

Compassionate Love in Early Marriage

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I, (name), take you, (name), to be my (husband/wife). I promise to be true to you in good, times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life. (—excerpt from traditional wedding vows)

In their wedding vows, couples publicly announce before their friends, family members, and authority figures that they will spend a lifetime loving their partner for better or for worse. Research on newlyweds confirms that most couples do enter marriage with the intent to fulfill this promise. Studies of newlywed couples reveal that these spouses profess a deep love for their partner, describe their partner in extremely positive and glowing terms, report being highly committed to the relationship, and have an almost unbridled optimism about the future of the marriage (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2005). For most newlyweds, it is inconceivable that their marriage will not last. Yet, a poignant fact about marriages is, that despite this seemingly strong foundation of love and the uniformly positive outlook of newlyweds, many marriages eventually end (Bumpass, 1990; Cherlin, 1992). Why is this the case?

Answering this question involves recognizing that there are many ways to love a partner. Early in a relationship, each of these types of love may manifest itself in similar ways. For instance, all newlyweds appear motivated to engage in positive behaviors toward their partners. However, as the relationship continues, the precise nature of spouses' initial feelings of love is likely to influence the way the marriage develops or deteriorates over time (e.g., Noller, 1996; Sternberg & Barnes, 1988). As noted in Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1 of this book (see also Underwood, 2002), the motivation underlying spouses' love for their partner may vary between couples. While some spouses' love may be guided by more selfish desires (e.g., "I will behave positively in order to gain some favor"), for others, positive behaviors may stem from a true concern for the well-being of

the other. The former is often described as a more romantic, immature type of love (Noller, 1996). As seen in the figure, because a self-focus lies at the core of this love, ultimately it may be associated with miscarried or inappropriate relationship behaviors. The latter, on the other hand, represents compassionate love: a love based on selflessness in which the partner is fundamentally valued and promoted regardless of costs to the self. Theories of compassionate love suggest this form of love is based on a more mature awareness and understanding of the other. It is thought to encompass a caring, altruistic attitude in which the other is valued to such a degree as to put the needs of the other before one's own (Underwood, 2002). As a result, expressions of this love are more likely to truly benefit the partner.

Yet, a closer look at common definitions of compassionate love reveals what seems to be, at first glance, a paradox. Compassionate lovers not only unconditionally value the other, but also may gain a sense of happiness and fulfillment from doing so. For instance, prior work on compassionate love suggests that one feature of loving compassionately is deriving a sense of meaning from engaging in activities that benefit the other (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). In this way, compassionate love incorporates an element of selfishness in even the most selfless love for another person. Compassionate love is rooted in selflessness, yet also rewarding at a higher level.

Consequently, the question guiding the current chapter is: How can we distinguish the pleasures of selfless love from the pleasures of a selfish one? We approach this topic from the perspective of researchers who have devoted our careers to studying the early years of marriage. We consider marriage to be an especially relevant domain within which to study compassionate love. Prior work on compassionate love indicates that this love should inspire behaviors such as compromise, tolerance, empathy, and support (Underwood, 2002). Consequently, compassionate love should be a critical element of a healthy marriage. We should expect married couples who love compassionately to last longer, be happier, and support each other more effectively than couples who do not love each other compassionately. Conversely, it is hard to imagine a successful marriage in which spouses were not able, at least occasionally, to put each other's needs before their own. Thus, conventional wisdom argues that compassionate love should be at the heart of marital success.

Newlyweds in particular are an appropriate sample to distinguish between compassionate love and other kinds of love. In order to understand fully how marriages develop and change over time, it is necessary to understand how and where they begin. As mentioned, all newlyweds report a deep and abiding love for the partner, yet not all of these couples may love each other in the same way. Examining newlyweds closely may

suggest ways of teasing apart the compassionate lovers from the other lovers as well as provide insight into the types of love that lead to better marital outcomes over time. The goal of the current chapter, then, is to present a model for distinguishing the initial love professed by all newlyweds from the compassionate love that should lead to healthier, more stable marriages. To accomplish this goal, the remainder of the chapter is organized into three sections. The first section more precisely defines compassionate love in marriage as a love for the partner that is based on an accurate understanding of a partner's specific strengths and weaknesses. The second section will describe some data indicating that newlyweds who love their partners compassionately think and behave in more positive ways within the marriage as well as experience better marital outcomes over time. Finally, the last section will describe the next steps for examining compassionate love in marriage as well as draw out some of the broader implications of this model for fostering compassionate love more generally, between strangers, groups, or nations.

