty & Karney, 2001). If the importance intimates attribute to their specific perceptions remains constant while those perceptions are changing, then over time differential importance would not be an effective means of maintaining global satisfaction. To the extent that a specific relationship aspect remains important even as perceptions of that aspect deteriorate, changes at this level of perception would lead to declines in global satisfaction as well. Implicit within a model of differential importance as a maintenance strategy is the idea that cognitive structures should be responsive to changes in cognitive content. For differential importance to preserve a positive global evaluation effectively throughout the course of a long-term relationship, fluctuations in specific relationship perceptions should be accompanied by corresponding changes in the importance attributed to those perceptions. If, over time, Jane began developing new interests

and hobbies that John did not share with her, John may begin to rate shared interests as being less important to their relationship. Likewise, if Jane became more physically affectionate with John, John may begin to rate demonstrations of affection as more important to the relationship. The ability to strategically alter the importance attributed to specific perceptions over time should allow intimates to support a positive global relationship evaluation no matter how their specific perceptions are changing. In other words, partners whose ratings of differential importance are flexible should exhibit more stable global satisfaction than intimates whose cognitive structures are not flexible, independent of any changes in the content of spouses' specific perceptions.

Some evidence does suggest that individuals' organization of specific perceptions is responsive to changing experiences. Research on the self-concept has shown that individuals perceive their negative qualities as relatively less important in times of elevated stress (Showers, Abramson, & Hogan, 1998). Moreover, one study revealed that students who received a high grade in a computer skills class reported an increase in the importance attributed to computer skills during the semester, whereas students who received low grades slightly decreased the importance of computer skills. Thus, students appeared to engage in the strategic manipulation of the importance attributed to their computer skills as their perceptions about their skills changed over the semester (Hill, Smith, & Lewicki, 1989).

Given that cognitive structures, such as differential importance, may reflect strategic responses to negative experiences (Showers et al., 1998), the longitudinal question concerning the flexibility of perception importance is central to any model of how cognitive structure may protect a global evaluation over time. Nevertheless, most prior research on differential importance has examined cognitive structures at a single point in time, leaving the longitudinal implications of this strategy an open question. To date, neither self nor close relationships research has examined the key hypothesis that the degree to which the structure of specific perceptions is responsive to changes in the content of those perceptions should be associated with the stability of the global evaluation.

OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STUDY

To examine the role of differential importance in the maintenance of relationship satisfaction, the current study assessed global satisfaction, perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship, and the importance attributed to those perceptions in a sample of newly married couples throughout a 2 ½-year period. Newlyweds are an appropriate sample in which to examine issues of change and stability. Compared to more established

marriages, newlyweds experience more dramatic changes and are at elevated risk of marital disruption (Bradbury, 1998). Nevertheless, newlyweds also tend to begin their marriages reporting highly positive perceptions of their relationships and are strongly motivated to maintain these perceptions over time. Thus, data from newlyweds are likely to provide conservative tests of the current hypotheses.

Analyses of these data addressed four specific questions. First, do spouses use differential importance to organize their specific relationship perceptions? The first goal of the current study was to examine the within-person association between perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship and the importance that spouses attributed to each aspect. In line with previous research on the self-serving weighting of self-perceptions, it was predicted that spouses would differentially attribute more importance to their positive than to their negative relationship perceptions.

Second, is spouses' use of differential importance associated with their global marital satisfaction? The second goal of the study was to determine whether differential importance contributes to global marital satisfaction, independent of the content of spouses' perceptions. Attributing greater importance to positive perceptions of the relationship should act as a protective strategy, allowing marital satisfaction to remain high despite the presence of negative relationship perceptions. Thus, high indices of differential importance (i.e., attributing greater importance to positive perceptions) should be associated with higher marital satisfaction, even after accounting for the content of spouses' specific perceptions. Low or negative indices of differential importance, on the other hand, would suggest that negative perceptions of the relationship are viewed as being as equally important as positive perceptions. A low index of differential importance, then, would indicate a larger contribution of negative perceptions to global marital satisfaction and thus should be associated with lower marital satisfaction.

Third, will spouses strategically alter the importance of specific relationship aspects as their perceptions of each aspect change over time? The third goal of the study was to examine whether spouses' cognitive structure was responsive to changes in cognitive content. It was predicted that as specific relationship perceptions become increasingly positive, they would be rated as increasingly more important. Likewise, as specific perceptions become increasingly negative, they would be rated as less important. In this way, positive aspects of the relationship would be rated as more important than negative aspects of the relationship at each phase of assessment, despite changes in the perception of each aspect between assessments.

Finally, is the flexibility of the importance spouses attribute to their specific perceptions associated with the stability of global marital satisfaction over time? The final goal of this study was to determine whether the flexibility of spouses' cognitive structures contributes to the maintenance of satisfaction. Spouses who alter the importance of their perceptions as those perceptions fluctuate over time should demonstrate more stable global marital satisfaction. Spouses who do not alter the importance of their perceptions, on the other hand, would maintain a cognitive organization that is not responsive to changes in cognitive content and thus should demonstrate greater declines in marital satisfaction over time.

