Attributions in close relationships:

From balkanization to integration

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Following Kelley's (1967) and Jones and Davis' (1965) important elaboration and systematization of Heider's (1958) seminal ideas about the perceived causes of behavior, attribution research replaced dissonance as the major research topic in social psychology, accounting for 11% of all published social-psychological research during the 1970s (Pleban & Richardson, 1979). Although the focus of attention shifted to social cognition in the eighties, the number of articles indexed with the term attribution as a descriptor continued to rise, tripling in number between 1974 and 1984 (Smith, 1994). The publication rate has not abated in the 1990s although it appears to have plateaued at approximately 300 articles per annum (1990-1998; mean = 322.8, range = 291-366).

What the numbers do not reveal, however, is a shift in the nature of research on attribution that might account for the continued prodigious output. One shift has been increasing attention to Heider's broad concern with how a perceiver links observables to underlying stable or dispositional properties ("invariances") of the world to give meaning to phenomenal experience. From this perspective, attribution is synonymous with perception and comprehension of the environment and draws on a variety domains (e.g., text comprehension, world knowledge) that might help elucidate the perceiver's causal construction of events. This emphasis fits well with social cognition research that also assumes continuity between inferences made about the social and nonsocial environment and it places attribution in a broader framework of research on how people construct mental models of the world.

The second shift has concerned the narrower and more traditional focus on linking a person's behavior to underlying properties of the person (e.g., traits, motives). Basic attribution research on this topic, stimulated by the classic attribution statements of Kelley (1967) and Jones and Davis (1965), began to wane in the 1980s. However, the application of an attributional framework in emerging areas of inquiry such as close relationships and to numerous applied problems (e.g., depression) maintained a steady output of research on this topic (see Hewstone & Fincham, 1996; Weiner, 1995).

The continued vitality of attribution research has, however, brought with it increased balkanization of the literature. The lack of interplay between the two new lines of attribution research just mentioned is striking. But even more striking is the relative isolation of research within closely related

areas of inquiry. For example, the impact of attributions on individual and relational outcomes has been investigated but the literatures relating to each type of outcome remain distinct.

Like the broader literature on attribution, research on attributions in close relationships has continued to flourish. Although initially focused on marital relationships, the research has broadened to embrace other relationships. But this growth has again brought with it balkanization as there is limited cross-fertilization of attributional research on different topics within the same relationship (e.g., marital violence, distressed marriages) and across research on different types of relationships (e.g., marital, parent-child and peer/friendship relationships).

It is just over 20 years since the inception of marital attribution research in social (Orvis, Kelley & Butler, 1976) and clinical (Wright & Fichten, 1976) psychology. As the field entered its adolescence, concerns were expressed about its "lack of focus and direction" (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers & Sher, 1989, p. 31). With the onset of adulthood, it behooves us to take stock of its development. In what ways have earlier expectations for the field come to fruition? Conversely, what promises remain unfulfilled and how might they now be realized? At a minimum, we need to recognize the price of balkanization and explore how integration among various domains of attribution research, and how links with a broader psychological literature, might enhance the study of attributions in marriage.

The chapter begins with a brief historical introduction to the study of attributions in marriage. It then evaluates the current state of the art in marital attribution research paying particular attention to developments in the past decade. This serves as a springboard for examining the marital literature in relation to the two shifts in attribution research that have balkanized the literature. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main points.

Historical Context

A vast body of research on attributions for behavior existed at the time researchers turned to study attribution in close relationships. However, they did not build on this research. Why? One reason is that basic attribution research concerned attributions made about a stranger or hypothetical other on the basis of highly restricted information and for the purpose of complying with experimenter instructions. These

characteristics cast doubt on the relevance of such research for understanding attributions in relationships. Empirical findings supported this doubt. For example, Knight and Vallacher (1981) showed that attributers who believed that they were interacting with another person showed the opposite pattern of attributions for that person's positive (situationally attributed) versus negative (disposition attributed) behavior compared to attributers who only expected to interact with the person at a later time. Detached observers did not make different attributions for these two forms of behavior. In a similar vein, persons tend to make stronger internal attributions for positive behavior performed by a friend or a spouse than for an acquaintance (Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976).

Interestingly, the discontinuity between the basic attribution research and research that emerged on attributions in close relationships extended to theory. Thus, for example, a seminal volume on close relationships published in the early 1980s (Kelly et al., 1983) makes no reference to Jones and Davis (1967) or to Kelley (1967). Reference to these works is also absent in recent, comprehensive overviews of the field (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Hinde, 1997). This disjuncture is particularly surprising as both fields have an influential common ancestor in Hal Kelley.

What then were the historical antecedents of attributional research in marriage? Two general roots can be traced. In social psychology Kelley was struck by the frequency with which intimates mentioned stable, general properties of the partner (usually dispositions) when describing relationship problems (see Kelley, 1979). This led to the investigation of atttributional conflict or disagreement between a person and their partner about the cause of the person's behavior (Orvis et al., 1976; Passer, Kelley & Michela, 1978; see also Harvey, Wells & Alvarez, 1978)[footnote 1]. A major finding to emerge from this research was that actors preferred explanations for their negative behavior that reflected a positive attitude to the partner, whereas partners preferred explanations that reflected the actor's negative attitudes and/or traits. The characterization of attributions along an evaluative dimension suggested that satisfaction experienced by the partners may covary with attributions, a possibility which turned out to be the well spring of marital attribution research in clinical psychology.

The origins of marital attribution research in clinical psychology did not, however, build on Kelley's work even though Kelley had focused on marital conflict (see Braiker & Kelley, 1979), a topic that was central to clinical research (marital dysfunction was seen to result from couple's ineffective response to conflict, Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Instead, the attribution perspective was brought to bear on the dominant pursuit of the time, the attempt to understand what differentiates distressed from nondistressed spouses so as to better understand the determinants of marital satisfaction and thereby improve marital therapy. Accordingly, the focus of most studies tended to be some variant of the hypothesis that attributions are associated with marital satisfaction. Interestingly, this hypothesis was later shown to be consistent with Heider's (1958, p. 207, 258) observations linking the liking of a person to the attributions made for his/her behavior (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

Interest in the attribution-satisfaction association was facilitated by two factors. At the global level, it was stimulated by dissatisfaction with the limits of a behavioral account of marriage and a subsequent shift in research emphasis from the study of observed behavior to examination of intraindividual factors (cognition, emotions) that might enrich understanding of overt behavior. At a more specific level, excitement was generated by the implicit causal assumption that attributions for marital events (e.g., spouse arrives home late from work) can promote marital satisfaction (e.g., "s/he is working hard to make us financially secure) or distress (e.g., ''s/he only cares about work and not about me," see Bagarozzi & Giddings, 1983).

Although originating in social and clinical psychology, the applied concerns of clinical researchers soon dominated the marital attribution literature. Before turning to this literature, it is worth noting some legacies of these historical origins as they inform the evaluation offered in the next section of the chapter.