A Model of Compassionate Love

The first step for identifying compassionate love in early marriage involves defining what exactly it means to love a partner compassionately. Our model of compassionate love is based on two premises. Drawing from other perspectives on love (Noller, 1996; Rubin, 1970), the first premise is that love can be thought of as an attitude toward a particular individual, and thus shares the structure that other sorts of attitudes have been shown to have (Fabrigar, Smith, & Brannon, 1999). In other words, assuming that love is an attitude suggests that spouses' feelings of love are founded on a variety of perceptions and judgments of the partner that range from perceptions of the partner's specific traits and abilities (e.g., "My partner is a fabulous cook") to global evaluations of the partner as a whole (e.g., "My partner is the greatest"; Hampson, John & Goldberg, 1986; Neff & Karney, 2002a, 2002b). Consequently, these perceptions and judgments of a relationship can be arranged in a hierarchical structure from very general and global to very specific. For instance, as seen in Figure 7.1, the global perception that my partner is fabulous may subsume the more specific perceptions that my partner is thoughtful, trustworthy, and successful. In this way, global perceptions might include evaluations of the partner's general worth, whereas specific perceptions refer to the particular traits and behaviors that comprise the foundation on which global evaluations are based (Pelham & Swann, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979).

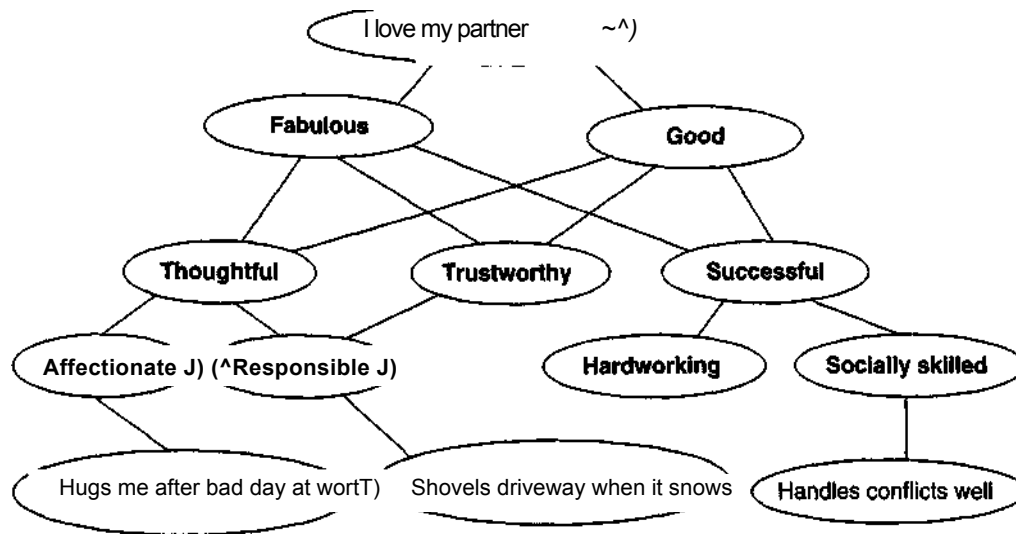


figure 7.1 Hierarchical Representation of Spouses' Perceptions

The second premise of the model is that spouses' motivation to view the partner positively may vary at different levels of this hierarchy. This premise is based on research suggesting that people generally care more about, and derive more pleasure from, their global perceptions compared to their specific perceptions (John, Hampson, & Goldberg, 1991; Neff & Karney, 2002a). As perceptions become more global, they tend to subsume a greater number of specific perceptions and behaviors. As a result, global perceptions should carry more emotional weight and be considered more important for marital happiness. Confirming this idea, prior research suggests that spouses tend to rate global perceptions, such as "my partner is kind," or "my partner is caring," as more important to their overall relationship satisfaction than specific perceptions, such as "my partner is intelligent," or "my partner is socially skilled" (Neff & Karney, 2002a). In other words, it seems more important for spouses to believe that their partners are good, worthy people than to believe that their partners are talented in any specific way.

An implication of this greater importance given to global perceptions is that spouses should be more invested in seeing the best in their partners at the global level. That is, in order to maintain their feelings of marital satisfaction, spouses should be highly motivated to perceive their partners as wonderful, kind, loving individuals. In this way, spouses' self-interests may influence their global perceptions of the partner. However, the motivation to view the partner in a positive light may not operate quite as strongly when spouses are evaluating their partners' more specific qualities, because acknowledging faults and imperfections

at the specific level should have relatively few negative consequences for marital satisfaction. For instance, spouses may be willing to recognize their partners as disorganized or as lacking in social skills, as these negative specifics should do little to hurt spouses' satisfaction with the marriage as long as spouses possess a number of positive global perceptions of the partner. In this case, spouses can note that their partner is disorganized, but also is a very caring person overall (Murray & Holmes, 1993). Thus, self-interest need not play as large a role in shaping spouses' specific perceptions.

