

Self-Evaluation Maintenance in Marriage: Toward a Performance Ecology of the Marital Relationship

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The self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model was originally developed to integrate distinct literatures on the potential positive and negative consequences for the self of being outperformed by others. Because close others are of particular importance for both of the basic processes thought to underlie the SEM model, committed heterosexual relationships provide an area in which relatively robust SEM effects should occur. In keeping with the expectation that SEM effects would be present among committed, heterosexual, married couples, the current series of studies demonstrated (a) that experimental manipulations of SEM processes influenced the behavior of married couples, (b) that patterns of couple outcomes conformed to predictions derived from the SEM model, and (c) that SEM effects accounted for inaccurate perceptions of partner needs.

Expressions of positive and negative feelings and the nature of affectional exchange are clearly important in understanding relationship quality. However, given that human pair bonding may carry a wide range of personal and economic consequences, it seems inevitable that performance considerations will play some role in evaluations of relationships and in their development. Indeed, “working well together” is an aspect of satisfaction often assessed directly

in relationship satisfaction inventories. But working well together suggests a coordination of effort and may often require that each partner develop and maintain a unique set of performance niches within the relationship. That is, working well together may require each partner to display unique strengths and capabilities relative to the partner. The web of interconnected factors that supports the development of specialized performance niches by each partner might be termed the couple’s *performance ecology*. It is our thesis that a performance ecology exists within every committed, romantic relationship; that the set of performance niches occupied by each partner and the relative performance of partners within their respective niches provide a context for understanding marital processes; and that the self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model is useful in explicating the structure of this performance ecology.

Romantic relationships are influenced by a complex web of interconnected processes that have been illuminated from the standpoint of cognitive theory (e.g., Fincham, Bradbury, & Scott, 1990; Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips, & Osborne, 1995), attachment theory (e.g., Shaver & Hazen, 1993), evolutionary psychology (e.g., Buss, 1994), social support theory (e.g., Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1990), and

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interdependence theory (e.g., Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). These perspectives have helped elaborate and expand the scope of earlier work on exchange theory (Clark, 1984; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and have been tested in two decades of behavioral interaction research (Gottman, 1994) and more than 200 longitudinal studies of close relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Missing, however, has been recognition of the role played by one's own or one's partner's outstanding performance and the concomitant emotions of pride in one's partner, contempt for one's partner, pride in oneself, and shame-envy that may intrude on married life from time to time. In part, this no doubt reflects the lack of a theory that can illuminate the circumstances under which one's superior performance relative to one's partner would be more and less facilitative of positive couple relations. Any theory of "teamwork," however, should make the prediction that a well-differentiated and complementary set of performance niches would be facilitative of coordinated and positive interaction. Likewise, any theory of teamwork should lead to the prediction that feelings of pride in one's partner or contempt for one's partner should be related to how well partners coordinate their performance niches. It is possible, through use of these rudimentary predictions, to examine the available literature for preliminary evidence that performance ecology matters in committed, romantic relationships.

One line of evidence that performance ecology matters comes from work by Fitzpatrick (1988) with relationship "types." She found three pure types of couples: independents, separates, and traditionals. Although independents are often viewed as an ideal example of a well-functioning marriage (they appear to be supportive of each other, are able to deal directly with conflict, and are egalitarian in their orientation to marriage), they were not the group Fitzpatrick found to be most maritally satisfied. They were more satisfied than separates, who displayed a particularly low level of teamwork and "we-ness," but not as satisfied as traditionals, who reported having a very clear and distinct division of labor in the marriage and separate spheres of influence. Traditionals also reported the most time together, the most shared activities, and the most physical proximity over the course of the day. The traditional group was best differentiated and most complementary with regard to the performance domain, and,

regardless of the index of closeness used, they were also the group reporting the greatest degree of closeness.

Another line of evidence regarding the potential importance of a performance ecology in marriage may be found in recent work on the use of the Oral History Interview to predict divorce (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Gottman, 1994). In this research, couples were asked a series of questions about the history of their relationship. Of particular interest here are the dimensions of "we-ness" and fondness or pride in one's spouse. Both of these dimensions can be viewed as indexes of successful niche building and performance differentiation in the relationship. That is, positive expressions of closeness, team membership, and pride in one's spouse should be facilitated to the extent that spouses have separate niches. It is interesting, therefore, that both low levels of wife and husband we-ness and low levels of wife and husband fondness or pride in other were associated with the husband's serious consideration of divorce 8 years after completing the Oral History Interview. Thus, pride in one's spouse, we-ness, and contempt for one's spouse predicted changes in an important index of closeness in marriage.

Other research examining the effect of perceived partner envy or pride directed toward the self has been inspired by the SEM perspective. Beach and Tesser (1995) examined the effect on closeness, satisfaction, and thoughts of leaving the relationship of perceived partner envy or pride regarding an area reported to be personally important. Both perceived partner pride and perceived partner envy had a substantial association with relationship outcomes, accounting for more than 30% of the variance in men's reported marital intimacy and 25% of women's reported intimacy. Greater perceived partner pride was significantly and positively related to relationship outcomes, and greater perceived partner envy was significantly and negatively related to relationship outcomes.

Also inspired by the SEM perspective, Beach and Tesser (1993) examined differentiation in the area of decision making and related it to marital satisfaction. Husbands and wives who were more complementary with regard to the areas in which they exercised decision-making power were more satisfied. That is, given a disagreement, husbands and wives who reported exercising decision-making power in ar-

eas of importance to themselves but not to their partners reported greater marital satisfaction. The effect was not due to having more power; rather, it was due to differentiation and the differentiated use of power. Interestingly, there was also evidence of an empathic effect. That is, husbands and wives were also more likely to be maritally satisfied when they viewed their partner as exercising more power in areas important to the partner and viewed themselves as exercising more power in areas not important to the partner. By comparison, there was a relatively small positive effect on marital satisfaction of overall equity in decision-making power. In a conceptually parallel series of studies, Pilkington, Tesser, and Stephens (1991) found that young men and women in romantic relationships were significantly more likely to report being outperformed by their partners in areas of low self-relevance than in areas of high self-relevance. Again, there was a strong tendency for participants to report strengths in their partners that complemented their own strengths and for which there were no personal aspirations for excellence.