METHOD

Participants

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 (e) each partner spoke English and had completed at least 10 years of education (to ensure comprehension of the questionnaires). 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.

On average, husbands were 25.1 ($SD = 3.3$) years old and had received 16.3 ($SD = 2.4$) years of education. Forty percent were employed full time and 54% were full-time students. Wives averaged 23.7 ($SD = 2.8$) years old and had received 16.3 ($SD = 1.2$) years of education. Thirty-nine percent were employed full time and 50% were full-time students. Slightly more than 70% of the sample was Christian (more than 45% were Protestant) and 83% of husbands and 89% of wives were White. The average combined income of couples was less than \$20,000 per year.

Procedure

Couples were mailed a packet of questionnaires to complete at home every 6 months throughout a 2½-year period for a total of five assessments. The 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 5, the final wave of data collection described here, 69 couples were still married, 6 couples had divorced, and 8 couples had withdrawn from the study. Of the 69 couples who were still married and participating in the study, 58 couples (84.0%) returned completed packets at Time 5. Analyses revealed no differences at Time 1 between couples who completed all five waves of data and those who did not on any of the measures described below.

Measures

Global marital satisfaction. Most frequently administered measures of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Marital Adjustment Test) (Locke & Wallace, 1959) include items that assess intimates' global relationship evaluations as well as items assessing perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship (e.g., evaluation of communication skills). To ensure that global and specific ratings were not confounded in the present study, marital satisfaction was assessed using a 15-item version of the Semantic Differential (SMD) (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) that assessed global evaluations of the relationship exclusively. Couples were asked to indicate their current feelings about their marriage on 7-point scales between two opposing adjectives (e.g., *satisfied-dissatisfied*, *unpleasant-pleasant*). Scores on the measure can range from 15 to 105. The internal consistency of the scale remained high across all five waves of data (alphas ranged from .91 to .97 across spouses).

Specific relationship perceptions. The Inventory of Specific Relationship Standards (Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996) was used to assess perceptions of specific aspects of the relationship. This measure presents spouses with 16 specific relationship standards, such as "My partner and I should have the same ideas about values" and "My partner and I should have equal say on the things we spend our money on." For each item, spouses were asked to indicate whether the standard was currently being met in their relationship. Thus, this question assessed spouses' current perceptions of how the marriage was meeting or failing to meet each specific standard. For the first three waves of data collection (T1-T3), this question was measured on a dichotomous scale as originally designed by Baucom and colleagues. However, to refine the power of our analyses, this dichotomous scale was changed to a 5-point continuous scale for the final two waves of data collection (T4-T5).

To ensure that the items on the measure captured positive and desirable relationship aspects, the between-subjects correlations between the total number of items spouses reported as being true of their relationship (or, at T4-T5, the total extent to which the standards were met) and marital satisfaction were examined. Results

revealed that spouses' perceptions of whether the items were true of their relationship were significantly positively correlated with global marital satisfaction at each of the time points for husbands (ranging from .40 to .68) and for wives (ranging from .40 to .61), suggesting that items represent positive relationship qualities. Thus, it seems that a response indicating that the item is true of the relationship represents a positive relationship perception, whereas a response indicating that the item is not true of the relationship indicates a relatively negative perception.¹

Importance of specific perceptions. For each of the specific relationship standards mentioned above, spouses also were asked to indicate how upset they would be if the standard was not met (1 = *not at all*, 3 = *very much*). This question represents how important the perception is to the individual. A response indicating that the individual would be very upset if the standard were not met suggests that the standard is highly important to the person. Scale scores were not computed because we intended to examine the measure at the level of individual items.

Data Analysis

Examination of the role of differential importance in relationship maintenance requires both within-subjects and between-subjects analyses. The within-subjects approach allowed us to examine variability in the degree to which spouses rated their most positive perceptions as their most important, relative to their other specific perceptions. The between-subjects approach allowed us to evaluate whether the tendency to attribute more importance to positive perceptions than to negative perceptions was associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction. To address both the within-subjects and between-subjects level of analysis, 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. When the associations for an individual can be estimated precisely, the final estimate relies heavily on the individual data. 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 ordinary least squares (OLS) methods. 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).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all measures used in the study. Given that specific perceptions were measured on a dichotomous scale for Time 1 through Time 3, the mean number of standards currently being met in the relationship is reported for the first three waves of data. For the final two waves of data (T4-T5), the table presents the mean of average positivity (i.e., the extent to which the standard is being met) spouses reported across the standards. The table also presents the mean of the average importance spouses reported across the standards. Given that the sample consisted of newly married couples, it is not surprising that spouses were fairly happy in their marriage, held positive specific perceptions about their marriage, and rated their specific perceptions as important on average. However, these averages did not threaten subsequent analyses, because they do not address the within-subjects variability in the positivity and importance individuals attribute to a particular perception relative to their other perceptions.