First, marital researchers drew upon causal attribution dimensions in clinical psychology (e.g., Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale's, 1978, attributional analysis of learned helplessness) rather than in social psychology (e.g., Weiner, Russel & Lerman's, 1978, attributional analysis of emotion). This affected both the types of attributions initially investigated (causal attributions) as well the manner in

which they were investigated (in most research spouses rated causal dimensions). Ironically, however, it was not recognized that the locus, stability and globality dimensions in the attributional reformulation of learned helplessness theory can be directly linked to Kelley's (1967) criteria of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness.

Second, the evaluative implications of attributions in relationships were underscored by clinical observations that couples "typically view therapy as a way to demonstrate …that they are blameless and the other is at fault" (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). This led to the suggestion that issues of responsibility and blame are particularly germane in relationships (Fincham, 1983). Whereas causal attributions concern who or what produced an event, responsibility entails assessment of who is accountable for the event once a cause is known. Blame, in turn, entails an assessment of responsibility (see Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Shaver, 1985). As a consequence, responsibility attribution dimensions (e.g., intent, motivation) and blame attributions, in addition to causal attributions, became the subject of study in the marital literature. Figure 1 illustrates schematically the attribution hypothesis investigated in the marital literature showing that the pattern of attributions expected varies as a function of the valence of the event the marital satisfaction of the attributer.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Third, the fact that attribution theory is one element of Heider's (1958) attempt to systematize common sense ("naïve psychology"), means that, as intuitive or lay psychologists, everyone has access to the ideas informing attribution theory. As a result, one can "set up studies without being very explicit about the attribution process" (Kelley in Harvey, Ickes & Kidd, 1978, p. 375). This is particularly evident in marital attribution research. It manifested itself most obviously in the need to uncover unarticulated assumptions and build basic theory (Thompson & Snyder, 1986) and in measurement where dependent measures sometimes had nothing to do with attributions (e.g., estimates of behavioral frequency for assessment of causal stability, Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985, p. 1402). The upshot is remarkable variety in work that appears under the attribution rubric in the marital literature.

Attributions and marriage: A synopsis and critique

The purpose of the present section is threefold. The first goal is to identify themes in marital attribution research that might reveal underlying coherence in the literature. The second is to provide a synopsis of the literature. As several earlier reviews are available (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Baucom, 1987; Harvey, 1987; Thomson & Snyder, 1986), the focus is on research that has appeared in the last decade. This leads naturally to the third goal, to evaluate progress by identifying both actualized and forgone opportunities as well as new lines of inquiry suggested by extant research. This, in turn, sets the stage for the next section of the chapter in which links are drawn with research outside of the marital area.

Taking stock

The attribution-satisfaction association. Early on Thompson and Snyder (1986, p. 136) concluded that "research has supported a strong association between attributional processes and relationship satisfaction." Although perhaps premature, this conclusion was prescient. By the turn of the decade there were 23 relevant studies and across attributional dimensions an average of 80% of them supported the attribution hypothesis (Fincham, Bradbury & Scott, 1990). Support for the attribution hypothesis has continued to accrue in the past decade and no data have emerged to contradict the hypothesis.

This is not to suggest that results obtained across measures and methodologies are identical. For example, Sabourin, Lussier and Wright (1991) in a successful cross-cultural replication of the attribution hypothesis, found that attributions for marital difficulties and for hypothetical partner behaviors were only moderately correlated, with the former more often accounting for unique variance in satisfaction. They called for a standardized attribution measure to facilitate greater comparison of findings across studies, and the measurement of attributions is a topic that has received increased attention (see section, "Delineating the domain of attributions"). Although the relations among attributions obtained using different methodologies (e.g., thought listing, couple conversations, questionnaires) remains unknown, the association with satisfaction is robust. Indeed, the evidence for an association between attribution and marital satisfaction is overwhelming making it possibly the most robust, replicable phenomenon in the study of marriage.

Threats to the validity of the attribution-satisfaction association. Concern about the validity of the attribution-satisfaction association has long been evident. Early work ruled out possible methodological artifacts (e.g., independent assessment of attributions and satisfaction, common method variance) and examined depression as a theoretically relevant variable that might account for the association (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). As the number of potentially relevant third variables can never be exhausted, it is not surprising to find continued work on this front throughout the 1990s.

Senchak and Leonard (1993) showed that demographic variables and anger did not account for the association and provided further evidence to show that the association was independent of depressive symptoms. They extended prior findings by demonstrating that with affect (anger and depression) of both self *and* partner controlled, attributions accounted for unique variance in satisfaction. In a similar vein, attributions for partner behavior have not been associated with the status of spouses as clinically depressed versus nondepressed (Bauserman, Arias & Craighead, 1995; Bradbury, Beach, Fincham & Nelson., 1996). It also appears that negative affectivity more generally (as indexed by neuroticism and depressive mood) does not account for the attribution-satisfaction relation; the association has emerged after controlling for the negative affectivity of both spouses and is independent of measurement error (Karney, Bradbury, Fincham & Sullivan, 1994). Finally, the demonstration that the attribution-satisfaction association is independent of depression is consistent with findings obtained using dating couples (Fletcher, Fitness & Blampied, 1990).

A new third variable explanation for the attribution-satisfaction relation was raised in a study of marital violence. Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson (1993) found that while violent husbands were more likely to attribute blame, negative intent, and selfish motivation to their wives than satisfied, nonviolent men, the attributions of maritally dissatisfied, nonviolent men did not differ from either of these two groups. If replicated, this finding would show that marital attribution phenomena may be attributable to the high rates of aggression and violence found in some married couples. However, the attribution-satisfaction association has been demonstrated in a sample of nonviolent husbands and also

remains significant when marital violence is partialled out of the association (Fincham, Bradbury, Arias, Byrne & Karney, 1997).

Ruling out threats to validity does not document the importance of attributions in marriage. Although robust, the attribution-satisfaction association may be unimportant for understanding marriage. Alternatively, it may simply reflect what Weiss (1980) has labeled "sentiment override" – the hypothesis that spouses respond noncontingently to partner behavior or questions about the marriage. In other words spouses simply respond in terms of their dominant feeling or sentiment about the marriage and this is reflected "in as many tests as one chooses to administer" (Weiss & Heyman, 1990, p. 92). Belief in this position is so strong that attempts to explain variance in marital quality using self-reports have been characterized as "invalid from a scientific standpoint" (Gottman, 1990, p. 79). A fundamental task for the field therefore has been to show that attributions increase understanding of marriage and are not simply a proxy index of marital sentiment.

Documenting the importance of attributions in marriage. One way to address the importance of attributions in marriage is to provide evidence for the assumption that attributions influence marital satisfaction. Such evidence raises the question of how attributions might exert any causal influence. Although any effect may be direct, it may also occur indirectly through spouse behavior. Thus, certain attributions for partner behavior (e.g., rejection of a sexual advance) may be conflict promoting (e.g., "you don't really love me"). This highlights a second important assumption that stimulated interest in spousal attributions, the possibility that attributions may influence marital behavior. For example, attributions might explain interaction patterns (e.g., negative reciprocity) identified with marital distress. Each assumption is addressed in turn.