In sum, there are sufficient clues in the literature to suggest that areas of performance expertise often are complementary in committed, romantic relationships. Partners who have a more complementary set of performance characteristics should benefit from more opportunities for positive affect and fewer provocations for negative affect, and they should be better able to support and appreciate each other's achievements. However, in the absence of explicit theory, the idea of a performance ecology remains difficult to use in forming specific predictions about couple behavior or couple response to deviations from a complementary arrangement. Likewise, absence of explicit theory inhibits the development of interventions that might be useful in working with couples therapeutically. Because it provides an explicit and testable theory capable of guiding research and practical intervention, the SEM model is of particular utility (Beach & Tesser, 1995). Because the model describes basic psychological processes, it should apply to a range of domains of couple interaction and functioning. Accordingly, we tested the model in several ways in the current study, and here we analyze implications of the model across a range of dependent variables. Before deriving specific hypotheses, we describe the basic features of the SEM model.

Overview of the Original and Extended SEM Models

Original SEM Model

The SEM model (Tesser, 1988) identifies two antagonistic processes central to the maintenance of a positive self-evaluation: reflection and comparison. The comparison process leads to adjustments to avoid the threat to one's self-evaluation that might result from comparison with the outstanding accomplishments of a close other (cf. Suls & Wills, 1991; Wills, 1981) or serves to bolster self-evaluation through comparison with the poor performance of another (Gibbons, 1986; Wood & Taylor, 1991). Examples of negative comparison are quite common (e.g., when one spouse feels threatened because the partner is perceived as smarter or more verbal or because the partner makes more money).

The reflection process can be seen as the mirror image of the comparison process. In this process, self-evaluation is bolstered by the outstanding accomplishments of a close other (cf. Cialdini et al., 1976) and threatened by the poor performance of a close other. Examples of the positive side of this process are frequent (e.g., when one spouse takes pride in the other's accomplishments at work or in the community and basks in the reflected glory of a partner's fame, attractiveness, or standing in the community).

It should be clear that, in both the example of comparison and the example of reflection, the partner outperformed the self. In one case, however, the result was a threat to self-evaluation, whereas in the other the result was a bolstering of self-evaluation. The SEM model predicts that people will tend to avoid situations that threaten self-evaluation but be attracted to situations that bolster self-evaluation.

What determines when spouses bask in reflected glory rather than wither under negative comparison? According to the SEM model, the relative balance of comparison and reflection processes is determined by the relevance of the performance dimension involved. That is, although recognizing good performance on a variety of dimensions, individuals aspire to be "good at" only a few such dimensions. Those dimensions that a spouse finds "self-defining" or relevant prompt comparison. Those dimensions that a spouse does not find to be important

or relevant prompt reflection. Thus, it bolsters self-evaluation both to outperform a close other on a dimension high in self-relevance and to be outperformed by a close other on a dimension low in self-relevance. In addition, these processes appear to be automatic and require minimal awareness and attention (cf. Pilkington et al., 1991; Pleban & Tesser, 1981; Tesser & Collins, 1988; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983).

SEM Model Extended to Marriage

The original SEM model for interactions involving strangers, acquaintances, and friends has been well supported (e.g., Tesser, 1988; Tesser et al., 1988). However, the SEM model had no component that weighted the person's investment in the relationship with the other. That is, when the person was given an opportunity for positive comparison with another, no effort was made to take into account the person's reaction to the fact that, as a consequence, his or her partner might suffer negative comparison or, conversely, bask in reflected glory. The literature on close relationships suggests that this omission is problematic when the model is extended to committed relationships such as marriages (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978).

Partners in committed relationships such as marriage tend to show a communal orientation, leading them to keep track of each other's needs and to respond sympathetically to these needs (Clark, 1984; Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Mills & Clark, 1982). Thus, in close relationships, a partner may feel less positively about an outcome that enhances his or her own self-evaluation if it simultaneously threatens the partner's self-evaluation. In addition, to the extent that spouses are sympathetic to each other's SEM needs, they would be expected to behave in ways that benefit the partner (cf. Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Hence, the likelihood that the partner will suffer negative comparison as a result of one's performance in a given area should tend to make one's affective reaction less positive and decrease the attractiveness of the situation. Conversely, the likelihood that the partner will bask in reflected glory as a result of one's good performance should augment the positive reaction to the situation and increase the attractiveness of the situation.

The SEM model was expanded to propose

that partners in committed relationships respond sympathetically to their spouse's outcomes, as well as directly to their own outcomes (Beach & Tesser, 1993; Clark & Bennett, 1992). The extended model, therefore, predicts that a spouse's benefit from positive comparison or reflection may be offset by the knowledge that the partner is suffering negative comparison or failing to benefit from positive reflection. Alternatively, a spouse benefiting from positive comparison might have positive reactions intensified by the knowledge that the partner is benefiting from basking in reflected glory.

Overview of Current Studies

In the current series of studies, we addressed predictions that follow directly from the SEM model or its extension to dyads (Beach & Tesser, 1995; Tesser, 1988). In Study 1, we manipulated SEM processes to examine whether they can affect recall of relationship history. In Study 2, we examined whether couples structure their daily interactions in accordance with predictions from the SEM model by engaging least frequently in activities that the model predicts they should avoid and by engaging more frequently in activities with the least potential for arousing self-evaluation threat in the self or the partner. In Study 3, we investigated whether spouses systematically distort their perception of their partner in a way that minimizes their perception of negative partner reactions as posited by the SEM model extended to marriage.

Study 1: Role of SEM in the Revision of (Marital) History

Everyone creates and maintains a personal narrative that may be essential to his or her sense of personal continuity but that is nonetheless subject to revision and elaboration (Greenwald, 1980). Recently, it has been suggested that relationship narratives likewise may play an important role in maintaining couple stability or at least in predicting couple dissolution (Buehlman et al., 1992). In addition, like their personal narrative counterparts, couple narratives may be subject to revision and elaboration in response to motivational factors (Baumeister, Wortman, & Stillwell, 1993; Vaughn, 1990).

Accordingly, Study 1 addressed the question of whether relevance is important in determining the effects of relative performance feedback on observed couple narratives. The SEM model suggests that relevance to the self should be critical in explaining effects of poor performance relative to one's partner. Poor performance relative to the partner in high-relevance areas was predicted to have a larger negative effect on the couple than poorer performance in low-relevance areas. We hypothesized that couples in which one partner was given negative performance feedback in a high-relevance area before a joint recall task would generate less positive recollections of their early history together than would couples in which the target partner was given the same feedback, except about an area of low relevance.

Method

Participants

Forty-eight married couples recruited via advertisements posted on the campus of a large southern state university completed both portions of the experimental protocol without expressing suspicion about the manipulation. All couples were paid \$20 for participating. The study was described as an investigation of personality and couple interaction. As a result of last-minute scheduling difficulties, 1 couple could not participate in the study, leaving 47 complete protocols.