Do Spouses Use Differential Importance When Weighting Specific Perceptions?

The first goal of these analyses was to examine the within-spouse association between perceptions of specific relationship aspects and the importance attributed to those aspects. It was predicted that spouses would differentially attribute more importance to positive aspects of the relationship than to negative aspects. This tendency to attribute differential importance to specific relationship perceptions was examined using HLM according to the following model:

$$y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (x_{ij}) + r_{ij}. \quad (1)$$

In this equation, y_{ij} represents the extent to which a spouse believes a particular item is true of the relationship. Again, for the first three waves of data, this variable was assessed on a dichotomous scale, whereas for the final two waves of data, perceptions were assessed on a 5-point continuous scale.² The importance a spouse attributes to that relationship aspect is represented by x_{ij} . This variable was centered around the mean importance rating for spouse j . β_{0j} , the intercept, represents the average positivity of a spouse's relationship perceptions at the spouse's mean level of perception importance. Thus,

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics

	<i>Husbands</i>		<i>Wives</i>	
	M	SD	M	SD
Time 1				
Number of standards met	12.3	2.0	12.5	2.2
Importance	2.1	0.34	2.2	0.34
Satisfaction	96.3	8.8	97.7	10.7
Time 2				
Number of standards met	12.1	2.7	12.0	2.3
Importance	2.2	0.32	2.2	0.27
Satisfaction	92.0	14.1	92.0	12.9
Time 3				
Number of standards met	12.1	2.5	11.9	2.3
Importance	2.2	0.34	2.3	0.25
Satisfaction	92.5	14.8	93.3	16.0
Time 4				
Standard positivity	3.1	0.58	3.1	0.69
Importance	2.2	0.30	2.3	0.28
Satisfaction	92.1	14.7	92.7	15.8
Time 5				
Standard positivity	4.1	0.55	4.1	0.64
Importance	2.1	0.32	2.3	0.29
Satisfaction	93.5	13.9	93.8	13.6

this parameter captures the positivity of the content of spouses' perceptions. β_{1j} estimates the association between specific perceptions and the importance attributed to those perceptions for a given spouse, controlling for the intercept. β_{1j} , then, represents an index of differential importance. A positive β_{1j} would indicate that a spouse is attributing more importance to their positive specific perceptions than to their negative specific perceptions, controlling for the average positivity of the spouse's perceptions. Finally, r_{ij} is the residual variance in specific perceptions for a spouse, assumed to be independent and normally distributed across spouses.

The previous equation was estimated at each of the five assessments. Table 2 presents the average β_1 terms for husbands and wives at each time point. As the table reveals, the association between specific perceptions and the importance of those perceptions was significant and positive for husbands and wives across all five time points. Thus, on average, both husbands and wives seemed to use differential importance when organizing their specific relationship perceptions, attributing greater importance to their most positive perceptions. Of importance, this effect was found both when measuring spouses' specific perceptions using the dichotomous measure and when using the more refined continuous measure.

Is Differential Importance Associated With Global Marital Satisfaction?

The second goal of these analyses was to examine whether engaging in differential importance was associated with variability in global marital satisfaction. A

TABLE 2: Within-Spouse Associations Between Specific Perceptions and Importance

	β	SE	t	Effect Size r
Time 1 (<i>df</i> = 81)				
Husbands	.81	.20	4.1***	.42
Wives	.90	.18	5.0***	.49
Time 2 (<i>df</i> = 75)				
Husbands	.39	.20	2.0*	.22
Wives	.87	.18	4.9***	.48
Time 3 (<i>df</i> = 63)				
Husbands	.49	.22	2.3**	.27
Wives	1.1	.23	4.6***	.50
Time 4 (<i>df</i> = 59)				
Husbands	.24	.07	3.5***	.42
Wives	.22	.08	2.9***	.36
Time 5 (<i>df</i> = 57)				
Husbands	.31	.08	4.0***	.47
Wives	.25	.07	3.8***	.45

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

stronger tendency to attribute greater importance to positive than to negative perceptions should be associated with higher marital satisfaction, whereas a failure to dismiss negative perceptions as unimportant should be associated with lower marital satisfaction, even after controlling for the content of spouses' specific perceptions.

To test the hypothesis that the structure of spouses' perceptions influences satisfaction independent of the content of those perceptions, global marital satisfaction was entered into the between-subjects level of the HLM analysis. At this level, the following two equations were estimated simultaneously:

$$\text{Positivity of cognitive content} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} (\text{satisfaction}) + \mu_{1j} \quad (2)$$

$$\text{Differential importance index} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21} (\text{satisfaction}) + \mu_{2j}, \quad (3)$$

where satisfaction scores were centered around the grand mean of the sample. In Equation 2, γ_{11} captures the association between satisfaction and the positivity of specific perceptions, such that a positive γ_{11} would indicate that spouses with more positive perceptions about the relationship also maintain higher global satisfaction. Equation 2, then, estimates the association between global marital satisfaction and the content of spouses' specific relationship perceptions.