Attributions and marital satisfaction: A causal association? A possible causal association between attributions and satisfaction has been investigated primarily through longitudinal studies. Because only the variance that attributions do not share with marital quality is used to predict changes in marital quality, it is difficult to account for significant findings by arguing that attributions simply index marital quality.

Four new longitudinal studies supplement early findings showing that attributions predict later satisfaction in dating (Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer & Heron, 1987) and married couples (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). In established marriages (mean length = 9.4 years) causal attributions predicted satisfaction 12 months later for both husbands and wives (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993). However, husbands' initial satisfaction also predicted change in their attributions suggesting a possible bidirectional causal relation between attributions and satisfaction. This study also ruled out depressive symptoms as a factor responsible for the longitudinal association and showed that the findings did not change when those who were chronically depressed or distressed were excluded from the sample. In a sample of newlywed husbands, conflict promoting responsibility attributions contributed to declines in reported satisfaction 12 months later but not vice versa (Fincham, Bradbury et al., 1997) thereby showing that the longitudinal pattern of findings extends beyond the population of established married couples.

The longitudinal association between attributions and satisfaction has also been replicated over an 18 month period and appears to be mediated by the impact of attributions on efficacy expectations which, in turn, influenced satisfaction (Fincham, Harold & Gano-Phillips, 1999). In this study, evidence was also obtained to support bidirectional effects in that satisfaction predicted attributions for both husbands and wives.

Finally, Karney and Bradbury (in press) provided novel data on the longitudinal relation through the application of growth curve modeling to eight waves of data collected over the first four years of marriage. They found intraindividual changes in attribution and in marital satisfaction covaried but found no evidence to suggest that either attributions or satisfaction were causally dominant. However, a different picture emerged at the between subjects level of analysis. Controlling for within subject covariation, initial attributions had greater effects on the trajectory of marital satisfaction than Time 1 satisfaction had on the trajectory of attributions. Specifically, more conflict promoting attributions at Time 1 were associated with lower initial marital satisfaction, steeper declines in satisfaction, and satisfaction that covaried less with subsequent changes in attributions. Finally, wives' attributions improved prediction of marital dissolution and both husbands' and wives' changes in attributions were

more strongly associated with deviations from the trajectory of marital satisfaction in marriages that dissolved.

In sum, there is a growing body of evidence consistent with that view that attributions influence marital satisfaction and increasing evidence that any casual relation between the two variables is bidirectional. Perhaps not surprisingly, attributions continue to be emphasized in newer, therapeutic interventions for couples (e.g., by offering a "formulation," an element of integrative couples therapy designed to promote non-blaming, Jacobson & Christensen, 1996, p. 41-58). This highlights the opportunity to gain experimental evidence on the causal role of attributions but interest in such research appears to have evaporated (for an exception see, Davidson & Horvath, 1997) following early demonstrations that supplementing standard therapies with an attribution intervention module did not improve therapeutic outcome (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Unfortunately, the impact of attributions on therapeutic outcome has not been directly evaluated and nor has the importance of attributional change as a precursor to progress and positive change in marital therapy (see Fincham, Bradbury & Beach, 1990). These considerations suggest that intervention research remains a potential source of important information (see section, "Expressed emotion").

Attributions and behavior. Despite its theoretical and applied significance, few studies have investigated the attribution-behavior link. Moreover, early attempts to do so were quite limited (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990, p. 24). With the exception of an early experimental study in which manipulated attributions influenced subsequent observed behavior in distressed but not nondistressed spouses (Fincham & Bradbury, 1988), evidence bearing on the attribution-observed behavior relation is quite recent.

Five studies report data relating attributions to behavior observed during marital interaction (Bradbury, Beach et al., 1996; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992, Study 1 & 2; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992, Study 3; Miller & Bradbury, 1995). Across 28 tests of the attribution-behavior association found in these studies, the mean effect size was .34; the "fail safe" number or number of unretrieved null findings that would allow one to attribute this effect size to sampling bias was 1,527. This moderate effect size,

however, reflects a heterogenous set of findings (chi-square (27) = 47, p <.01). One clear source of heterogeneity was spouse gender which was strongly associated with effect size (r=.57); the average effect size for men (mean z = .23) was smaller than that for women (mean z =.45). Although encouraging, these meta-analytic findings should be viewed with caution as they use a data base that includes simple, bi-variate correlations between attributions and rates of behavior. In view of earlier comments about sentiment override and the documented association between spousal satisfaction and behavior (Weiss & Heyman, 1997), it is important to show that an attribution-behavior association is independent of marital satisfaction.

With marital satisfaction partialled from the attribution-behavior relation, it has been shown that conflict promoting responsibility attributions are related to (1) wives' less effective problem-solving behaviors (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992, Study 1), (2) more negative behaviors during problem solving and support giving tasks (Miller & Bradbury, 1995) and that this association is independent of level of depression (Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996), (3) to specific affects (whining and anger) displayed during problem solving (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992, Study 3) and (4) husbands' and wives' conflict promoting attributions are related to increased rates of negative behavior during a problem-solving discussion (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992, Study 2). There is some evidence to suggest that the attribution-behavior association is moderated by marital quality in that it is stronger for distressed spouses and tends to occur more consistently for responsibility attributions (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Miller & Bradbury, 1995).

A recent study by Fletcher and Thomas (in press) provided the first longitudinal data on the relation between attributions and observed behavior. Using a sample of couples randomly selected from the New Zealand electoral rolls, they found that both husbands' and wives' conflict-promoting attributions for marital problems were associated with more negative interaction behavior over a 12-month period. Interestingly, earlier behavior was not related to later attributions, a pattern of findings consistent with the view that attributions influence behavior. A second important finding from this study was that attributions mediated the relation between marital satisfaction and behavior for both husbands

and wives at Time 1 and again for husbands at Time 2. These mediational effects were shown to be independent of length of marriage and the seriousness of the problems from which observational data were obtained and for which spouses made attributions.

In sum, available evidence is consistent with the view that attributions influence behavior. This conclusion, however, rests on an important assumption. Because attributions are assessed at a global level rather than for the specific behaviors in the observed interaction, implicit is the view that these global attributions determine attributions for specific behaviors. It therefore remains to demonstrate that global attributions shape attributions for specific behaviors which, in turn, influence responses to the behavior (for a discussion of the issues in relating cognition to interactional behavior see Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1991). Finally, the correlational nature of the data should not be overlooked.

Delineating the domain of attributions. Delineation of the domain to which the term attribution applies has been identified as the "single most significant barrier to progress" (Fincham, 1985, p. 205) in marital attribution research. Progress is facilitated on this task to the extent that attention is given to identifying the basic dimensions of underlying causal explanations in marriage, the measurement of these dimensions, and the types of attributions important in marriage.