On average, husbands were 37.15 years old ($SD = 11.92$), and wives were 35.11 years old ($SD = 10.60$). Spouses reported having been married an average of 9.40 years (range = 9 months to 45 years). Mean family income was reported to be in the range of \$30,000–\$50,000 per year. Median educational attainment for both husbands and wives was reported to be at the level of college graduate but ranged from grade school to graduate school. Mean level of marital satisfaction scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) were 114.94 ($SD = 15.04$) for husbands and 113.15 ($SD = 17.31$) for wives. Mean level of depressive symptomatology scores on the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988) were 3.62 ($SD = 3.39$) for husbands and 6.43 ($SD = 5.96$) for wives. Two couples self-identified as Black; in one couple, both partners self-identified as "other"; and, in one couple, one partner self-identified as other and one self-identified as White. The remainder of the couples consisted of spouses both self-identifying as White. Mean number of children at home was reported to be 1.06 ($SD = 1.21$).

Procedure

Overview and purpose of Study 1. Study 1 involved three procedural elements. First, couples completed pencil-and-paper measures. Second, couples competed on a "trivial pursuit" task and received feedback that one of them had outperformed and one of them had been outperformed by the other. Finally, couples were videotaped talking with each other about how they met and the early years of their marriage. In half of the cases, "outperformed" partners were told that they had been outperformed in an area low in importance to the self (this was the *positive reflection* condition). In the other half of the cases, they were given the feedback in an area they had previously indicated to be high in importance to them (this was the *negative comparison* condition).¹ Partners were randomly assigned to be either the target (i.e., receive feedback that they were outperformed) or the nontarget (i.e., receive feedback that they outperformed their partner in an area of importance to them).

Procedural detail. On arrival, each partner was asked to complete a brief set of questionnaires that included information on demographics, the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1988), and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). After completing the paper-and-pencil measures, all spouses were told the following:

You and your partner will respond to a number of questions representing a variety of knowledge areas. Although you will sit at different stations while you work, the computer task will be the same for both of you. The instructions will be presented on the computer screen.

The computer was programmed to present first a list of 30 knowledge areas such as hunting–fishing, cooking, American history, cars, and movie stars. Partners were told the following:

Some areas are important for some people but not for others and for each of us there are some areas that we like to think we know about. Indeed, being knowledgeable in those areas is part of how we think about ourselves.

¹ Negative comparison and positive reflection are both potential responses to being outperformed by a close other. To influence which response predominated, the experimenter provided feedback about an area high in importance to the individual (to induce comparison) or low in importance to the individual (to induce reflection). Accordingly, the only difference between participants in the two conditions was the importance to the target spouse of the area for which feedback was given. Therefore, the results were not an artifact of failure or poor performance feedback per se; such feedback was constant across both conditions.

They were then asked to pick two topic areas that would reflect each of the following situations: (a) a topic that was important to them but not to their partner, (b) a topic that was important to their partner but not to them, (c) a topic that was important to both them and their partner, and (d) a topic that was unimportant to both them and their partner. The computer then selected randomly one of the topic areas that fit the condition to which the spouse was assigned and one of the topic areas indicated to be unimportant to both partners. Participants were assigned to conditions according to a predetermined, block randomized pattern. Because feedback was given by the computer, experimenters were not aware of the condition to which participants were assigned, nor were they aware of the experimental hypotheses under investigation.

For each topic area, the computer was programmed with a bank of 12 items with four multiple-choice answers from which to choose. Eight of the items had correct answers. The presence of these items was designed to make the feedback more credible. There were also 4 items with only incorrect response alternatives (e.g., in the area of nature and wildlife, participants might have been asked to guess the range of the crested blue fin; because there is no such fish, feedback indicating that some items were incorrect should have been credible). After a participant had entered his or her responses for all 12 items, the computer provided feedback on the number correct for the participant and his or her partner. Again, although partners were not actually answering the same questions, they were led to believe that they were.

All of the target spouses were given the feedback that they had been outperformed either in an area they had identified as important to them or in an area they had identified as unimportant. All nontarget spouses were given feedback that they had outperformed their partner in an area important to them. Accordingly, the two conditions contrasted the effect of creating, for the target spouse, either negative comparison or positive reflection while holding constant partner motivational state (positive comparison). A block randomization procedure was used to assign couples to conditions and spouses within couples to target or nontarget status.

Interaction task. Immediately after they had completed the computer game, spouses went to a room with a camera concealed behind a one-way mirror. The couple was asked to read the following brief instructions:

For this portion of the study we would like to have you reminisce and remind each other about the important events in the development of your relationship. For example, you may discuss things such as how you met, what attracted you to your partner, various events that occurred early in your relationship, things that had a major effect on each of you, or things that were prob-

lems that needed to be worked out, and so forth. We do not require that you discuss any particular areas, but rather, we realize each couple will be different and we would simply like you to discuss those subjects that come to mind for you. Please continue to reminisce until the person conducting the study signals that 10 minutes are up.

Couples were then allowed 10 min to reminisce with no constraints placed on the flow of the interaction. The entire interaction was videotaped; however, observers subsequently rated only the first 4 min.

Rating of positiveness and negativeness. The content of each spouse's behavior was rated for each of the first 4 min of the task by each of three raters who were unaware of the experimental manipulations and the hypotheses being tested. For each minute, the raters gave a rating as to the overall positiveness of the recollections. The same behavior was subsequently rated as to overall negativeness in each of the same 4 min (scores on negativeness were reversed so that they would be in the same direction as the positiveness scores). Theoretically, it was possible for positive and negative ratings to vary independently, but in fact mean positive and negative ratings were substantially intercorrelated ($r = .80, p < .001$). Similarly, it was theoretically possible for spouses' behavior to diverge, but there was substantial intercorrelation in the behavior of spouses (the median correlation among mean ratings of positive and negative husband and wife behavior was $.83, p < .001$). Interrater reliability was good (correlations between pairs of raters across the 4 min were $.71, .72$, and $.68$), yielding an effective reliability of the mean rating of $.88$ (Rosenthal, 1982). Accordingly, the mean rating of the three observers was summed across the four time intervals, the independent positive-negative ratings, and the two spouses to yield a single score that indicated total overall positiveness of the recollections for each couple. The rating scale could range from 0 to 6; thus, the theoretical score range for the composite was 0 (*not at all positive*) to 96 (*extremely positive*).