In Equation 3, γ_{21} captures the association between satisfaction and differential importance, such that a positive γ_{21} would indicate that spouses with a higher differential importance index also maintain higher global satisfaction. Thus, Equation 3 estimates the association between global marital satisfaction and the structure of spouses' specific relationship perceptions. By estimating

these two equations simultaneously, the association between differential importance and global marital satisfaction could be examined while controlling for the association between cognitive content and marital satisfaction.

Table 3 presents the associations between cognitive content and satisfaction for both spouses at each time point. The positivity of perceptions consistently was significantly associated with marital satisfaction for husbands. On average, husbands who reported more positive specific perceptions had higher levels of marital satisfaction. For wives, however, this association was significant for only two of the five time points. To determine whether the associations between cognitive content and marital satisfaction were significantly stronger for husbands than for wives, a model was specified in which the size of the association was constrained to be equal for husbands and for wives. The final column of Table 3 shows that this model fit the data as well as the unconstrained model at three out of five assessments. Thus, results suggest that the differences between husbands and wives were frequently nonsignificant.

Table 4 presents the associations between differential importance and satisfaction for both spouses at each time point. Differential importance tended not to be associated with global marital satisfaction for husbands. For wives, however, a stronger tendency to attribute more importance to positive perceptions was associated with higher levels of global marital satisfaction at four of five assessments, even when controlling for the positivity of wives' specific relationship perceptions; namely, the happiest wives tended to be the ones using differential importance the most. Thus, the structure of wives' perceptions seemed to contribute to marital satisfaction independent of the content of those perceptions.

To determine whether the associations between differential importance and global satisfaction were significantly stronger for wives than for husbands, a model again was specified in which the size of the association was constrained to be equal for husbands and for wives. As the final column of Table 4 reveals, this model fit the data as well as the unconstrained model at four of five assessments, suggesting that the differences in the associations between husbands and wives were mostly nonsignificant.

Are Importance Ratings Responsive to Changes in Cognitive Content?

Throughout the course of a long-term relationship, intimates' specific relationship perceptions are likely to fluctuate. For differential importance to be an effective strategy for relationship maintenance over time, spouses should be flexible in the importance they attribute to their specific perceptions. The third goal of these analyses was to investigate whether changes in specific percep-

TABLE 3: Associations Between the Positivity of Specific Perceptions and Global Marital Satisfaction

	γ	SE	t	Effect Size r	Chi-Square Test for Gender Difference
Time 1 (<i>df</i> = 80)					
Husbands	.06	.02	2.9***	.31	1.4
Wives	.02	.02	1.5	.17	
Time 2 (<i>df</i> = 74)					
Husbands	.07	.01	4.8***	.49	4.5**
Wives	.02	.007	1.1	.13	
Time 3 (<i>df</i> = 63)					
Husbands	.05	.02	3.3***	.37	.19
Wives	.04	.01	2.9***	.35	
Time 4 (<i>df</i> = 58)					
Husbands	.02	.005	4.1***	.47	.03
Wives	.02	.006	3.6***	.43	
Time 5 (<i>df</i> = 56)					
Husbands	.03	.008	4.1***	.48	4.5**
Wives	.003	.008	.45	.06	

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

tions were associated with corresponding changes in the importance of those perceptions. To examine this hypothesis, two change scores were computed. First, the change in the positivity of each specific perception was computed for each spouse. Second, the change in the importance of each specific perception was computed for each spouse. Change scores were computed from data collected at Time 4 and Time 5 (i.e., a 6-month interval) because during these two phases of assessment specific perceptions were measured on a continuous rather than dichotomous scale. These two waves of data, then, provided the most sensitive measure of changes in spouses' perceptions.

In all of the analyses that follow, change is estimated by calculating the raw difference between scores at Time 4 and scores on the same items at Time 5. Some researchers have voiced well-founded concerns in regard to the use of the difference score, suggesting that it may be an inappropriate measure of change (e.g., Griffin, Murray, & Gonzalez, 1999). However, Rogosa and colleagues have demonstrated that the difference score can be a reliable and valid estimate of change as long as individual differences in change exist (Rogosa, 1988; Rogosa, Brandt, & Zimowski, 1982). If there is a lack of variance in the difference score, the score will indeed tend to be unreliable. In the presence of individual differences in change, though, the difference score may prove just as reliable as the original measures. Thus, to evaluate the reliability of the difference scores used in the next set of

TABLE 4: Associations Between Differential Importance and Global Marital Satisfaction, Controlling for Positivity of Specific Perceptions