Supporting this idea, our research indicates that, on average, spouses tend to view their partners' specific qualities in a less positively biased manner than they view their partners' global qualities. In one study, 82 newlywed couples were asked to rate both themselves and their partners on a variety of attributes that varied in their specificity (Neff & Karney, 2002a). We then compared spouses' views of their partner to the partner's self-views on the attributes. Results indicated that as the attributes became more global (e.g., good, understanding), spouses were more likely to enhance their partner's self-views, seeing the partner even more positively than the partner viewed him/herself. Thus, spouses viewed their partners in a highly positive light when evaluating their partner on global qualities. On the other hand, as the attributes became more specific (e.g., organized, socially skilled), spouses tended to agree with their partner's self-views, even if agreeing with the partner involved seeing the partner in a somewhat negative light. In this way, spouses were less likely to put a positive spin on their partners' specific qualities compared to their partners' global qualities.

Recognizing this hierarchical structure in relationship perceptions has two important implications for understanding the types of love found in early marriage. First, this perspective suggests that spouses who may all look identical in their global perceptions of their partners (e.g., they all view their partners in a highly positive light) may still look quite different from one another when examining their specific partner perceptions. In other words, while all newlywed spouses are likely to view their partners as wonderful people overall, they also may hold a variety of both positive and negative perceptions of their partner's specific qualities and abilities (McNulty & Karney, 2001). Second, these perceptions at the specific level may be more or less accurate reflections of the partner's self-image, in other words, even though on average, spouses may be less positively biased in their specific perceptions compared to their global perceptions, for some spouses these specific perceptions of the partner may be unrealistically positive or negative compared to their partners' self-views, whereas other spouses may see their partners as their partners see themselves (e.g., Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994).

This reasoning suggests that among happily married, newlywed couples, some spouses may base their overall positive view of the partner on an accurate understanding of their partners' specific qualities, whereas other spouses may have little insight into their partners' qualities. We suggest that it is the former individuals, those who affirm and adore the partner globally, yet also recognize the partner's specific positive *and* negative qualities, who are providing their partners with compassionate love. In other words, the compassionate lover does not gloss over the partner's specific negative qualities, but rather holds the partner in high esteem while at the same time acknowledging specific faults and weaknesses.

What makes this love compassionate? Consider that if individuals truly believed that every specific aspect of their partners was fabulous, then loving them would not be very difficult. Indeed, some spouses may not be able to love their partners unless they view each of their partners' specific traits very positively, suggesting their love may be grounded in more selfish concerns (see Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1). In this case, the spouse may be unwilling to accept a partner's faults, and once the partner's less-than-perfect traits come into awareness, the spouse's love for the partner may dissipate. However, understanding and accepting a partner's specific strengths and weaknesses may represent a selfless act, in that spouses endure the costs of their partner's faults, weaknesses, and limitations but love them anyway. These spouses set aside any desires to view the partner in a particular manner and acknowledge the strengths and imperfections of their partners. In other words, consistent with other definitions of compassionate love (e.g., Underwood, 2002), these spouses are unconditionally valuing their partner at a fundamental level. Thus, compassionate love is more than simply caring for the partner; it is a love founded on an accurate understanding of the partner. Compassionate love is personally fulfilling, in that spouses can reap the rewards of their love, but it is also selfless, in that spouses accept their partners, the good and the bad, for who they are.

The Implications of Compassionate Love for Marital Processes and Development

The goal of our research, then, has been to examine spouses who compassionately love their partners and to investigate the implications of compassionate love for marital well-being over the early years of marriage (for a more detailed description of this research see Neff & Karney, 2005). To accomplish this goal, we collected data from a total of 251 newlywed couples at several points during the first 4 years of their marriages. All couples were in the first 6 months of their marriage when the

study began and it was the first marriage for both members of the dyad. Examining compassionate love within a sample of newlywed couples provided several advantages. First, selecting newlyweds ensured that all couples were at a similar marital duration and that the motivation to evaluate a partner positively should be strong and fairly uniform across spouses. In this way, the use of newlyweds allowed us to study the advantages of compassionate love within a sample of couples who all proclaim to love their partners deeply. Second, newlywed couples are an appropriate sample in which to examine issues of relationship change and dissolution. Compared to more established marriages, newlyweds experience more dramatic changes in relationship quality and are at elevated risk of marital disruption (Cherlin, 1992).