Results and Discussion

To control for the potential confounding influence of couple level of depressive symptomatology and couple level of marital discord on the valence of recall of early relationship events, we used the sum of husband and wife depressive symptom scores on the Beck Depression Inventory and the sum of husband and wife scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale as covariates. The summary ratings of positiveness of recollection were subjected to a 2 (condition)

$\times 2$ (gender of spouse outperformed) analysis of covariance. Neither covariate was found to be significant. There was, however, a significant effect of condition in the predicted direction, $F(1, 41) = 4.20, p < .05$.² But the main effect of gender of spouse outperformed and the Gender \times Condition interaction were not significant. Couples in which one partner had been placed in the negative comparison condition were significantly less positive in their recollections of early relationship experiences ($M = 69.35$) than were spouses in couples in which the outperformed partner was in the positive reflection condition ($M = 78.13$).

Reminiscence tasks like the one used in this study are quite commonly recommended by marital therapists as a way of inducing a positively valenced tone in the first session (e.g., Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Stuart, 1980) and are sometimes used in experimental work to induce a positive, collaborative set at the end of the session (Gottman, 1994). In keeping with this tradition, it was clear that, on average, couples did enjoy the reminiscence task and were generally quite positive in their recollections. However, it was possible to change the positive hedonic tone of this task significantly by inducing negative social comparison rather than positive reflection vis-à-vis the spouse before having the couple begin reminiscing.

Interestingly, there was no effect attributable to whether the husband or the wife was outperformed, suggesting that husbands and wives were equally receptive targets of the manipulation. It appears, then, that experimentally generated social comparison processes can influence reminiscence. In particular, there was a less favorable recollection of the couple's history together when negative comparison was induced than when positive reflection was induced. This suggests that spouses who can view a partner's better performance as an opportunity for reflection rather than an occasion for comparison may experience relatively better relationship outcomes.

Study 2: Are SEM Processes Apparent in Reports of Daily Activities?

Study 1 showed that experimentally induced social comparison processes can change the va-

lence of spouses' recollections and their joint behavior. In Study 2, we examined the effect of social comparison processes on the reported frequency of shared activities in a sample of married couples. In this study, we were interested in everyday behavior that couples might engage in together and that might provide an opportunity for social comparison. In particular, we wondered whether couples might show evidence of a performance ecology in their reports of how frequently they engaged in various joint activities in which one person could outperform the other. That is, do couples show evidence that some capabilities may be "selected for," whereas others are "selected against"?

Method

Participants

To create a sample in which external performance demands for both spouses were relatively equal, we recruited only dual-earner couples. Accordingly, comparisons across gender were more likely to be free of confounding differences in occupational status or education. Participants were recruited through a random digit dialing procedure. The person answering the phone was asked whether she or he worked at least 30 hr outside the home and whether his or her spouse also worked at least 30 hr outside the home. In addition, respondents were asked whether they had at least one child living at home with them. If they answered affirmatively, they were asked to participate in a study of marriage. Accordingly, the participants represented not a sample of convenience but an attempt to obtain a cross section of individuals meeting study criteria in the three-county area surrounding Athens, Georgia. Once an eligible household was selected for participation in the study, two questionnaires were mailed along with two return envelopes. To maximize candid responding, we instructed participants to complete the survey separately from their spouse, not to show or compare their responses with those of their spouse, and to return the surveys in the separate return envelopes provided. Of 455 families indicating over the phone that they would participate, 266 respondents, including 104 couples, returned completed questionnaires. However, as a result of missing data, the final sample size

² Alternatively, this analysis can be run with four covariates: husbands' and wives' Dyadic Adjustment Scale scores and their Beck Depression Inventory scores. In this case, the effect of condition remained significant in the predicted direction, $F(1, 39) = 4.57, p < .05$. All other effects remained nonsignificant.

was 224: 74 couples and 76 individuals for whom no partner report was available.³ Accordingly, there were 150 independent observations in the data set.

Husbands' and wives' reports of their occupation indicated that the modal respondent had an occupational status at either the professional or managerial level. There was no significant difference in occupational status between husbands and wives. Median educational attainment for both husbands and wives was reported to be at the level of some college but ranged from grade school to graduate school. Again, there was no significant gender difference. Accordingly, the recruitment strategy was successful in minimizing gender differences in status. On average, husbands were 40.7 years old ($SD = 8.4$), and wives were 37.7 years old ($SD = 7.4$). Spouses reported having been married an average of 14.4 years ($SD = 8.3$, range = 2 to 40 years). Mean number of children at home was reported to be 1.75 ($SD = 0.84$). Mean level of marital satisfaction scores on the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983) were 5.78 for husbands (range = 1 to 7) and 5.58 for wives (range = 1 to 7). This indicates that, although the average participant in the study was relatively happy in his or her relationship, the full theoretical range (1 to 7) of levels of satisfaction was represented. Mean level of depression scores on the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1988) were 6.3 for husbands (range = 0 to 38) and 7.39 for wives (range = 0 to 32). This indicates some depressive symptoms, on average, but a range from complete absence of depressive symptoms to diagnosable disorders. Mean family income was reported to be in the range of \$40,000 to \$49,000 per year. Eight individuals self-identified as Black, 2 self-identified as Asian, and all others self-identified as White. Accordingly, despite efforts to obtain a representative sample, the final sample overrepresented the more affluent and well educated and underrepresented African Americans and members of other ethnic minorities relative to their presence in the three-county area (4% vs. 15%). It is not clear to what extent this reflected our exclusion criteria and focus on dual-earner couples or to what extent it reflected differential response rates. In either case, however, caution is warranted in extrapolating the results to ethnic minority populations.

Measures and Procedure

In addition to providing the general demographic information just described (and other information not related to the present investigation), participants answered questions about the frequency of each of eight types of outcomes involving them and their partner. Specifically, spouses were asked about the frequency

of outperforming their partner and the frequency of their partner outperforming them on tasks important to them or not important to them and tasks important to their spouse or not important to their spouse. For example, the frequency of outcomes in which one outperformed one's partner, in tasks of importance to oneself but not the partner, was assessed as follows:

Please think about the various tasks and activities that you think are not very important to your spouse. How often would you say that you do better than your spouse on tasks or activities which are important to you but not very important to your spouse?

Response options for each outcome were often, frequently, rarely, and never.

To avoid an overly repetitious series of questions, we assessed spouse relevance between subjects. That is, for a given respondent, all questions focused either on the set of outcomes that were very important to the spouse or the set of outcomes that were not very important to the spouse. Relative performance and self-relevance were crossed within subjects, however, to yield a total of four judgments per participant. Accordingly, self-relevance and performance were within-subject variables, whereas spouse relevance was a between-subjects variable. Thus, all eight social comparison situations produced by crossing two levels of performance, two levels of importance to self, and two levels of importance to partner were assessed.