	γ	SE	t	Effect Size r	Chi-Square Test for Gender Difference
Time 1 (<i>df</i> = 80)					
Husbands	-.004	.01	-.27	.03	1.3
Wives	.01	.01	1.8*	.20	
Time 2 (<i>df</i> = 74)					
Husbands	.001	.007	.25	.03	2.5
Wives	.02	.008	2.5**	.27	
Time 3 (<i>df</i> = 62)					
Husbands	-.006	.008	-.72	.09	.19
Wives	-.001	.009	-.03	.003	
Time 4 (<i>df</i> = 58)					
Husbands	.008	.004	2.0*	.26	.64
Wives	.01	.003	3.03***	.37	
Time 5 (<i>df</i> = 56)					
Husbands	.001	.004	0.2	.03	5.0***
Wives	.014	.002	5.0***	.56	

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

analyses, the distribution of the change scores for each item was examined. Overall, the change scores for the items appeared to be fairly normally distributed. For changes in specific perceptions, the skew indices ranged from -.81 to 1.3 for husbands and from -1.8 to 1.2 for wives. For changes in the importance of perceptions, skew indices ranged from -1.1 to .69 for husbands and from -.59 to .64 for wives. The range of standard deviations for perceptions was .78 to 1.3 for husbands and .83 to 1.29 for wives. Likewise, the range of standard deviations for importance was .55 to .84 for husbands and .46 to .72 for wives. Thus, descriptive analyses of the change scores provided evidence for individual differences in change across the 16 items, supporting the idea that the difference scores examined here were reliable estimates of true change in these scores.

Within-person associations between change in specific perceptions and change in importance was examined using the following equation:³

$$\text{Change in perception} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{change in importance}) + r_{ij} \quad (4)$$

In this equation, β_{0j} , the intercept, represents the average change in the positivity of perceptions for a given spouse. β_{1j} represents the within-person association between change in perceptions and change in importance for a given spouse, controlling for the intercept. In other

words, β_{ij} represents the extent to which spouses will strategically alter the importance given to a specific perception as that perception changes over time, controlling for the average tendency to alter specific perceptions. A positive beta would indicate that changes in perceptions are associated with changes in importance in the same direction. Finally, r_{ij} is the residual variance in change in specific perceptions for a spouse, assumed to be independent and normally distributed across spouses.

Table 5 presents the associations between changes in perceptions and changes in importance for husbands and wives. Results revealed that both husbands and wives were experiencing significant change in the content of their perceptions over time. Moreover, on average, both husbands and wives seemed to use differential importance in a strategic fashion over time. Changes in specific perceptions were significantly associated with corresponding changes in the importance of those perceptions, such that specific perceptions tended to be rated as increasingly important as they became more positive and less important as they became more negative. Thus, these results provide evidence suggesting that the organization of specific relationship perceptions is sensitive to changes in the content of those perceptions.

Is the Flexibility of Differential Importance Associated With More Stable Marital Satisfaction?

Strategically altering the importance of specific perceptions as those perceptions change over time is one way to ensure that positive perceptions are always more important than negative perceptions. Maintaining a flexible structure among their specific perceptions should in this way enable spouses to maintain a positive global evaluation of the relationship despite the development of specific negative perceptions of the relationship. The fourth goal of these analyses was to examine the association between the flexibility of differential importance and the trajectory of marital satisfaction over time. The current data allowed for the estimation of a slope and an intercept summarizing the trajectory of marital satisfaction for each spouse throughout the first 2 1/2 years of marriage. The index of flexibility in differential importance ratings was estimated throughout the last 6 months of this interval. We have argued that spouses whose importance ratings change to correspond with change in their specific relationship perceptions should be those who experience more stable global marital satisfaction over time. Thus, it was predicted that spouses who have experienced the least change in their global satisfaction throughout the first years of marriage should be demonstrating the most flexibility in their differential importance between Time 4 and Time 5. Spouses who have experienced the steepest declines in their marital satisfaction throughout the first years of

TABLE 5: Within-Spouse Associations Between Change in Specific Perceptions and Change in Importance Ratings

	β	SE	t	Effect Size r
Change in perceptions				
Husbands	-1.05	.08	-13.9***	.91
Wives	-.93	.08	-12.2***	.89
Flexibility of differential importance				
Husbands	.16	.09	1.7*	.26
Wives	.19	.07	2.5***	.37

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

marriage were expected to demonstrate the least flexibility in their differential importance between Time 4 and Time 5.