Sayers and Baucom (1995) have attempted to identify underlying dimensions of causal explanations for marital problems. Using explanations offered by spouses, they employed college students' perceptions of the causes for a multidimensional scaling analysis to select a subset of causes to employ in a second multidimensional scaling analysis using spouses' perceptions of the causes. The use of college students is unfortunate as it undermines the study's attempt to document dimensions that are psychologically meaningful for spouses and the solution they report for spouses is necessarily a function of the stimuli that were selected using student perceptions. The resulting complex set of findings with different, four-dimensional solutions for husbands and for wives, nonetheless identified a dimension in both spouses' solutions (relationship schism and disharmony versus other factors [husband]/family factors [wife]) that is consistent with one of Passer at al's. (1978) dimensions (positive versus negative attitude towards partner). This finding again emphasizes the implicit evaluative aspect of explanation in close

relationships. Sayers and Baucom (1995) concluded that attributional assessment should move beyond assessment of traditional casual dimensions, a feature that is evident in progress to develop attribution measures.

Sabourin et al.'s (1991) earlier noted call for a standardized attribution measure has met with two quite different responses. One response has been to develop measures to assess specific attributional content. For example, the development of a measure of dysfunctional attributions includes a subscale that assesses the extent to which partner behavior reflects "lack of love" (Pretzer, Epstein & Fleming, 1991). Similarly, in their attributional assessment of problems in 12 domains of relationship functioning (e.g. finances, leisure) Baucom, Epstein et al. (1996) inquire about attributional content (e.g., boundaries, "we disagree about how much of our lives to share with each other in this area of the relationship") and underlying attribution dimensions (as well as self-reported emotional and behavioral responses). Perhaps the most obvious problem with this approach is that it gives rise to nonindependent assessment of attributions and marital satisfaction (disagreement is assessed in both measures, see Fincham & Bradbury, 1987) making reported associations (see Baucom et al, 1996) tautologous. Second, there is a potentially vast domain of attributionally relevant content, a problem that led early attribution researchers to derive (both empirically and rationally) underlying attribution dimensions. Finally, this approach reinforces the earlier noted balkanization of the attribution literature as it mitigates against developing an attributional perspective that might transcend relationship type.

In contrast, the second response to the need for a broadly accepted, standard measure has been limited to assessment of attribution dimensions. However, it has also addressed the issue of attribution type by building on distinctions among causal, responsibility and blame attributions documented in basic research. In fact, the presupposition or entailment model in which a blame attribution presupposes a judgment of responsibility, which, in turn, rests upon the determination of causality, was strongly supported among 206 cohabiting couples when they made judgments about relationship conflict (Lussier, Sabourin & Wright, 1993). Unfortunately this study used single item measures of each attribution type. The use of multiple item measures has revealed that partners do not distinguish readily between

responsibility and blame (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Although it is possible to imagine circumstances under which such distinctions may be made, only the distinction between causal (locus, stability and globality) and responsibility dimensions (intent, motivation, blame) are incorporated in the measure resulting from this line of research - the Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Advantages of this measure include its demonstrated relation to satisfaction and observed behavior, its brevity, its simplicity for respondents, the provision of indices for different types of attributions, and the potential to modify the scale in order to obtain analogous measures across relationship types (cf. Children's Relationship Attribution Measure, Fincham, Beach, Arias & Brody, 1998). Although cause and responsibility attributions yielded by this measure are highly correlated ($\underline{r}$ = .7-.8), recent research confirms that a two factor measurement model provides a significantly better fit to the data than a single factor model (Davey, Fincham, Beach & Brody, 1999).

In sum, there has been some progress in delineating the domain of attributions in marital research. However, this progress is largely a function of the attempt to develop measures and has been isolated from developments in a broader literature on attributions leaving unresolved the importance of earlier, identified distinctions (e.g. interpersonal attributions, dyadic attributions, see Newman, 1981).

Some other developments. The foregoing themes capture much of the recent activity in the marital attribution literature. However, without mentioning two further themes the picture painted of developments over the past decade would be incomplete.

The first theme can be characterized in terms of the domain specificity of attributional phenomena. In marriage research it is manifest by the emergence of a quasi-independent literature on attributions for marital violence (for a review see Eckhardt & Dye, in press). Thus, for example, attributions for violent versus nonviolent partner behavior appear to differ (Holtzworth-Munroe, Jacobson, Fehrenbach & Fruzzetti, 1992), hostile attribution are evoked more readily in specific content domains (jealousy, spousal rejection, and potential public embarrassment) among violent men (Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993), and are more likely to be spontaneously verbalized in this group (Eckhardt, Barbour & Davison, 1998). Although the focus has been primarily on violent men,

casual and responsiblity attributions also correlate with wife-to-husband aggression (Byrne & Arias, 1997), mediate the relation between increased violence and wives' intentions to leave the relationship (Pape & Arias, in press) and responsibility attributions moderate the association between husband violence and wives' marital dissatisfaction (Katz, Arias, Beach & Brody & Roman, 1995). Explicit recognition of possible domain specificity in relationship attribution phenomena is important. A move from content free to content specific inference rules would link marital attribution research to the broader cognitive literature in which specific knowledge of the world is central to understanding cognitive functioning.

A second theme, particularly evident in the early 1990s, was the development of general theoretical frameworks. These not only focused on the study of attribution/cognition in marriage (e.g., Epstein & Baucom, 1993; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991) but also integrated such study into a broader organizational framework for researching close relationships (e.g. Bradbury & Fincham, 1991). In these frameworks explicit links were drawn to broader literatures, particularly the social cognition literature and we return to them in the section, "Social cognition."

Critique

The themes reviewed have already been critiqued and the present section therefore highlights some of the opportunities foregone in the marital attribution literature. In doing so, however, it is important to acknowledge the potential realized during the field's adolescence: confirmation of a robust attribution-satisfaction association, demonstration that this phenomenon is not an artifact, accumulation of systematic evidence that speaks to two central causal hypotheses, progress in identifying the types and underlying dimensions of attributions and how to measure them, careful theoretical specification of the role of attributions in understanding marriage, and attempts to locate marital attributional phenomena in broader, more comprehensive frameworks. Notwithstanding these achievements, a number of important topics have received little or no attention in the past decade.

Revisiting the beginnings of attributional research in close relationships is instructive. Orvis et al. (1976) studied attributions not as private events but as public behaviors. The implications are profound

but remain relatively unexplored (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990, p. 26-28). Three of these are highlighted. First, attributional understanding in relationships can result from dyadic interaction. However, we know relatively little about how spouses negotiate particular explanations to achieve a shared understanding of relationship events, yet such negotiated understanding is central to some accounts of marriage (see Berger & Kellner, 1970). Here a broader literature on accounts and their communication in relationships is relevant (e.g., Fincham 1992; Weber, Harvey, & Orbuch, 1992) but has not been tapped in marital attribution research possibly because the narratives studied in the accounts literature transcend the level of analysis found in attribution research.

Second, the identification of attributions as public events raises the question of their relation to attributions as private events. Early on the relation between these two types o f events was identified as an important issue (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1988) along with the need to study public attributions (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1988) but neither have received attention in the marital attribution literature in the past decade.