As noted earlier, because some participants were married to each other, there was a problem of non-independence of responses in the data that precluded use of all respondents when gender was treated as a between-subjects variable. However, because some participants did not have spouses who also were participants, it was not possible to treat gender as a within-couple variable without loss of data, introducing unknown selection bias into the sample. Unfortunately, there was no one fully satisfactory way to analyze the data. Accordingly, we first conducted analyses using only couples with complete data for both spouses and treated gender as a within-couple variable (reducing the degrees of freedom to 74); then we conducted analyses using all respondents and treated gender as a between-subjects variable (and reduced the degrees of freedom to 150 to reflect the true number of independent observations). Because

³ Participants for Study 3 were drawn from the same sample. However, the number of couples differed between the two studies as a result of differing numbers of partners with missing data on each section of the survey. Specifically, 84 couples in which both partners provided complete data were involved in the investigation of distorted partner perceptions (Study 3). In addition, the sample was the basis of the Beach and Tesser (1993) article on decision-making power and its effect on marital satisfaction.

the pattern of results was not appreciably altered, only the later analysis is presented here.⁴

Results

To assess the effect of SEM processes on the frequency of occurrence of various types of outcomes, we conducted a 2 (gender) \times 2 (self-relevance: high vs. low) \times 2 (spouse relevance: high vs. low) \times 2 (relative performance: self outperforms partner vs. partner outperforms self) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA); self-relevance and performance were treated as repeated variables, and gender and spouse relevance were treated as between-subjects variables. The means for each of the 16 cells can be seen in Table 1. For both husbands and wives, the two types of tasks reported to be least frequent were (a) tasks that were high in self-relevance and low in spouse relevance and that involved the spouse outperforming the self and (b) tasks that were low in self-relevance and high in spouse relevance and that involved the self outperforming the spouse. These were the outcomes predicted by the SEM model to have the least benefit for SEM and the greatest potential threat for at least one member of the couple.

There were six significant effects: two main effects, two predicted two-way interactions, and two three-way interactions. For ease of explication, we begin with the higher order interactions.

Higher Order Interactions

The three-way interactions reflected small but important higher order effects involving the predicted SEM effects. First, there was a significant Self-Relevance \times Performance \times Gender interaction, $F(1, 150) = 4.80, p < .05$. Examination of the means in Table 1 shows that the effect resulted from the greater tendency of wives than husbands to report a pattern of interactions conforming to their own SEM needs and, in particular, to report more opportunities for positive reflection. This pattern can be seen most clearly by summing, within gender, those outcomes conferring SEM benefits (i.e., high self-relevance, self outperforms spouse and low self-relevance, spouse outperforms self) and subtracting those outcomes not conferring SEM benefits (i.e., high self-relevance, spouse outperforms self and low self-relevance, self outperforms spouse). This difference measure of the magnitude of the SEM benefits for each gender was greater for wives than for husbands. In particular, wives were more likely to report that their partner frequently outperformed them at tasks low in importance to them. In addition, for both husbands and wives, the simple Self-Relevance \times Performance interaction conformed to the crossover pattern predicted by the SEM model.

The second higher order interaction was the significant three-way Self-Relevance \times Spouse Relevance \times Relative Performance interaction, $F(1, 150) = 6.63, p < .05$. Examination of the means in Table 1 indicates a greater frequency of activity in cells conferring SEM benefits to

Table 1
Cell Means for Frequency of Occurrence of Marital Interactions as a Function of Gender, Self-Relevance, Partner Relevance, and Relative Performance

Partner relevance	High relevance		Low relevance	
	Spouse better	Self better	Spouse better	Self better
Husbands				
High	2.58	2.48	2.62	2.19
Low	2.25	3.16	2.26	2.37
<i>M</i>	2.41	2.82	2.44	2.28
Wives				
High	2.89	2.43	3.18	1.96
Low	2.27	2.98	2.69	2.37
<i>M</i>	2.58	2.71	2.93	2.16

⁴ Analyses using only couples in which both partners provided complete data yielded the following effects. Predicted interaction effects between importance to self and relative performance, $F(1, 71) = 56.48$, and between importance to partner and relative performance, $F(1, 71) = 58.32$, were obtained. In addition, a significant three-way Relative Performance \times Importance to Self \times Importance to Partner interaction was obtained, indicating synergistic effects for those cells in which both the original and extended models predicted greater or lesser frequency. Finally, significant main effects of importance to self and relative performance and significant Gender \times Importance to Partner and Gender \times Relative Performance interactions were obtained. The three-way Gender \times Relative Performance \times Importance to Self interaction discussed in the text was not significant.

both partners (high self-relevance, low spouse relevance, self outperforms spouse and low self-relevance, high spouse relevance, spouse outperforms self) and a lesser frequency of activity in the cells conferring SEM benefits to neither partner (low self-relevance, high spouse relevance, self outperforms spouse and high self-relevance, low spouse relevance, spouse outperforms self) than would be expected on the basis of the two-way interactions alone. Thus, the three-way interaction indicates a synergistic effect of self and partner SEM needs on frequency of activity.

Interactions Predicted by the SEM Model

The two interactions predicted by the SEM model extended to marriage were highly significant. The Self-Relevance \times Performance interaction was significant, $F(1, 150) = 96.64, p < .001$. Because the higher order interaction with gender did not change the shape of the interaction, Figure 1 reflects the combined effects for husbands and wives. As can be seen, the two-way interaction reflects relatively higher frequencies of individuals outperforming their partner in areas high in importance to them and being outperformed in areas low in importance to them. This, of course, was the pattern predicted by the SEM model. Likewise, the Spouse Relevance \times Performance interaction was significant, $F(1, 150) = 75.06, p < .001$. Figure 2 reflects the combined effects for husbands and wives. As can be seen in Figure 2, the Spouse Relevance \times Performance interaction reflected the relatively greater reported frequency of being outperformed by rather than outperforming one's spouse when the task was high in spouse relevance; the opposite was true when spouse relevance was low. Again, this was the pattern predicted by the SEM model.