To address this hypothesis, each spouse’s trajectory of satisfaction throughout the five waves of data was estimated at the within-subjects level of the HLM analyses according to the following equation:

$$\text{Satisfaction} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{time}) + r_{ij} \tag{5}$$

In this equation, β_{0j} , the intercept, represents a spouse’s initial level of marital satisfaction. β_{1j} estimates the slope of a spouse’s trajectory of satisfaction over the first 2 1/2 years of marriage. To determine the association between satisfaction and the flexibility of differential importance, the following equations were estimated at the between-subjects level of the analysis:

$$\text{Initial satisfaction} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} (\text{flexibility of differential importance}) + \mu_{1j} \tag{6}$$

$$\text{Satisfaction slope} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21} (\text{flexibility of differential importance}) + \mu_{2j} \tag{7}$$

In Equation 6, γ_{11} captures the association between initial levels of marital satisfaction and the tendency to alter the importance of perceptions as those perceptions change. In Equation 7, γ_{21} captures the association between change in satisfaction and the tendency to alter the importance of perceptions over time. By estimating the two equations simultaneously, the association between the flexibility of differential importance and change in marital satisfaction could be examined while controlling for the association between the flexibility of differential importance and initial marital satisfaction.

Table 6 presents the associations between the flexibility of differential importance and retrospective changes in satisfaction for husbands and wives. Results revealed that wives who experienced more stable levels of marital

satisfaction throughout the first 2 ½ years of marriage also exhibited the strongest tendency to alter the importance of their specific perceptions as the positivity of those perceptions changed over time. This association was not significant for husbands. To determine if husbands and wives significantly differed from each other, a model was specified in which the size of the association was constrained to be equal for husbands and for wives. As Table 6 reveals, this model fit the data as well as the unconstrained model, suggesting that the difference in the strength of the association between husbands and wives was not significant.

DISCUSSION

Evaluating a close relationship requires that intimates integrate their positive and negative specific relationship perceptions within an overall representation of the relationship (Murray & Holmes, 1999; Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). Understanding change and stability in relationship satisfaction may therefore require not only an accurate assessment of the content of intimates' perceptions but also a model of how those perceptions are organized (Karney et al., 2001). The way intimates structure their specific perceptions may be as important to relationship functioning as the content of those perceptions.

Differential importance represents one way that intimates may accomplish this integration. Viewing positive perceptions as important should serve to link those perceptions closely to the global evaluation, whereas viewing negative perceptions as unimportant separates those perceptions from the global evaluation. Consistent with research on the self-concept (Pelham & Swann, 1989), analyses revealed that spouses tend to organize their specific perceptions in a relationship-enhancing manner, attributing more importance to those aspects of the relationship that they evaluated most positively relative to other aspects of the relationship. Moreover, for wives, differential importance contributed to higher feelings of marital satisfaction even when controlling for the overall positivity of their specific relationship perceptions. Prior research suggests that structural features of a representation, such as differential importance, may have the strongest effects when perceptions are fairly negative (Pelham & Swann, 1989; Showers et al., 1998). However, even though wives in the current study reported primarily positive relationship perceptions, the structure of those views nevertheless had a consistent and significant association with global satisfaction. For husbands, on the other hand, associations between differential importance and marital satisfaction tended not to be significant.

Cross-sectional evidence, then, indicated that intimates have some latitude in the way they integrate their specific perceptions within an overall representation of

TABLE 6: Associations Between the Flexibility of Differential Importance and Changes in Global Marital Satisfaction

	γ	SE	t	Effect Size r	Chi-Square Test for Gender Difference
Initial satisfaction (<i>df</i> = 48)					
Husbands	-2.4	4.6	-0.50	.07	2.7
Wives	-22.7	5.5	-4.1***	.51	
Slope of satisfaction (<i>df</i> = 48)					
Husbands	1.38	1.7	0.83	.12	1.7
Wives	5.08	2.3	2.2**	.30	

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

the relationship. In this way, individuals may reach a positive global evaluation without denying the presence of specific negative perceptions. Still, differential importance will do little to maintain global evaluations over the course of a long-term relationship if that organization is not also responsive to changing life circumstances. Thus, the central goal of the current study was to determine whether the flexibility of cognitive structure enhances the resilience of the global evaluation to changes in cognitive content. Analysis of the association between changes in specific perceptions and changes in the importance of those perceptions over a 6-month time interval revealed that both husbands and wives appeared to maintain flexible cognitive structures. Spouses' ratings of the importance of the same relationship qualities varied according to how characteristic the quality was of their relationship. Specific perceptions tended to be rated as increasingly important as they became more positive and as less important as they became more negative.

In addition, for wives, the stability of marital satisfaction throughout the first 2 ½ years of marriage was associated with the malleability of their cognitive structure (estimated throughout the last 6 months of this interval). Wives who experienced the least change in their marital satisfaction demonstrated the most flexibility in their differential importance ratings. Likewise, wives with a more rigid cognitive organization experienced the greatest declines in their satisfaction. For husbands, however, changes in marital satisfaction were not significantly associated with the flexibility of their cognitive structure.

Why do only wives seem to benefit from the use of a differential importance strategy? Although husbands did rely on differential importance to organize their spe-

cific perceptions, this organization tended not to significantly affect their feelings of global satisfaction. Rather, husbands' satisfaction appeared to be shaped primarily by the positivity of their cognitive content. It should be noted, though, that the majority of the tests for gender differences were not significant, indicating that the difference between husbands and wives may have been a quantitative rather than a qualitative difference. In other words, although many effects were significant for wives only, the lack of significant gender differences suggests that the associations between cognitive structure and satisfaction may have been only moderately larger among wives than among husbands. Consequently, future research is needed to clarify the strength of the association between differential importance and global marital satisfaction for husbands.