Third, Orvis et al.'s (1976) work focused on self-partner discrepancies in attribution. Despite early evidence suggesting that discrepancies in attributions for self and partner behavior might advance understanding of the attribution-satisfaction association (e.g., Kyle & Falbo, 1985), self-partner attribution differences have not gained attention over the past decade. Consideration of the relation between self and partner attributions highlights a further gap that is endemic to close relationships research, the need to study phenomena at the dyadic level. Although several studies have controlled for partner influence in examining the outcomes related to a spouse's attributions (e., Senchak & Leonard, 1993; Karney et al, 1994), evidence has only recently emerged to demonstrate the necessity of a dyadic model in examining attribution phenomena (Davey et al., 1999). Finally, study of attributions for self behavior alerts one to the possibility that self processes require consideration in a complete attributional account of marriage. Indeed, Kelley (1979, p. 109) notes attributions for partner behavior have implications for the self creating interdependence at the level of inferred dispositions of partners. In any event, it is clear that relating marital attribution research to research on self-processes is long overdue.

Perhaps more important than the relative lack of attention to the above implications, is the failure to systematically explore the assumption that spouses' exhibit a tendency to make particular attributions "across different situations and across time" (Metalsky & Abramson, 1981, p. 38). As Karney and Bradbury (in press) point out, the presumed casual role of attributions in maintaining marital dissatisfaction, and attention to attributions in therapy, only make sense to the extent that spouses exhibit an "attribution style." Shifting attention from mean scores to consistency in attributions gives rise to an interesting variant of the attribution hypothesis in which variability in responses on attribution dimensions and patterns of responses across attributional dimensions is related to satisfaction. Although inconsistent findings have emerged for variability in responding on attribution dimensions, there is consistent evidence relating patterns in attributions across dimensions to marital satisfaction (Baucom, Sayers & Duhe, 1989; Horneffer & Fincham, 1995). However, Karney and Bradbury's (in press) intraindividual analysis showed that attribution responses were not constant across time; wives' attributions became more conflict promoting over the first four years of marriage and significant interindividual variability among husbands supported a linear change model even though group mean scores did not change. These findings suggest that attributional style does not operate as a trait. However, the conceptual status of "attributional style" is far from resolved.

Finally, a general feature of the marital attribution research is worth noting because it draws attention to a domain of inquiry that has yet to be exploited. Broadly speaking, marital researchers have been concerned with the consequences of attributions and can be said to have developed an attribution based approach to study marriage. Kelley and Michela (1980) distinguish such "attributional theory" from a second genre of attribution research that focuses on the antecedents and processes that lead to attributions. Although attention to this latter type of research is not entirely absent from the marital domain, attribution antecedents and processes have not been studied systematically. However, the events studied in marital attribution research may be important. For example, the feature-positive bias in which inferences about own attitude are influenced more by reactions to stimuli than failures to react (Fazio, Sherman & Herr, 1982) suggests that partner behaviors that prompt a reaction may be more likely to

instigate attributional processing than those that do not prompt a reaction. In a similar vein, basic attribution research showing that people are considered more responsible for commissions than omissions (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980), may have implications for the demand-withdraw pattern of interaction. Specifically, attributions for demand behaviors (commissions) may differ from those for withdrawal behaviors (omissions).

This critique, like the review preceding it, is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather it serves as a springboard for the remainder of the chapter which is intended as an antidote to the balkanization noted at the outset. As will soon be evident, the broader literature is relevant to many of the concerns noted in this critique and suggests several new directions for marital attribution research.

From myopia to presbyopia:

Setting the stage for an attributional analysis of close relationships

In its youthful zest, marital attribution research has been somewhat egocentric, a characteristic that has served it well in focusing energy on establishing replicable phenomena, documenting their relevance and so on. As it enters adulthood, however, the area has the opportunity to look further afield and fashion its identity in new ways. The purpose of this section is to draw connections with domains of inquiry that have the potential to enrich the study of attributions in marriage and contribute to an integrative, attributional account of close relationships. This will be done in relation to three domains of increasing generality, namely, relevant attribution research in family relationships, attribution research and adaptational outcomes, and research on social cognition.

Balkanization on the home front

Perhaps the most obvious starting point for enriching marital research is to examine overlooked areas of attributional research involving family relationships. Two examples with quite different origins and implications for the study of marriage are examined.

Expressed emotion. In the late 1950s English researchers noted that the success of psychiatric patients released into the community was related to the kind of living group to which they returned, with those returning to the parental or matrimonial home faring worse than those who went to live in lodgings

or with siblings (e.g., Brown, Carstairs & Topping, 1958). Subsequent research identified the emotion expressed toward the patient by key relatives at the time of hospital admission, particularly hostility and criticism, was a reliable predictor of the patient's relapse following hospital discharge (e.g., Vaughn & Leff, 1976; see Bebbington & Kuipers, 1994, for a review).

Attempts to understand the mechanism underlying the expressed emotion (EE)-relapse association led to an attributional analysis. Vaughn and Leff (1976) suggested that EE was associated with attributing patient behavior to personal characteristics of the patient rather than to the illness. Others went on to identify as critical the patient's perceived control over the causes of the symptoms (e.g., Hooley, 1987); undesirable patient behavior attributed to causes potentially under the patient's control were hypothesized to result in high EE whereas those attributed to the illness would lead to greater tolerance (low EE). Hooley, Richters, Weintraub and Neale (1987) provided initial, indirect evidence consistent with this formulation in that spouses of patients with "positive" symptoms (those most easily attributed to illness, e.g., hallucinatory behaviors) were more maritally satisfied than those whose spouses displayed "negative" symptoms (behavioral deficits, e.g., lack of emotion). Direct assessment of attributions has confirmed the above predicted attributional difference in high and low EE relatives (Barrowclough, Johnston & Tarrier, 1994; Brewin, MacCarthy, Duda & Vaughn, 1991; Hooley & Licht, 1997).

Why is this research relevant? In addition to providing further, converging evidence that attributions may be important for understanding relationship behavior, it points to a major deficit in the marital attribution literature, the emotional dimension of marriage. It is difficult to imagine a comprehensive account of marriage that fails to accord emotion a central role yet the marital attributional literature has little to say about emotion. This is all the more surprising given Weiner's (1986) attributional theory of emotion which again serves to underline discontinuity between marital and basic attribution research and theory.

One obvious implication is to consider how Weiner's theory can contribute to an understanding of marriage. According to Weiner, the valence of an event determines the initial emotional response (if

positive, happy; if negative, frustrated and sad) but the perceived dimensions underlying the causes of the event determine the specific affect experienced. The focus on specific affect accords with developments in the marital domain where specific affects play a prominent role (Gottman, 1994). Specifically, Gottman (1994, p. 184) contends that what makes marital conflict dysfunctional is "the response to one's partner with criticism, disgust, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling" and he goes on to argue that his data support a chained effect in which complain/criticize-> contempt-> defensiveness-> stonewalling.