Examining Compassionate Love

To examine compassionate love, it was necessary to assess spouses' global and specific perceptions of their partner and the relationship. At the beginning of the study, when these couples were first married, we measured their global perceptions by asking them to rate their marital satisfaction using a 15-item version of the Semantic Differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). Thus, spouses were asked to indicate their current feelings about the marriage on seven-point scales placed between two opposing adjectives (e.g., "satisfied-dissatisfied," "unpleasant-pleasant," "rewarding-disappointing"). Spouses also were asked to report on the extent to which they considered their partners to be good, worthy people overall using a version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1965). This measure was reworded such that spouses completed it with regard to the esteem in which they held their partners (e.g., "I feel my partner has a number of good qualities"). To assess spouses' specific perceptions, spouses were asked to rate both themselves and their partners on numerous specific traits and abilities, taken from the Specific Attributes Questionnaire (Swann et al., 1994) and the Big Five Personality Inventory (Goldberg, 1999), such as intellect, extroversion, conscientiousness, and social skills. It should be noted that although the specific qualities on these measures are generally considered to be positive, spouses varied in the degree to which they claimed these qualities for themselves. In other words, spouses were acknowledging particular weaknesses in themselves (e.g., low degrees of social skills). As such, if partners agree with their spouse's self-reports across all dimensions (e.g., those in which they rate themselves high and those on which they rate themselves low), this would seem to indicate that partners are acknowledging their spouse's strengths *and* limitations. Based on our model of compassionate love, it was expected that while all newlyweds would report

highly positive global evaluations of their partners, these happy spouses would nevertheless vary significantly in their understanding of each other's specific strengths and weaknesses, indicating variability in compassionate love even among recently married couples.

To assess the assumption that newlywed couples are uniformly happy with their partner and the relationship, we first examined the distribution of scores on the measures of global perceptions. As is often seen in samples of newlyweds, virtually all couples reported being extremely satisfied in their marriage. In fact, even though scores on the satisfaction measure could range from 15 to 105 (with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction), close to 50% of the sample had a perfect score on the measure of marital satisfaction (for husbands, $M = 96.1$, $SD = 9.5$; for wives, $M = 97.8$, $SD = 9.9$). Similarly, virtually all spouses viewed their partners as extremely good and worthy people. Close to 60% of the sample gave their partner the highest rating possible on the measure of the partner's global worth (possible range was 4 to 40). The average score was 38.2 ($SD = 2.5$) for husbands and 38.6 ($SD = 2.2$) for wives. Thus, results revealed very little variability in spouses' global perceptions.

Given that spouses reported strongly positive global impressions of their marriages and their partners, we next examined whether, within this sample of uniformly happy couples, spouses varied in the accuracy with which they viewed their partners' specific traits and abilities. To do this, the within-couple association between a spouse's perceptions of the partner's specific attributes and the partner's self-perceptions on these attributes was examined. In other words, we examined the relative degree to which spouses' perceptions agreed with their partners' perceptions across the attributes. It was predicted that while on average spouses would tend to agree with their partners' self-perceptions, there would nonetheless be significant variability in the extent of this agreement across spouses.

Results revealed that, on average, both husbands and wives were demonstrating a relatively accurate view of their partners' self-perceived traits and abilities. However, there was notable variability across spouses in the extent of this accuracy, such that some spouses were demonstrating a more accurate understanding of their partners' specific qualities than were others. Thus, only a subset of these loving, newly married couples seemed to be engaging in compassionate love, in which a globally positive view of the partner is linked to an accurate understanding of the partner's specific strengths and weaknesses.

Having found variability in the degree in which these happy spouses were engaging in compassionate love, we next examined the implications of compassionate love for marital well-being. If compassionate love does in fact provide a deeper, more solid foundation for marriage, then spouses

who view their partners in this manner should enjoy better marital outcomes than spouses whose love is not based on an understanding of the partner's specific qualities. In particular, we addressed three specific questions: First, is compassionate love associated with the manner in which spouses support one another in the marriage? Second, is compassionate love associated with spouses' feelings of efficacy when faced with marital difficulties? Finally, is compassionate love associated with the stability of marriage over time?

Compassionate Love and the Provision of Social Support

One of the primary needs served by intimate relationships is providing a source of social support (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986). Relationship partners are expected to help each other attain their goals and surmount the challenges encountered in daily life. Accordingly, support from a partner has been associated not only with personal well-being, but also with relationship satisfaction (Cutrona, 1996). Spouses receiving greater levels of support from their partner report greater marital happiness (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998), and spouses often cite a lack of support as prominent factor underlying relationship dissatisfaction (Baxter, 1986). Furthermore, support received from an intimate partner is unique, such that support from other sources generally cannot compensate for lack of support from a partner (Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988). Yet, despite the fact that supportive, compassionate interactions appear critical to marital success, little is known about the conditions that promote such positive interactions within marriage.