Although differences between husbands and wives failed to reach significance in the current study, the general pattern of results nevertheless reveals a trend consistent with prior literature on gender differences in close relationships. This research has found that wives tend to think more often, and with more complexity, about relationship issues than do their husbands (Acitelli & Young, 1996). In addition, some evidence suggests that women may be more likely than men to actively work on improving the relationship (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Iwaniszek, 1986). The current pattern of findings complements this existing work by suggesting that whereas husbands may evaluate their relationships in terms of the number of positive relationship aspects, wives may engage in greater, more complex cognitive efforts to form and maintain their evaluations of the relationship. Although our sample size compared favorably to other longitudinal studies of marriage, a larger study might have provided additional power for detecting significant gender differences.

The analyses described here addressed one aspect of cognitive structure in close relationships: the association between specific perceptions and the importance of those perceptions over time. However, other types of cognitive structure are likely equally important for relationship functioning. For instance, a substantial body of research argues that intimates who make internal attributions (e.g., my partner is late because he is thoughtless) for their partners' transgressions report lower levels of satisfaction than intimates who make external attributions (e.g., my partner is late because he was stuck in traffic) for those transgressions (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). The difference between these groups may be that whereas internal attributions link perceptions of a specific problem to their overall evaluations of the relationship, external attributions detach those perceptions from global relationship evaluations (McNulty & Karney, 2001). Thus, attributional processes may repre-

sent another way that spouses may integrate their specific relationship perceptions within a global relationship impression. Furthermore, research suggests that intimates who link their negative specific perceptions of a partner (e.g., my partner does not handle conflict well) to their positive specific perceptions of a partner (e.g., my partner is considerate of my feelings), rather than compartmentalizing those negative perceptions, report greater relationship satisfaction (Murray & Holmes, 1999; Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). Linking negative specific perceptions to positive specific perceptions ensures that intimates will be reminded of their partners' positive qualities when negative qualities are made salient. Thus, converging evidence suggests that the integration of specific and global perceptions of a relationship may be of fundamental importance for understanding how different aspects of intimates' cognitive content affect relationship outcomes.

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 importance attributed to those perceptions. Second, the HLM approach allowed for the estimation of the association between differential importance and satisfaction, controlling for the influence of cognitive content, ensuring that these parameters were not confounded. Third, in contrast to prior research that has relied almost exclusively on cross-sectional data, the current study used longitudinal data that allowed us to address whether flexibility in differential importance ratings over time is associated with the stability of relationship satisfaction. Fourth, also in contrast to much prior 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. Moreover, the use of a fairly homogeneous sample provided a more conservative test of our hypotheses. Finally, the results of the study replicated across assessments, indicating the findings were robust.

Despite these strengths, several factors nevertheless limit interpretations of the current findings. First, all of the data examined here were correlational. The current article showed a strong association between changes in perceptions and changes in the importance of those perceptions, suggesting that intimates seem to organize their perceptions in a strategic manner that will allow for positive perceptions to be viewed as more important than less positive perceptions. Theories of cognitive

structure suggest that this finding reveals that intimates will alter the importance of their perceptions as the content of those perceptions change. However, another possibility is that some perceptions may simply become more or less important to individuals over time, leading to a change in perceptions. This interpretation seems less likely for two reasons. First, given that specific perceptions represent fairly concrete aspects of the relationship (Hampson, John, & Goldberg, 1986), specific perceptions should be more difficult to change in a strategic fashion than are importance ratings. In other words, importance ratings should be more malleable than perceptions of specific relationship aspects. For instance, although demonstrations of affections may become less important to John as the relationship progresses, it may be difficult to then perceive Jane as less affectionate when her behaviors have not actually changed. Second, if affection simply became less important to John over time, it seems unlikely that he would then change his initially positive relationship perception to a negative relationship perception, because little seems to be gained by doing so. Rather, one may expect John to report that Jane is affectionate, but that perception is not as important as his other positive perceptions.

Similarly, although our theory suggests that engaging in differential importance may be a response to threats to the relationship and thus serve to maintain global satisfaction, these data cannot rule out the alternative perspective that differential importance also may be a result of global satisfaction. Most likely, the link between differential importance and relationship satisfaction may be a reciprocal one. Initially, a positive global evaluation may enable intimates to dismiss a couple of negative qualities as inconsequential. Continued reliance on this cognitive strategy may then serve to protect the global evaluation in the future as more negative perceptions accumulate.