An attributional analysis may facilitate an understanding of entry into, and initial movement along, this chain. Weiner's (1986) theory is helpful in understanding the initiation of overt conflict through the generation of anger towards the other (it follows the same logic outlined above in regard to EE). Anger, in Weiner's (1995, p. 18) writing is seen as an accusation that reflects the belief that the person could and should have behaved differently and "provides a bridge between thinking and conduct." Thus, Weiner's analysis gets us to the point where overt conflict may arise but there is a subtle difference between disagreement and the initial step towards dysfunctional conflict.

It seems likely that it is the interplay among casual dimensions that may result in the shift from an initial complaint to criticism. Thus, prior experience with the partner in relation to the complaint or in related areas (which is likely to be reflected in casual globality and stability attribution ratings), would produce the shift from complaint to more global criticism. The further shift to contempt may reflect crossing a certain threshold in the configuration of responses on the causal dimensions. Although Gottman (1994, p. 415) believes the specific emotion cascade outlined above fits well "as a behavioral counterpart to attribution theories of marriage," the ultimate viability of the attributional analysis suggested here is less important than the goal of identifying a much needed integration. An integration of emotion and attribution research clearly transcends the scope of the present chapter.

Before leaving the topic of EE, it behooves us to note that this domain may provide one of the best opportunities to obtain experimental evidence on attributions and relationship outcomes. This is because intervention studies that reduce reduce EE among relatives show significant decreases, relative to controls, in patient relapse rates at 6, 9, and 24 months and greater compliance with a medication regime

(see Mari & Streiner, 1994 for a review). Such studies address only indirectly the attributional account of EE but it seems to be a small step to examine whether changes in relatives' attributions predict patient outcome. Brewin (1994) has made a promising start in showing that changes in relatives' hostility following intervention were associated with changed attributions and that these changes could not be ascribed to changes in the patient's behavior.

  <u>Parent-child relationships</u>. Unlike EE research, attributional analyses of parent-child relationships are rooted in attribution theory in social psychology. Thus, for example, Dix and Grusec (1985) offer an exemplary application of Kelley (1967) and Jones and Davis' (1965) models in their analysis of parent attributions in the socialization of children. Since then a substantial literature has emerged on attributions in parent-child relationships. As reviews of this literature are available elsewhere (e.g., Bugenthal & Goodnow, 1998; Joiner & Wagner, 1996; Miller, 1995), only selected aspects of this literature are highlighted to illustrate a potential interplay with marital attribution research.

  Perhaps the most obvious point to make in linking the two literatures is that study of the parent-child relationship provides further evidence supporting phenomena documented in the marital literature. Thus, for example, it is well established that parental attributions are linked to parent satisfaction (e.g., Sacco & Murray, 1997) and to parenting behavior (e.g., Bugenthal & Shennum, 1984). Indeed, this literature provides much needed experimental data to show that attributions influence behavior. Slep and O'Leary (1998) showed that mothers led to believe that their children were misbehaving voluntarily, and with negative intent, were overreactive in observed discipline and reported somewhat more anger compared to mothers who believed the misbehavior was due to the experimental situation. More recently, children's attributions for parent behavior have also been shown to relate to their satisfaction with the parent and to behavior observed with the parent (Fincham, Beach, Arias & Brody, 1998). The consistency of findings across relationship types is unusual and speaks to the need to document pan relational phenomena for a science of close relationships (Berscheid, 1994). Unfortunately, "thus far there has been little attempt to integrate findings from the two literatures" (Miller, 1995, p. 1579).

Turning to the parent-child literature does more than provide additional evidence for the themes studied by marital researchers; it also identifies new lines of inquiry as well as the need to revisit exactly what is studied in attribution research. This can be illustrated by focusing on two features of the parent-child relationship. First, there is a clear imbalance in status and power that necessarily shapes attributional research on this relationship. The specifics of the research are less important in the present context than the fact that power and status have been ignored in marital attribution research. This oversight is emphasized by Heider's (1958, p. 259) observation that "the power of *o* is an important determinant of *p*'s general evaluation and reaction to an act of harm or benefit. Not only will *p*'s perception of who is responsible for the act be influenced, but also his understanding of the reasons motivating the act."

Attention to power provides a different perspective on sex differences in marital attributions. For example, the stronger association between wives' attributions and their behavior may reflect the fact that women have typically commanded less power in marriage. This could explain the attribution-behavior sex difference because, relative to less powerful actors, more powerful actors are seen to be exerting their will and hence attributions for their behavior are particularly diagnostic (and presumably can be more safely used to guide behavior). If this account is correct, one might also postulate that wives are more likely to be attentive to, and make attributions for, partner behavior.

Power and status are equally important for attributions in egalitarian marriages. This is because making certain attributions for a partner behavior (e.g., "he's offering to help because he thinks I'm incompetent") may imply a change in the power relation. As emphasized by the extension of self-evaluation maintenance process to marriage (e.g., Beach & Tesser, 1995), the implication may be more or less important depending on the relevance of the domain to the self and partner (e.g., for high partner/low self relevance it should have minimal impact). One resulting hypothesis is that acts with real or symbolic implications for status and power will be subject to close attributional analysis and that one class of such acts that can readily evoke issues of power/status are those that benefit another. Thus, contrary to the accepted view that only negative events evoke attribution processing (Weiner, 1985), in relationships certain positive events may also do so. The resulting attributions are likely to be critical for understanding

why benefits may be rejected or have minimal impact (for an attributional analysis of social support see Fincham & Bradbury, 1990).

A second, obvious feature of the parent-child relationship is that one partner is immature and constrained by developmental limitations. This necessarily draws attention to preconditions that have to be met before a child can be held responsible for their actions. For example, what mental capacities need to be present? Although marital researchers have paid attention to dimensions underlying responsibility, the parent-child literature invites us to revisit this attribution type. The issue of capacities necessary for inferring responsibility finds its analogue in marital relationships where a partner lacks the requisite skills or knowledge to act appropriately (e.g., be intimate, communicate freely). Such capacity criteria are utilized in clinical interventions where it is not uncommon to use a cognitive restructuring procedure called relabelling (e.g., Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Hence a distressing spouse behavior that prompts a conflict promoting attribution (e.g, "he won't tell me about his worries because he doesn't trust me") is reframed as a skill deficit (e.g., "he has never learned how to share things that he sees as weaknesses"). A good deal might be learned by determining what influences the criteria underlying responsibility attributions in marriage.

The more general and important point, however, is that it is timely to reconsider the study of responsibility in the marital domain. The discontinuity with basic attribution research has tended to isolate the study of responsibility in the marital literature from recent advances in the analysis of this construct (e.g., Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995). In this regard, it is worth noting that any analysis of responsibility in marriage will be enriched to the extent that it accords Heider's "ought forces" a central role. This is because partner behavior that violates expected standards is often experienced as upsetting the objective order or perceptions of the way things should work in the relationship even, and perhaps particularly, when spouses are unaware of the expectations that give rise to this response. As a result, attributed responsibility may not be seen as an interpretation regarding partner behavior but as something that is intrinsic to the behavior. General analyses of responsibility that fail to explicitly consider this element (e.g., Weiner, 1995), may nonetheless be helpful

in relationship research (e.g., application to EE, see Hooley & Licht, 1997) to the extent that the behaviors studied implicitly violate generally accepted standards of behavior. However, making this assumption explicit allows it to be examined systematically.