A common assumption within the counseling literature is that a key component of effective support provision is providing the other with "unconditional positive regard" (Kelly, 2000). Consistent with the idea that successful support occurs when individuals maintain a high positive regard for one other, research on established marriages has found positive associations between supportive behavior and relationship satisfaction (Cutrona, 1996). However, studies of newlywed couples reveal that, despite their generally high regard for each other, newlyweds nevertheless vary considerably in their ability to provide positive support to their partners (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Thus, while providing a partner with positive regard may help create a safe, loving environment for spouses to express their needs, this finding indicates that positive regard alone may not be sufficient for spouses to effectively support their partners in reaching their goals.

Rather, spouses may be effective in helping and supporting their partners only when they also demonstrate an accurate understanding of their partner's specific qualities and attributes. Spouses who understand

their partner's qualities should be better able to predict how their partner will respond to them, which should serve to facilitate successful interactions (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). On the other hand, a discrepancy between spouses' views and partners' self-views may indicate that interactions will be characterized by misunderstanding, as partners' behaviors may frequently counter spouses' expectations (Swann et al., 1992). Thus, accurate insight into when the partner needs support, as well as what kind of support would be most effective, may result from positive regard that is coupled with specific understanding. In this way, compassionate love may foster more behaviors that effectively promote and support the partner than a love lacking in specific understanding.

To examine this idea, when couples were first married, they were asked to attend a laboratory session in which we had them engage in two 10-minute videotaped discussions. For each discussion, one spouse was asked to choose a personal problem or difficulty they were facing and discuss that problem with their partner. The partner was instructed to respond in any way he or she felt appropriate. Thus, each spouse had the opportunity to play the role of the support provider. A panel of independent observers then rated the supportiveness of the partner's behaviors during the discussions using the Social Support Interaction Coding System (Bradbury & Pasch, 1992). Specifically, observers were trained to identify three general types of supportive behaviors: behaviors where the partner reassured, consoled, or otherwise encouraged the spouse, letting the spouse know that he or she is loved (i.e., positive emotional behaviors); behaviors that offered the spouse specific suggestions on how to reach desired goals (i.e., positive instrumental behaviors); and behaviors that provided insight into the cause of the problem (i.e., other positive behaviors that were neither emotional nor instrumental in nature).

Results revealed that husbands' compassionate love was not associated with their support behaviors. However, wives who based their love for their partner on a more accurate understanding of the partner's specific qualities were rated as providing better support during the interactions than wives lacking in compassionate love. Importantly, this result held even when controlling for how positively wives viewed their husbands' specific qualities. In other words, wives were more supportive when they viewed their husbands' qualities in an accurate manner, not necessarily in a positive manner. Given that all wives reported being very happy with their partner and the marriage, these results provide further evidence that caring for a partner may not be sufficient for providing positive support. Rather, having a compassionate love for the partner may allow spouses to give both the loving encouragement and the specific information necessary to effectively support a partner.

Compassionate Love and Feelings of Marital Efficacy

In addition to predicting spouses' actual behaviors, we also expected that compassionate love would be associated with spouses' feelings of marital efficacy when faced with conflicts or difficulties in the relationship. In other words, compassionate love may be associated with spouses' beliefs that they are able to execute the behaviors necessary for resolving relationship conflicts. Individuals' feelings of efficacy and control often influence coping responses to stressful situations (e.g., Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000). For instance, while spouses high in efficacy beliefs, feeling confident in their abilities, may respond to marital conflicts by taking active, constructive steps toward resolving the issue, spouses with low efficacy beliefs are likely to "give up" and engage in more passive or even destructive responses to conflict (e.g., withdrawing from the problem), thereby leaving the couple vulnerable to further relationship problems. Thus, maintaining a sense of marital efficacy can be essential for protecting marital happiness over the long term (Swann, 1984; Swann et al., 1994).

Theories of identity negotiation in relationships argue that when spouses accurately understand their partners' qualities, they will be better able to predict how their partner will respond to them in various situations (Swann et al., 1992). As a result, when spouses recognize each other's particular strengths and weaknesses, marital interactions should proceed smoothly, and cooperative efforts to overcome conflicts and difficulties are likely to be successful (Schlenker, 1984; Swann, 1984). These experiences of successfully surmounting challenges should, in turn, serve to bolster spouses' feelings of efficacy. Consequently, we expected that spouses exhibiting compassionate love would experience the greatest increases in their feelings of marital efficacy as the marriage progressed over time.