Main Effects

The main effect of self-relevance, $F(1, 150) = 14.53, p < .001$, indicated that all participants rated as more frequent those tasks and activities that were important to them. The significant Gender \times Performance interaction, $F(1, 150) = 18.44, p < .001$, reflected a robust tendency for wives to rate as more frequent outcomes in which they were outperformed and

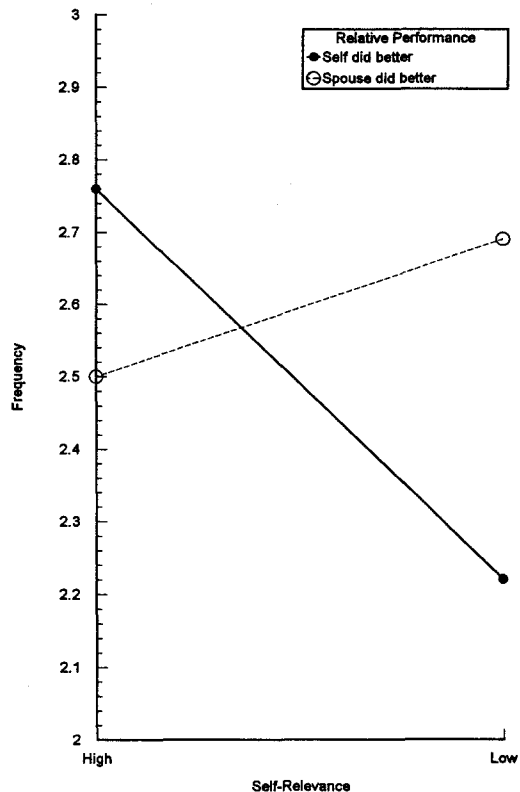


Figure 1. Interaction of performance and self-relevance on frequency of outcomes.

husbands to rate as more frequent outcomes in which they outperformed their partners.

Discussion

The results support the prediction that couples avoid outcomes that might produce negative comparison in either partner and instead report patterns of outcomes that support both partners' SEM needs. In addition, the significant three-way Performance \times Self-Relevance \times Spouse Relevance interaction further underscored this finding by showing that outcomes providing self-evaluation benefit to both partners were more likely to occur than would be predicted on the basis of the two-way interactions alone. This result conforms to SEM predictions regarding patterns of spousal activity in marriage and suggests the possibility of an even tighter determination of relative performance as a function of self and partner relevance than was originally proposed. Also of potential theoretic-

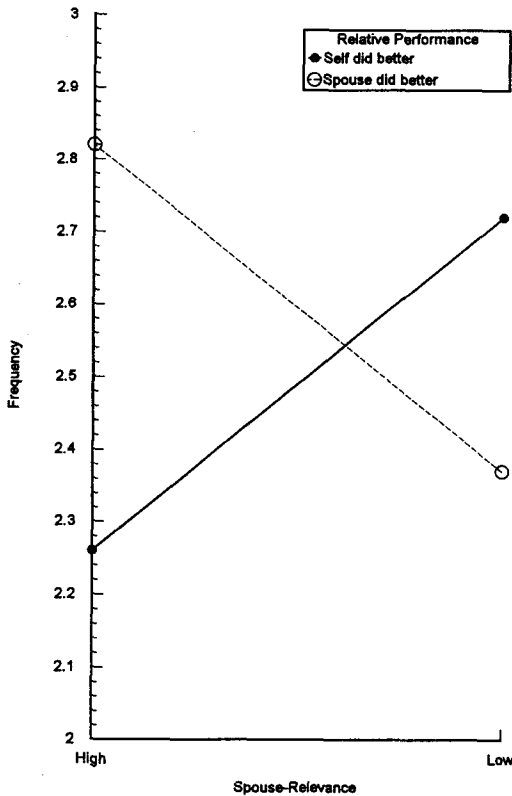


Figure 2. Interaction of performance and spouse relevance on frequency of outcomes.

cal interest, it was found that women were more likely to report being outperformed by their partners overall and were more likely than men to report being outperformed even in areas high in relevance to them; furthermore, they were particularly likely to report being outperformed by their partner in areas low in importance to them. Because this pattern has potential relevance for symptoms of depression (Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991), it may be worthy of further theoretical attention in its own right.

Study 3: SEM Processes and the Distortion of Partner Needs

Study 1 indicated that processes described by the SEM model could account for differences in recalled relationship history after feedback designed to elicit either comparison or reflection in response to information that one had performed more poorly than one's spouse. As pre-

dicted, comparison processes produced more negatively valenced reminiscence than reflection processes. Study 2 suggested that processes described by the SEM model could account for the self-reported frequency of various shared activities that had the potential to occasion social comparison. In particular, spouses reported doing more of the things that the SEM model indicates are "ecologically sound" and fewer of the things the SEM model indicates are "ecologically unsound." However, from the standpoint of a performance ecology of the marital relationship, it is also of interest to examine the role of perceptual processes in reconciling the interests of the spouse with one's own interests. Study 3 was designed to address the question of whether spouses might distort partner importance (and so partner needs) to avoid the perception of negative outcomes for the partner.

According to the extended SEM model (Beach & Tesser, 1993), spouses should not only find it uncomfortable when they are outperformed in areas of high self-importance or outperform their partner in areas of low self-importance but also find it uncomfortable when they perceive that their partner is in one of these circumstances. One possible reaction to an unpleasant condition of this sort is to change one's perception of the situation so that it no longer seems so unpleasant. Because spouses appear to have relatively little information about the actual importance of various decision-making areas to the partner (Beach & Tesser, 1993), spouse importance should be particularly susceptible to distortion. For example, after deciding what family car to buy without consulting his wife, a husband might think, "She never really cared about cars anyway," thereby protecting himself from the uncomfortable realization that his wife might have a negative reaction to his unilateral exercise of decision-making authority.

In the preceding example, if the wife's report of the importance of the area were available, one might subtract the husband's assessment from the wife's report, and the discrepancy could serve as a measure of the degree of the husband's "self-protective" distortion. From the perspective of the extended SEM model, one should be motivated to distort the partner importance of an area downward from its true level (i.e., see it as being less important to the spouse than it really is) when one has made a decision but distort upward when the partner

has made a decision. That is, after one makes a decision in an area of disagreement, it should be useful to minimize perceived partner importance and so minimize perceived potential for partner distress from negative comparison. Conversely, after the partner makes a decision in an area of disagreement, it should be useful to inflate partner importance so as to minimize the perceived potential for partner distress from negative reflection. Thus, the SEM model allows for directional predictions of distortion of partner importance as a function of who made the decision. Conversely, if misperception were based on random factors (unmotivated error), there should be no systematic relationship between the magnitude of discrepancy scores and which partner made the decision. Likewise, if distortion occurs for assessments of one's own performance or changes in report of importance to oneself but not for perception of importance to the partner, there should be no relationship between discrepancy scores and who made the decision. Accordingly, we assessed the perceived importance to the spouse as well as each spouse's self-report of importance to create an index of spouse distortion.

Method

Participants

Eighty-four couples from Study 2 provided complete data on the measures used for the current investigation.