To summarize, an attempt was made in this section to illustrate the value of linking marital attribution research and closely related, but independent, areas of inquiry. One outcome of this exercise is the potential to develop a more general attributional perspective that spans different close relationships. Success in achieving this ambitious goal is likely to be facilitated by willingness to benefit from developments outside of the field of close relationships. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to considering two such developments.

<u>Leaving home</u>

In moving further afield, we first visit an area that could be considered a family relative in that it arose from research on learned helplessness and investigates attributions and adaptational outcomes.

<u>Attributions and adaptational outcomes</u>. Research on attributions and adaptational outcomes need only be briefly considered for the lessons to be learned are obvious, simple ones. Five characteristics of this literature are briefly considered.

First, in an interesting account of the evolution of research emanating from learned helplessness, Peterson, Maier and Seligman (1993) accord the use of language an important role. The change in terminology from "attributional style" to "explanatory style" to "optimism" bears consideration. Although one can question the motivation to use "vivid language" and to distinguish the study of causal attribution in this literature "from any of a number of others with 'attributional' labels" (p. 302), the fact remains that the linguistic lens one uses as a researcher can have profound effects.

This point can be succinctly illustrated in the marital field. Because marital research has focused on the attributional analysis associated with helplessness, and because attributions tend to occur for negative events (Weiner, 1985), marital research has focused heavily on what could be labeled "pessimistic explanatory style." This highlights two points. First, explicit use of the term "style" crystallizes the often implicit view in marital research that the subject of study is a personality trait (see

Karney & Bradbury, in press). Second, the descriptor, "pessimistic," draws attention to its opposite, "optimistic." Thinking in terms of optimism frees us from focusing on the negative. As marital researchers embrace study of how spouses link positive marital events to Heider's underlying "invariances," it is worth avoiding an assumption about psychological structure relating to optimism and pessimism implicit in the use of bipolar assessment scales. There is already evidence that marital quality, like affect and attitudes in general, comprises distinct and somewhat independent positive and negative dimensions (Fincham & Linfield, 1997), and similar structural independence may characterize explanatory optimism and pessimism.

A second general lesson to be drawn for the broader attribution/adapational outcome literature is the variety of adaptational outcomes studied. Thus, for example, explanatory style has been shown to be related to such outcomes as performance (e.g., in sports, in insurance sales, in academic tasks), death from coronary disease, victory in presidential elections, and physical health (see Buchanan & Seligman, 1995). The scope of outcomes studied contrasts with the limited range investigated in the marital domain. Investigation of additional relationship (e.g., commitment, intimacy) and individual (e.g., physical health, self-concept) outcomes represents an important avenue of future attributional research in marriage.

Third, the predictive power of the attributional style studied in the broader literature raises an important question for marital research. Is this attributional style sufficient to predict spouses' marital satisfaction? Stated differently, are the attributions studied in marriage simply a subset of a more generic attributional style rendering superfluous a distinct model of attributions in marriage? The single study to address this issue showed that marital attributions provided unique information in predicting both depressive symptoms and marital satisfaction and were significantly more powerful than general attributions in predicting marital satisfaction (Horneffer & Fincham, 1996). Although in need of replication, this study points to the potential value of marital attributions for understanding individual as well as relationship outcomes.

Fourth, the ubiquitous link between attributions and adaptational outcomes raises questions about the mechanisms that might account for this link. Although this is not the context in which to explore such

mechanisms, there is an important relevant lesson to be drawn. Specifically, there is a clear conceptual commitment to attributional style as a risk factor which forces consideration of what potentiates this risk. The resulting diathesis-stress framework in which attributional style is clearly situated as a moderating variable is instructive for marital researchers who have studied attributions independently of stressful events. Not surprisingly, the status of attributions in the marital literature as a mediating versus moderating variable has been unclear. On the one hand, attributions are treated as a mediating variable that "explain(s) how external physical events take on internal psychological significance" (Baron & Kenny, 1986; p. 1176) yet the standard means for testing a mediating variable have not been applied. On the other hand, attributions have also been treated as an individual difference factor that might function as a moderating variable yet most studies examine only its "main effects." Clarifying the conceptual status accorded attributions in a study is therefore important in assessing the appropriateness of its methodology. One hypothesis worth exploring is whether attributions serve as a moderating variable when assessed globally via questionnaires and as a mediating variable when they pertain to inferences made in situ for partner behavior.

The fifth implication to be considered concerns measurement. Although the past decade has witnessed attention to attribution measurement in the marital domain, this effort has focused on questionnaire development with no attempt to follow up on earlier attention paid to unsolicited attributions (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). Questionnaire development has, however, been accompanied by development of the Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations (CAVE) in the broader explanatory style literature (see Peterson, Schulman, Castellon & Seligman, 1992; Reivich, 1995). The CAVE requires coders to identify and then rate casual attributions on the three dimensions (locus, stability, globality) represented in questionnaires. This has the advantage of allowing investigation of the convergence between questionnaire and coded attributions, although it should be noted that convergence is not a prerequisite. Each approach provides a legitimate perspective and source of data on attributions. It is also worth noting a similar coding measure, the Leeds Attribution Coding System (LACS), has been more fully developed in the 1990s through its application in clinical, work, and consumer settings (see

Munton, Silvester, Stratton & Hanks, 1999). However, the LACS derives from a slightly different theoretical framework than the CAVE and provides a viable alternative to it.

These developments again highlight the need for a second strand to marital attribution research that focuses on coded attributions. This would allow the accrual of much needed data on unsolicited and on spontaneous attributions that could allow for comparison of attributions that are made spontaneously with those that occur more deliberately (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Developing a data base on such attributions in relationships poses numerous challenges. These were discussed some time ago and that discussion remains pertinent (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1988). The need for developing such a data base may not be apparent given the earlier noted link between the marital attribution literature and social cognition research. After all, the study of spontaneous attribution inferences is well represented in social cognitive research and hence the call for research on spontaneous attributions in marriage may appear anomalous. In turning to consider links with the field of social cognition that might advance marital attribution research, it will be seen that this anomaly is more apparent than real.

Social cognition. Recall that at the beginning of the 1990s several conceptual analyses in the marital domain were influenced by ideas drawn from the social cognition literature (e.g., Fincham, Bradbury & Scott, 1990; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991). For example, the distinction between automatic and controlled processes was used to deal with the observation that much interactional behavior unfolds rapidly and without mindful cognitive processing. As a result, one might reasonably have expected research on the spontaneous attribution inferences represented in social cognition research (e.g., Bassili, 1989) to be represented in the marital literature. However, during the 1990s clinical and social investigations of cognition in relationships began to diverge (Fincham & Beach, in press), which may account for the virtual absence of marital research that moves beyond the focus on conscious attributional content. Thus, there is no anomaly in calling for the development of a data base on spontaneous attributions in marriage.