In line with this reasoning, 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. As a result, they tended to organize their perceptions in a manner that would protect a positive global relationship evaluation. However, the way distressed spouses integrate global and specific perceptions 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, importance ratings may serve to justify leaving the relationship. In this case, negative perceptions may actually be weighted as more important than positive perceptions, allowing distressed spouses to maintain a globally negative evaluation of the relationship.

A third limit of the study is that spouses were asked to indicate their relationship perceptions as well as the

importance of those perceptions on a single page. The fact that these questions were placed immediately adjacent to each other open up the possibility that demand characteristics may have influenced the current findings. However, our results indicated that there was significant variability in the extent to which spouses used differential importance to organize their specific perceptions. In other words, whereas for some spouses the association between specific perceptions and importance was quite high, for others, this association was quite low. This variability in the differential importance index argues against a demand characteristics interpretation of the results.

A final limitation to the current study is the use of forced-choice responses. The current study asked spouses to indicate both how well a statement described their relationship as well as how important that statement was to them. Future research may want to examine the importance of specific perceptions through the use of open-ended methods. The current theory would predict that when asked to describe their specific relationship perceptions, intimates should describe highly positive perceptions as being important to the relationship and negative perceptions as being less important to the relationship.

Implications for Future Research

The present study illuminates the need to consider an important distinction when examining the maintenance or deterioration of relationship quality, namely, the distinction between the content and the structure of intimates' relationship perceptions. Attention to both content and structure suggest that there may be two routes to relationship deterioration. First, a spouse may accumulate a large number of negative specific perceptions. Specific perceptions of a relationship likely reflect the objective experience within the relationship. Thus, if a partner's communications become increasingly critical, for instance, intimates' will likely experience an increase in the number of negative specific perceptions about their relationships. As the number of negative specific perceptions grows larger, structurally reorganizing these perceptions may no longer serve to protect the global relationship evaluation from the implications of those perceptions. In other words, the content of perceptions may overwhelm the structure of those perceptions, leading to decreases in satisfaction.

A second path toward relationship decline may involve the deterioration of the ability to engage in coping strategies such as differential importance. Future research may want to examine where the ability to reframe specific perceptions comes from as well as what factors may affect this ability. Personality factors such as cognitive complexity or neuroticism may influence the type of

integration individuals use to organize their specific perceptions. Moreover, contextual influences on the relationship, such as exposure to external stressors (i.e., work stress, financial stress), may inhibit intimates' ability to utilize strategies that would maintain their global satisfaction levels. Research by Tesser and Beach (1998) has demonstrated that under moderate levels of external stress, individuals are able to separate their negative life events from judgments of the relationships. However, as stress increases, individuals' negative life experiences tend to contaminate their evaluations of their relationships. One possible mechanism behind this contamination is that coping with high stress may consume additional cognitive resources, rendering individuals unable to exert the effort required to structurally reorganize their specific relationship perceptions in a relationship-enhancing manner.

CONCLUSIONS

Most prior research on cognition in relationships has focused on aspects of cognitive content, demonstrating reliable links between particular cognitions and relationship outcomes. The current study draws attention to the importance of cognitive structure in relationship functioning. These data complement a growing area of research arguing that the implications of a specific perception on a global evaluation depend on how the perception is structurally linked to the evaluation. The tendency to organize specific perceptions such that positive perceptions are always viewed as more important than negative perceptions, despite changes in the content of those perceptions, appears to aid in the maintenance of global satisfaction over time. The current study, then, suggests that research move beyond the question of how the content of relationship representations affects relationship quality to the question of how the content and structure of relationship cognitions interact to influence a broad range of close relationship phenomena.

NOTES

1. For each item, spouses also were asked, "To what extent do you agree with this statement?" This question provided further data regarding whether spouses generally felt the items represented desirable relationship qualities. We examined the mean agreement with each item at each wave of data collection. Of the 160 means (16 items for husbands and 16 items for wives at five time points), in only three cases was the mean agreement below the midpoint of the scale, indicating that, on average, spouses viewed the items as desirable relationship qualities.

2. Given that the outcome variable was a dichotomous variable for T1-T3, a nonlinear analysis using Bernoulli estimation was used to estimate models relying on this data (see Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992).

3. To ensure that our results were not simply idiosyncratic to the difference score approach, we also conducted all analyses involving the flexibility of differential importance using residuals. We computed the residual score on each item for each spouse between Time 4 and Time 5. We then examined the association between the residuals of spouses'

perceptions and the residuals of perception importance. The residual score approach yielded similar results to the difference score approach. Again, results indicated that wives maintained flexible cognitive structures ($\beta_1 = .06$, effect size $r = .25$) and the flexibility of their cognitive structure was associated with the slope of their satisfaction throughout the early years of marriage ($\beta_1 = 5.1$, effect size $r = .30$). The flexibility of husbands' structure was marginally significant using the residual approach ($\beta_1 = .04$, $p = .09$, effect size $r = .18$). As before, the flexibility of husbands' cognitive structure was not associated with their satisfaction slope over time. Thus, results were not tied to a particular methodological approach.

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