To examine this idea, we measured spouses' feelings of efficacy both at the beginning of the study when couples were first married, and again 6 months after their initial assessment using the Relationship Efficacy Measure (Fincham et al., 2000). Example items from this measure include, "When I put my mind to it, I can resolve just about any disagreement that comes up between my partner and I" and "I have little control over the conflicts that occur between my partner and I" (reverse-scored). Controlling for initial feelings of efficacy, wives who loved compassionately reported greater feelings of marital efficacy 6 months later than wives whose love was not based on specific accuracy. As with the previous results, this finding held when controlling for how positively wives viewed their husbands' specific qualities. The association between compassionate love and feelings of efficacy was not significant for husbands. Thus, at

least for wives, loving a partner compassionately seemed to increase marital efficacy beliefs over the course of the marriage.

Compassionate Love and Marital Stability

As mentioned previously, despite the fact that newly married spouses uniformly profess a strong love for their partners, a large percentage of marriages end in divorce (Bumpass, 1990). Though a large literature has argued that the nature of spouses' love for one other may help account for this change in marital quality, such that a love that is initially "deeper" should be more stable over time, exactly what constitutes a deeper love has been the source of some debate (Noller, 1996). The current model of compassionate love argues that love should be stronger and more resilient over time when positive global evaluations of the partner are coupled with an accurate understanding of the partner's specific traits and abilities.

Namely, perceiving a partner with global adoration should serve to maintain positive partner evaluations and protect the relationship from doubt (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b). In other words, spouses who view their partners with global adoration should feel confident in their belief that their partner is the "right one." However, holding a partner in high positive regard may be necessary, but not sufficient to ensure better marital outcomes. For instance, spouses who adore their partners, but lack an understanding of their partners' specific traits and abilities, may find themselves prone to disappointment in the marriage. These spouses are unlikely to have their expectations for their partners met, as maintaining a false view of partners' qualities places partners in the uncomfortable position of having to live up to an identity they may be unwilling or unable to confirm (Schlenker, 1984). On the other hand, spouses who love compassionately enter the marriage recognizing their partners' limitations and accepting them anyway. As a result, when partners' negative qualities inevitably surface as the relationship progresses, these spouses should be more likely to respond adaptively in the face of this negativity.

To address the idea that couples who love compassionately should have more stable marriages, we examined whether compassionate love was associated with the likelihood of divorce over the first 4 years of marriage (approximately 20% of couples divorced during this time). Results indicated that husbands' compassionate love was not associated with marital outcomes. However, when wives loved their husbands compassionately, the couple was less likely to divorce. As with the previous analyses, this finding held even when controlling for the general positivity of wives' specific views of their husbands. In other words, it was only when wives

understood their partner's traits, not when they viewed those specific s positively, that the marriage fared better over time. Overall, it seems love at the global level may be even more powerful when coupled i an understanding of a partner's specific qualities.

Gender Differences in Compassionate Love?

The results described thus far indicate that although a subset of both husbands and wives engaged in compassionate love, only for wives was type of love able to predict positive outcomes. In other words, husbands' compassionate love was not associated with their supportive behaviors, their feelings of marital efficacy, or the couple's likelihood of divorce. Does this suggest that it is not important for husbands to love compassionately? There is some evidence in the broader literature on marriage that women's relational processes may be particularly important marital quality and stability. Prior research indicates that women are more likely to think about relationship issues, and are more likely to rely work on improving aspects of the marriage (Acitelli & Young, 1996; Christensen & Heavey, 1990). If women take on more responsibility relationship maintenance activities, then it would be more important for them to base their love for the partner on an accurate understanding of the partner's qualities in order to facilitate marital processes.

However, it may be premature simply to conclude that husbands' compassionate love is less meaningful for marital success. For instance, by necessity, the current research measured a limited number of qualities when examining specific understanding and its implications. It is possible that husbands and wives may differ in the types of qualities they need to understand in order to enhance marital success. Future research may want to examine which specific qualities men and women report as particularly important for a relationship partner, and determine if an accurate perception of those qualities deemed important predicts positive outcomes for both husbands and wives.

Similarly, perhaps husbands' compassionate love influences the marge in ways not measured in the current research. In the current studies, measured only a limited number of the many possible processes that *ft* been shown to affect marital outcomes (e.g., social support, feelings marital efficacy). It is possible that husbands' compassionate love may luence different marital processes than does wives' compassionate love, r example, prior research indicates that spouses who enter a marriage th overly positive, unrealistic expectations of the partner (e.g., "My rtner will never disappoint me" or "My partner and I will always com-unicate well") tend to experience the most dramatic declines in their isfaction over the early years of marriage (e.g., McNulty & Karney, 2004).