In light of the above observation, one purpose of this section is to reiterate the rallying call of the early 1990s for a rapprochement between the study of marital attributions and social cognition. In this

regard, it takes its place alongside several similar calls for integrating a social cognitive perspective in the study of close relationships. For example, Reis and Knee (1996, p 181) noted that relationship cognition research has focused "almost exclusively on 'what' questions" concerning conscious cognitive content and point to the need for research "to consider processes that occur outside of conscious awareness" (Reis & Knee, 1996, p. 175). Similarly, there is limited evidence of such research in a recent comprehensive survey of the close relationship literature where the section on automatic cognitive processes has the status of a promissary note (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Lest it appear otherwise, one must hasten to add that there are a number of notable exceptions to these summary conclusions (see Karney et al, this volume) that auger well for the future. For the present, however, the social cognitive analyses of marriage offered earlier in the decade remain relevant (see Fincham, Bradbury & Scott, 1990; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Scott, Fuhrman & Wyer, 1990). Rather than repeat the observations made in them, the remainder of the section highlights two implication of social cognition research that have been overlooked in these analyses.

First, social cognition research shows that people access and use specific knowledge in making social judgments (e.g., Smith & Zarate, 1992). The implication is that marital attributions may vary depending on the stored knowledge that is accessed when the attribution is made. In the social cognition domain this is readily demonstrated through priming or making accessible a construct and then examining the effects of such priming. Although discussed in prior analyses, the complexity of priming effects in marriage has not been recognized. For example, Fincham and Beach (in press) report studies in which priming marital satisfaction did not influence subsequent judgments, whereas priming hostility did effect judgments of partner behavior but in the direction opposite to that predicted. Spouses who had been primed rated subsequent partner behavior as *less* hostile. It is likely that a variety of such contrast effects, as well as assimilation effects, will be found as marital researchers examine the effects of stored knowledge on spouses' attributions. It will therefore be important to accommodate to the impact of a number of influences on priming effects, including the recency, frequency, and blatancy of the priming, awareness of the priming, exact relation between primed and target materials, and so on (see Higgins,

1996). It has been somewhat simpler to document the importance of chronically primed material; the attribution-marital satisfaction association has been shown to be significantly larger among spouses whose marital satisfaction was more accessible relative to spouses where it was less accessible (Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips & Osborne, 1995).

A final, but important, point regarding the potential impact of accessing stored knowledge on attributions concerns domain specificity. Simply stated, the relevance of accessed knowledge for the event, subject to an attributional analysis, may influence its impact. From this perspective, further and perhaps more subtle, attribution phenomena may emerge from investigations that examine domain specific effects. There is initial evidence to suggest such phenomena. For example, Collins (1996) has found that internal working models of attachment are related to attributions independently of relationship satisfaction among dating students, but only for attachment-relevant partner behaviors. Documenting such domain specific effects is consistent with the earlier call to broaden the correlates of attributions studied in marriage.

A second implication of social cognition research worth highlighting is the emphasis on goals. The impact of goals on information processing is ubiquitous in social cognition studies and is evident in basic research on spontaneous attribution – in contrast to other goals (e.g. remembering stimulus material), the goal of forming an impression results in spontaneous trait inferences (Smith, 1994). It is also apparent, however, that trait inferences can occur without a causal analysis of the behavior (cf. Smith & Miller, 1979 where trait inference occur more rapidly than causal inferences) emphasizing the need to examine explicitly the impact of information processing goals on causal and responsibility attributions in marriage. Vorauer and Ross (1996) specifically address the role of information goals in close relationships thereby both extending the range of goals considered and providing a goal analysis specific to the relationship domain. They suggest that the goal of obtaining information about issues relevant to the perceiver leads to a diagnosticity bias that influences attributions; i.e., partner behavior is more likely to be attributed to the self. Their analysis identifies a number of factors likely to influence information

goals (e.g., shifting circumstances, relationship development, co-ordination of partners' goal) that could profitably be used to examine the impact of information goals on attributions.

The value of pursuing a goal based approach in marital attribution research is enhanced when it is recognized that goal obstruction or interruption may be critical to understanding the instigation of attribution processing. From this perspective, negative events occasion attributions because they are generally inimical to the goals people pursue, but it is the thwarting of the goal that is more fundamental. If correct, this raises a variety of questions about how different elements of goals may influence attributions. At the simplest level one could examine whether thwarting of approach versus avoidance goals are associated with different attributional outcomes in a manner analogous to attributions for commissions versus omissions. Similarly, does the generality of the goal constrain acceptable attributions? For example, is a conversational interruption (e.g, while a couple is trying to locate their destination) adequately explained by an attribution that speaks to goal content (e.g., "I just wanted to let you know I don't like asking for directions") when a relational goal (e.g., to experience mutual respect and equality) is seen to be thwarted? Goals have been found to vary along a number of dimensions that might be examined in relation to attributions (e.g., level of consciousness, importance-commitment, difficulty, specificity, temporal range and connectedness, see Austin & Vancouver, 1996).

Again the specific form of the link between goals and attributions is less important than its potential to yield integrative theory. First, the goal thwarting hypothesis offered above is cut from the same cloth as Berscheid's (1983) theory of emotion in close relationships where interrupted goal pursuit gives rise to emotion. Goals may be a vehicle for minting the coin that displays affect and cognition on each side. Second, a goal analytic framework has been applied to marital conflict, the topic that simulated marital attribution research (Fincham & Beach, 1999). As this analysis attempts to incorporate research on marital phenomena, marital prevention, and intervention under a single goal theoretic framework, placing marital attribution research in the same framework represent a step towards increased theoretical integration that has been the legacy of social cognition in basic attribution research (Smith, 1994).

Conclusion

The chapter began by noting the continued vitality of attribution research and offered two reasons to account for this phenomenon. One was a broader study of attribution consistent with continuity between social and nonsocial cognition and the second was the application of an attribution perspective to many new, and especially applied, areas. This provided a context for understanding the emergence and evolution of marital attribution research. An updated review of this field showed that it has realized a great deal of its early potential and several clear themes were evident. However, it was equally apparent that the balkanization accompanying the prodigious output of attribution research was also evident in the marital domain. Accordingly, links were made with other areas of research and with the broader social cognition literature. This analysis identified gaps in the marital attributional literature and pointed to ways in which these new avenues of inquiry might be pursued. The importance of pursuing this research is emphasized by the promise of yielding a more integrated theoretical account of attributions in close relationships.

Footnote

1. Harvey, Wells and Alvarez's (1978) study of attribution for conflict and separation in relationships was also an important early influence. However, it gave rise to a broader literature on accounts that was not limited to attributions or relationship events but instead focused on the narratives that arise in reaction to severe stress (see Harvey, Weber & Orbuch, 1990).

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