Measures

The Marital Decision Making Scale (Beach & Tesser, 1993) was derived to assess the four categories of information deemed important for understanding the impact of marital decision making from the standpoint of the SEM model. For each of 24 decision-making areas, spouses were asked to indicate (a) whether the couple agreed, for the most part, in this area of decision making; (b) whether decisions in this area were made primarily by them or by their partner; (c) whether making decisions in this area was important to them; and (d) whether making decisions in this area was important to their partner. A sample item and scoring instructions can be found in Figure 3. The 24 areas of decision making assessed were generated on the basis of the areas described by Stuart (1980, 1983). Areas assessed included issues about how much to work, how many children to

<p>A. <u>Extent to which you</u> <u>and your spouse agree</u></p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Entirely or Often Not at all</p> <p>Always or Never</p>	<p>B. <u>Who Decides</u></p> <p>1 2 3 4</p> <p>Entirely Mostly Mostly Entirely</p> <p>My My My Spouses My Spouses</p> <p>Decision Decision Decision Decision</p>				
<p>1. Where you live. 1 2 3 4 5</p>	<p>1 2 3 4</p>				
<table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>C. <u>How Important</u> <u>that You Decide</u></p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very Somewhat Not</p> <p>Important Important Important</p> </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>D. <u>How Important to</u> <u>Your Spouse that He/She Decide</u></p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very Somewhat Not</p> <p>Important Important Important</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>1. Where you live. 1 2 3 4 5</p> </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p> </td> </tr> </table>		<p>C. <u>How Important</u> <u>that You Decide</u></p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very Somewhat Not</p> <p>Important Important Important</p>	<p>D. <u>How Important to</u> <u>Your Spouse that He/She Decide</u></p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very Somewhat Not</p> <p>Important Important Important</p>	<p>1. Where you live. 1 2 3 4 5</p>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>C. <u>How Important</u> <u>that You Decide</u></p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very Somewhat Not</p> <p>Important Important Important</p>	<p>D. <u>How Important to</u> <u>Your Spouse that He/She Decide</u></p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very Somewhat Not</p> <p>Important Important Important</p>				
<p>1. Where you live. 1 2 3 4 5</p>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p>				

Scoring

If A = 1 or 2 then the area is scored as an agreement, otherwise not

If B = 1 or 2 then the area is scored as high decision making power, if 3 or 4 low power

Within the four cells created by crossing A by B,

Figure 3. Sample item and scoring for the Marital Decision Making Scale.

have, how to spend free time, how much time to spend with relatives, how to spend money on large or small purchases, where to go for vacations, whether to go to church, and when to have sex, among others. Because of the homogeneity of the sample, all questions were deemed to be applicable to all couples participating in the study.

For all items on which any disagreement was indicated, the discrepancy between the self-reported and partner-reported importance of the area was computed. Difference scores were then averaged within level of importance to the self and within level of decision making.

Results and Discussion

A 2 (gender) \times 2 (level of decision making) \times 2 (level of importance to the self) repeated measures ANOVA, with discrepancy between predicted and actual spouse importance ratings as the dependent variable, was used to analyze the data. The overall pattern of results was consistent with SEM predictions for both men and women. The main effect of level of decision making was significant, $F(1, 83) = 81.67, p < .0001$. No other main or interaction effects were significant. When individuals themselves made the decision in an area of disagreement, errors were in the direction of underestimating the importance of the decision-making area to the partner ($M_s = -.29$ and $-.24$ for men and women, respectively). Conversely, when the partner made the decision, the errors were in the direction of overestimating the importance of the decision-making area to the partner ($M_s = .28$ and $.38$ for men and women, respectively). It appears, then, that both husbands and wives may substantially distort their perception of their partner so as to view the partner as being relatively better off than is actually the case.

An alternative explanation might focus on the possibility that it is the partner who distorts his or her perceptions. That is, one might argue that, after a decision has been made, the partner might change in terms of the self-importance of the area. However, this process should work against the predicted effects and obscure the predicted pattern of results. That is, to the extent that one's partner decreases the importance of an area after one makes a decision, it should minimize the difference between the ratings provided by the two. Accordingly, our ability to obtain the predicted result suggests that this

effect, if it occurs, is not as robust as the process leading to distortion of partner importance. This is as one would expect, because it should be easier to distort partner ratings of importance than to distort one's own ratings. In addition, however, the source of the effect may also be examined empirically by considering individually the two component parts of the difference index. Indeed, we found that although there were no group differences in self-ratings of importance as a function of decision making, there was a significant effect when partner ratings were used. Accordingly, in the current data, it appears that the distortion effect was accounted for by self-serving changes in partner ratings that reduced perception of potentially negative partner reactions as a result of negative comparison or negative reflection.

General Discussion

Our thesis was that a performance ecology exists within every committed, romantic relationship and that the set of performance niches occupied by each partner and the relative performance of partners within their respective niches provide a context for understanding relationship processes. We have also argued that the SEM model is useful in explicating the structure of this performance ecology. The current series of studies provides initial support for this position. In Study 1, relatively simple laboratory manipulations of performance feedback in areas of high versus low self-relevance made a difference in the valence of couple recollections. In Study 2, we found that spouses report structuring their joint activities in such a way that negative social comparison is minimized for both partners. In Study 3, we found systematic distortion of partner needs as a function of who made the decision. Needs were distorted in the direction of minimizing potential partner discomfort and maximizing potential partner positive reflection. It appears, then, that an ecology of performance in marriage may contribute to understanding of patterns of dyadic interaction and that the SEM model may provide some guidance as this new context is explored. An advantage of using the SEM model to guide the examination is that it allows research to be informed by related work on social comparison processes more generally (Suls & Wills, 1991).

Accordingly, this approach has the potential to illuminate a variety of dyadic effects on individual functioning as well as the effect of self-processes on dyadic functioning.

Negative social comparison should arise infrequently if members of a romantic relationship consider self-defining only nonoverlapping performance domains. Consequently, it may be that negative social comparison rarely arises in the context of very traditional relationships and was relatively uncommon before this century. So long as there were clear gender-based prescriptions for participation in various performance domains, there could be little overlap in important performance domains and so little opportunity for negative social comparison with one's spouse. Because people have become somewhat freer in recent years to develop unique self-definitions in ways that cross traditional gender roles, the potential for overlapping areas of high self-relevance between partners of different genders in close relationships has also increased, and any tendency toward assortative mating with regard to talents and interests should exacerbate the potential for problems to develop. Increasing overlap in areas high in self-relevance increases the likelihood of being outperformed by a close other in an area of high self-relevance and the consequent experience of negative comparison in intimate heterosexual relationships. Indeed, it may be that negative social comparison in romantic relationships is of sufficiently recent origin that it has not yet gained a popular vocabulary. If so, continuing rapid changes in gender role patterns may occasion interesting new challenges for therapists and researchers. At a minimum, it appears that negative social comparison is a potential force in romantic relationships and is worthy of additional empirical and theoretical attention.