If spouses hold more accurate specific perceptions of their partner (e.g., recognizing the partner's strengths and weaknesses), this may lead them to align their marital expectations closer to reality, thus preventing spouses from becoming disappointed and dissatisfied in the marriage. In other words, husbands' compassionate love may affect marital outcomes by influencing the nature of the expectations they bring to the marriage. Thus, additional research is necessary to clarify the role of husbands' compassionate love in marital development.

Integrating Compassionate Love with Alternative Theories of Marital Success

If you want a person^ faults, go to those who love him. They will not tell you, but they know. And herein lies the magnanimous courage of love, that it endures this knowledge without change. (—Robert Louis Stevenson)

Arguably, a compassionate, selfless love should be at the core of a healthy marriage. The trick is reconciling how love can be selfless, yet also rewarding and personally fulfilling. Similar to Robert Louis Stevenson's musing on love, we argue that what makes love compassionate is the fact that love endures despite the recognition of the other's specific weaknesses. Consistent with other theories of compassionate love (Underwood, 2002), our research confirms that a love founded on an accurate understanding of the partner's strengths and weaknesses, in other words a love in which the partner is valued at a fundamental level, may have several important benefits for marriage. First, compassionate love has benefits for the beloved. While it may be good to be the object of love, it is better to be the object of a love that is coupled with understanding. Compared to husbands who were only globally adored, when husbands were both loved and understood, they received better support from their wives. Second, compassionate love has benefits for the lover. Wives who loved compassionately experienced increases in their feelings of marital efficacy as the relationship progressed. As a result, these spouses may be better equipped to respond to marital difficulties in an adaptive manner. Finally, compassionate love benefited the couple as a unit, as marriages characterized by compassionate love were less likely to dissolve over time. Thus, as indicated in Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1, a love motivated by compassion and selflessness seems to lead to the expression of more positive relationship behaviors.

This view of compassionate love ties together research and theory on the types of marital evaluations associated with more lasting, satisfying relationships. In the close relationships literature, there has been a long-standing

debate regarding the types of relationship perceptions associated with better relationship quality. Some theorists have argued that a critical part of maintaining a relationship involves viewing the partner through rose-colored spectacles. That is, positive feelings toward the partner should remain high if spouses are positively biased in the way they view the partner (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b). On the other hand, other theorists argue that the essential ingredient for long-term happiness is to hold a more tempered, accurate view of the partner's qualities (Swann et al., 1994). The current model of compassionate love reconciles these positions by formally delineating how the best relationships may be characterized by both positive biases and accuracy.

Complementing research on positive biases in relationships, our perspective on compassionate love argues that a degree of positive bias in perceptions at the global level is a necessary element of successful marriages. However, our results indicated that globally adoring the partner was not sufficient to produce better marital well-being. Likewise, viewing the partner's specific qualities in a positive light did not ensure happier, more stable marriages. Thus, positive biases alone seemed to result in marriages that may be fragile. Rather, it was only when that global adoration of the partner was founded on an accurate understanding of who the partner really is that the marriage fared better over time. Consequently, our model of compassionate love also argues for the critical role of specific accuracy within relationships. Contrary to the old adage, true love is not blind. It seems that spouses in healthy marriages love their partners in spite of (or perhaps because of) their less than perfect specific traits.

Fostering Compassionate Love in Marriage and Beyond

The Origins of Compassionate Love in Marriage

If compassionate love, or a love that is based on specific understanding, produces marriages that are happier and less fragile than love without this understanding, an important direction for future research is to examine the antecedents of specific understanding and how it may be fostered within relationships. One could speculate that certain aspects related to the history of the relationship (e.g., length of courtship) may allow individuals to witness a wider variety of behaviors from the partner, and thus enhance the accuracy of their perceptions of their partners' qualities. Yet, in our studies, the length of time couples knew one another prior to marriage, whether couples were friends prior to dating, whether the couple cohabited prior to marriage, and whether the couple received

premarital counseling all failed to predict which spouses loved their partners compassionately (Neff & Karney, 2005). Thus, having more opportunities to learn about and interact with the partner did not seem to ensure spouses would have more accurate perceptions of the partner's specific qualities.

Rather, future research may want to examine a number of individual difference factors that may be associated with spouses' ability to love compassionately. For instance, individuals' attachment style may play a significant role in shaping their perceptions of their partners. Anxious/ ambivalent individuals, who tend to be less happy and trusting in their relationships, may be particularly threatened by the presence of negative relationship aspects, even at the level of their specific perceptions (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Consequently, these individuals may be motivated to "misperceive" their partners, and thus be less likely than securely attached individuals to accurately view their partners' positive and negative qualities. Supporting this idea, Feeney and Noller (1991) have found that when asking intimates to describe their romantic partners, anxious/ambivalent individuals are more likely to idealize their partners than are securely attached individuals. This reasoning is consistent with other research (Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005) arguing that secure individuals are better equipped than non-secure individuals to provide compassionate love to others.