It is also of theoretical interest to consider the gender differences that emerged in Study 2. There was a significant effect for women to report being outperformed by their partners and men to report outperforming partners. This necessarily leaves women relatively more dependent on reflection for SEM within marriage and men relatively more dependent on positive comparison. There is likely to be some pressure on women in heterosexual relationships, then, to allow their partner to outperform them if the area is of importance to the partner. If the area is one in which one has typically done well, perhaps as well as one's partner, there may be

pressure to sabotage or denigrate one's own performance to allow the partner to perform, or seem to perform, better. Likewise, there is reason to expect some level of covert sabotage by the partner to help ensure that the performance is poor enough to not be threatening (cf. Tesser & Smith, 1980). As noted by Baumeister (1991), for areas of greatest societal recognition, this dynamic may be supported by the pattern of slightly older men marrying somewhat younger women. Although the average age difference between husbands and wives is only 2 years, this may be sufficient to produce differential earning potential early in marriage, create a pattern of deference with regard to decision making in important areas, and support a performance differential in favor of husbands across many areas. In either case, the result may be that women are placed at risk for producing a series of suboptimal performances that lead to a sense of personal inadequacy, and this may occur relatively automatically and with little awareness on the part of either spouse. It seems likely that this process would, at a minimum, constrain the complexity of women's potential future selves (Niedenthal, Setterlund, & Wherry, 1992), making women more vulnerable to subsequent challenges and perhaps to depression.

The current series of studies also suggests a varied tapestry of effects that have not yet been examined in the marital dyad. If a performance ecology is important in understanding marriage, and social comparison motives commonly arise in intimate dyads, one might anticipate effects on social support processes between spouses (e.g., Beach, Fincham, Katz, & Bradbury, 1996), on the process of marital therapy (e.g., Beach, 1991), and on global marital satisfaction (e.g., Beach & Tesser, 1993; Clark & Bennett, 1992; Pilkington et al., 1991). Likewise, social comparison motives may sometimes figure prominently in "individual" problems, such as violence and depression, that often occur in a dyadic context (cf. Beach, Smith, & Fincham, 1994).

However, to focus exclusively on the negative consequences of "negative" social comparison is to miss an important part of the story that can be inferred from these data. In particular, it seems clear that couples may adjust what is important to them or develop their sense of self in new directions to avoid negative comparison and gain positive reflection. It is possible that

this sort of development might create long-term self-esteem benefits if specialized expertise is developed in areas that attract favorable external reactions (Beach & Tesser, 1995). Indeed, this dynamic might lead some spouses with overlapping areas of relevance to perform particularly competently (e.g., Bryson, Bryson, Licht, & Licht, 1976). Thus, there may be, in many cases, adaptive consequences to spouses' negative reactions to negative comparison. Only when there is no means of making adjustments do negative outcomes seem inevitable.

Clinical Implications and Future Directions

Although it appears that a performance ecology may exist in every relationship and may influence one's behavior toward one's partner, the factors that create problems of "clinical" importance have not been explicated in the current series of studies. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that the effects of negative comparison can be very powerful in some cases. There is, for example, the case of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). Writing was a dimension of self-defining importance to Scott, but when Zelda first began to write it is doubtful that her efforts were very threatening to him. Indeed, it appears that initially he encouraged her to write. However, when Zelda began to be published, there is evidence that Scott's attitude toward her writing changed. Scott reacted in an intense and negative manner and forbade her to pursue her writing career further. His jealousy of her writing had a severe and destructive impact on their relationship. Although little is known about the situational or personal variables that might increase vulnerability to the destructive potential of negative comparison, recent work by Salovey (1991) and colleagues using the SEM model as a framework for studying envy appears to have considerable potential in helping further explicate these performance effects.

Certain job-related "performance" effects are also known to influence marital quality. Marital dissatisfaction is heightened among those couples for whom the wife has greater occupational status than her husband (Hornung & McCullough, 1981), and marital dissolution is more likely under these circumstances as well (Phil-

iber & Hiller, 1983). Perhaps the SEM model can provide some insight into the difficulties being faced by these couples, along with suggesting possible solutions. In particular, the SEM model suggests that strategies aimed at changing the relevance of the performance dimension from high to low may be critical in such cases. That is, to the extent that individuals can redefine their partner's good performance as being in an area low in relevance to them, they should find it easier to feel good about the partner's performance and be at low risk for engaging in behaviors destructive to the relationship.

Much additional work is needed, of course, to apply the insights of the SEM model to prevention and intervention efforts. More needs to be known about those dimensions that are most likely to be sources of comparison and reflection within opposite-gender dyads. Likewise, a better understanding is needed of the various affective outcroppings that may accompany comparison and reflection effects and how such factors affect feelings of satisfaction with the relationship. In addition to examinations of overtly negative behaviors that occur as a function of couples' performance ecology, it may be useful to study how individuals may constrain their own development over time or how support may fail at critical moments as a function of performance ecology. Finally, it is of considerable interest to determine whether encouraging couples to develop complementary areas of expertise is a way to facilitate couple satisfaction.

Limitations

The current series of studies was limited to community couples examined cross sectionally or in a laboratory setting. The studies did not address the way in which SEM processes may unfold over time or how a performance ecology may exert longitudinal effects. Clearly, however, longitudinal effects are of considerable potential interest. In addition, there was no comparison of discordant and nondiscordant couples in the current series. Future work will need to directly examine the circumstances under which SEM processes may create serious relationship disturbance. Finally, minority participation was low in each of the studies, creating

the need for caution with regard to generalizing the effects to minority populations.

Conclusion

The current series of studies may be viewed as helping to open up the discussion of a performance ecology of marriage and the potential of the SEM model to explore this context for couple interaction. It is clear that many questions remain unanswered. In particular, the strategies most often used by couples to deal with negative comparison or its threat, the effect of long-term exposure to negative comparison when it proves to be inescapable, and the strategies most effective in dealing with negative comparison need close examination to better explicate the unforeseen pitfalls that await couples planning to marry. Likewise, because there are likely to be many unintended side effects of attempts to deal with negative comparison, greater explication is needed of the dyadic and intraindividual consequences of maneuvers used to handle negative comparison. In particular, the information-processing consequences of SEM processes and the basic mechanisms that produce adjustment in response to self-evaluation threat seem deserving of close attention. It appears, then, that there is much work left to be done, but a better explication of social comparison processes in romantic relationships promises to clarify understanding of marriage and add a context that has hitherto been lacking. We hope the result will be greater attention in future theories of romantic relationships and marital interaction to the role of social comparison processes and the performance ecology of marriage to which they give rise.

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