Spouses' cognitive complexity also may affect spouses' specific perceptions of their partners. The ability to acknowledge specific negative aspects of the partner and then reconcile those negative perceptions into an overall positive view of the partner and the relationship is likely to require a certain degree of cognitive skill. In other words, prior research has shown that the effects of a specific perception on the global relationship evaluation depend on how that perception is linked to the overall evaluation (Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). When a specific perception is negative, linking that perception to the global evaluation will likely result in a deterioration of relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, maintaining a cognitive structure that serves to minimize the impact of the negative perception on the global evaluation would allow satisfaction to remain high despite the presence of negative relationship aspects. For instance, spouses may acknowledge the presence of a negative perception (e.g., "My partner is disorganized"), yet view that perception as unimportant, thereby weakening the link between that negative perception and their feelings of marital happiness (Neff & Karney, 2003). Alternatively, spouses may dilute the meaning of their partner's faults by linking them to their partner's many strengths (Murray & Holmes, 1999). Spouses lower in cognitive complexity may be unable to engage in this process of minimizing negative perceptions. Consequently, these spouses may find themselves

unable to maintain global feelings of love while also understanding and accepting the partner's specific strengths and weaknesses.

Looking beyond Marriage: Compassionate Love in Other Domains

Although the current research examined compassionate love in early marriage, this model of compassionate love may have implications for other types of relationships as well. For instance, some theories of effective parenting suggest that parents should strive to protect their children's self-esteem through unconditional positive regard. The "self-esteem movement" of recent decades recommends that parents and teachers cultivate a sense of uniqueness and worth in children by refraining from criticizing children, and instead praising them for even trivial accomplishments. The idea is that if children feel good about themselves as a result of this feedback, a number of desirable outcomes will ensue (e.g., they will achieve more in school, avoid drugs and smoking, etc.). Unfortunately, a growing body of work has called this assumption into question, demonstrating that self-esteem formed in this manner not only has few actual benefits, but also may lead to undesirable outcomes (e.g., narcissism; for a review see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

The current research complements alternative perspectives to the self-esteem movement, which argue that the benefits of having high self-esteem may only appear when those feelings of worth are explicitly linked to an accurate understanding of one's specific strengths and weaknesses (Baumeister et al., 2003). From this perspective, it may be more productive for parents to promote accurate self-knowledge in children, provided that this knowledge is offered in a context of global acceptance. In fact, Schlenker (1984) has argued that for feedback to be perceived as supportive and trustworthy, it must be perceived as both sincere and believable. While giving the child unconditional positive regard may provide the sincerity, by itself this regard may not create a context in which feedback is believable. That is, if the positive feedback parents provide is removed from an honest recognition of children's limitations, children may fail to understand the logic behind the feedback, thereby undermining its effectiveness (cf. Swann & Predmore, 1985). Thus, raising happy, healthy, and successful children may require compassionate love.

Finally, the current research dovetails well with contact theories of prejudice and intergroup relations. These theories argue that simply providing groups with the opportunity to interact with one another is not enough to reduce prejudicial feelings and create positive attitudes toward outgroup members. Rather, certain conditions must be met in order for contact to generate positive intergroup relations (for a review see Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003). One critical feature necessary

for contact to be effective is that the contact must provide individuals with opportunities to learn new information about outgroup members. Acquiring greater knowledge of others has been shown to increase understanding and sensitivity toward the outgroup, as well as reduce discomfort and uncertainty when interacting with outgroup members (Dovidio et al., 2003). Thus, consistent with the current model of compassionate love, this research suggests that acceptance and tolerance of others must be based on accurate knowledge of others' specific qualities. Before compassionate love can take hold, there must be understanding.

Conclusions

We began the chapter by highlighting the tremendous difficulty many newlywed couples have when trying to adhere to their vow to love and honor their partner for all the days of their lives. Despite even the best of intentions, many couples fail to keep this promise. Understanding why this is the case seems to require a deeper examination of the kind of love spouses have for their partners. The current research argues that in order to alleviate or prevent marital distress, the advice to love the partner, to view the partner with unconditional positive regard, is too simple. Love that is not founded on understanding is not enough and not likely to improve marital processes. Rather, an accurate understanding of the partner may be a prerequisite for truly compassionate love, which leads to enhanced marital success.

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