

Marital Violence, Marital Distress, and Attributions

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Because empirical associations involving marital distress may be confounded by the presence of marital violence, 2 studies examined the interplay among marital distress, marital violence, and attributions for marital events. Study 1 showed that marital satisfaction was associated with causal and responsibility attributions independently of violence in a sample of 130 husbands. Study 2 demonstrated that the satisfaction–attribution association was independent of violence in a sample of 60 newlywed husbands and also showed that responsibility attributions predicted satisfaction 12 months later when violent husbands were excluded from the sample. These findings support the focus on cognitive variables in recent models of marriage and marital violence.

Increased awareness of marital violence has led to growing concern that phenomena thought to be associated with marital distress actually may be due to marital violence. The present studies therefore examined the extent to which associations between marital distress and attributions are altered when marital violence is controlled.

Attributions are associated with marital dis-

trass, and they predict behavior in marital interaction, changes in marital satisfaction, and symptoms of spousal depression (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, 1994). Perhaps not surprisingly, scholars have begun to explore the role of attributions in marital violence (e.g., attributions are hypothesized to mediate violent spouse behaviors; O’Leary & Vivian, 1990). It can be argued that because aggressive behavior is not normative and is often sanctioned, those who emit such behavior are likely to engage in attributional processing (i.e., use attributions to justify their actions). This line of reasoning suggests a strong link between attributions and violence.

In a study of husbands who were maritally violent and distressed, nonviolent and distressed, or nonviolent and nondistressed, Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson (1993) found that violent husbands were more likely to attribute blame, negative intent, and selfish motivation to their wives. However, distressed husbands did not differ from violent husbands or nondistressed husbands. It is therefore possible that the documented attribution–distress association may be due to the presence of violent spouses in the distressed samples studied. This possibility has far-reaching consequences. For example, the addition of a cognitive component to behavioral marital therapy does not appear to increase the efficacy of such therapy (cf.

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Baucom & Epstein, 1990), a finding that would not be surprising if problematic cognitions associated with marital violence are incorrectly attributed to general marital distress. We therefore examined whether the attribution–distress association occurs when marital violence is controlled and explored the interplay among violence, distress, and attributions.

Study 1

Study 1 extended research on the relations among attributions, violence, and marital distress in two ways. First, we examined the two types of attributions, causal and responsibility, commonly investigated in the marital attribution literature. Second, we used attribution measures and a sample representative of those used to document the marital attribution–satisfaction association, thereby increasing the generalizability of our findings to that literature.

Method

Participants and Procedure

As part of a larger study,¹ 130 couples from the community were recruited through newspaper advertisements (for sample details, see Fincham & Bradbury, 1992, Study 2). Couples were mailed two sets of materials that they were asked to complete independently and return in separate, postage-paid envelopes.

Measures

Two measures of attributions were used. Attributions were assessed for hypothetical partner behaviors via the short (four negative partner behaviors) version of the Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992), and attributions were assessed for actual marital difficulties via the Areas of Difficulty Questionnaire (ADQ).

For causal attributions, respondents were asked about the extent to which the cause rested in the partner (locus), was likely to change (stability), and affected other areas of the marriage (globality). The three responsibility attribution items assessed the extent to which the partner had acted with negative intent, had acted with selfish motivation, and deserved to be blamed for the behavior. Composite indexes (range = 0 to 60, average $\alpha = .85$) were computed by summing the 12 causal (4 items \times 3 questions) and 12 responsibility responses. Higher scores indicated more maladaptive attributions.

The ADQ assessed attributions for the two most important difficulties in the marriage (e.g., finances and communication). Spouses wrote each difficulty at

the top of a page that included questions assessing the six attribution dimensions described. Composite indexes (range = 0 to 30, average $\alpha = .67$) were again computed, higher scores indicating more maladaptive attributions.

The 15-item Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959), which is reliable (split half reliability = .90) and discriminates between nondistressed spouses and spouses who have documented marital problems, was used to assess marital satisfaction. The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979), which consists of 18 behaviors that spouses might use to settle marital conflicts, was used in identifying violent husbands. Husbands who endorsed the "threw something at partner" item and more extreme behavior items (over the past year) were regarded as violent.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the variables investigated. A substantial minority (42%) of husbands indicated that they had engaged in some form of physical aggression in the past year and, in comparison with nonviolent husbands, were less satisfied with the marriage, $F(1, 129) = 14.39$, $p < .001$.

Attributions and Distress in Nonviolent Marriages

Marital satisfaction correlated ($p < .01$) with attributions (RAM cause = $-.39$, RAM responsibility = $-.41$; ADQ cause = $-.47$, ADQ responsibility = $-.28$). If these correlations were due to marital violence, they should have become nonsignificant when nonviolent spouses were excluded from the sample. When analyses were recomputed for nonviolent husbands, significant correlations ($p < .05$) were obtained (RAM cause = $-.34$, RAM responsibility = $-.25$; ADQ cause = $-.50$, ADQ responsibility = $-.23$).

¹ The attribution data have been used to examine the factorial structure of attributions, the relations between attributions for hypothetical and real events, and the internal consistency of attribution scales (see Fincham & Bradbury, 1992).

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations
for Variables in Study 1

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Marital Adjustment Test	108.0	22.0
Conflict Tactics Scale aggression	1.5	1.4
Relationship difficulties		
Causal attributions	24.4	6.3
Responsibility attributions	23.6	4.7
Relationship Attribution Measure (partner behavior)		
Causal attributions	49.8	11.6
Responsibility attributions	35.8	12.4

Distress and Violence as Predictors of Attributions

To examine whether violence might account for variance in attributions independently of satisfaction, we used CTS and MAT scores to predict each of the four attribution indexes. Table 2 shows that, in all four equations, marital satisfaction predicted attributions independently of violence.

Study 2

Study 2 differed from Study 1 in two important respects. First, it examined whether attributions account for longitudinal change in marital satisfaction when marital violence is controlled. Although the longitudinal association between attributions and satisfaction (see Fincham, 1994) is not directly challenged by the possibility that violence accounts for the concurrent attribution–distress association, it is timely to reconsider the longitudinal association. Second, Study 2 investigated a sample of newlyweds in an effort to extend our findings beyond the population of relatively stable and established married couples. Because newlywed couples tend to be happily married, Study 2 provided a more stringent test of the association between attributions and marital satisfaction.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Couples within 3 months of their wedding were recruited via newspaper advertisements (for full sample details, see Miller & Bradbury, 1995). At Time 1, each couple participated in a laboratory

session that included individual completion of consent forms, demographic forms, and questionnaires assessing attributions, marital satisfaction, and marital violence.² Couples were debriefed and paid \$50. At Time 2, approximately 12 months later, 54 couples completed a measure of marital satisfaction. Couples were paid \$35.

Measures

Participants were administered the RAM and the CTS at Time 1 and the MAT at Time 1 and Time 2 (see Study 1 for details of measures). Coefficient alpha for the RAM was again acceptable (cause = .82, responsibility = .86). The CTS responses pertained to violence in the preceding 12-month period (α s = .79 and .80 for husband and wife reports, respectively).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for the variables. In 44 (73%) of the couples, both spouses indicated that the husband did not engage in physical violence. As in Study 1, endorsement of the “threw something at partner” item and more extreme items on the CTS defined violence.³ The correlation between husbands’ CTS score and their MAT score was .01 (*ns*).

Attributions and Distress in Nonviolent Marriages

Husbands scoring lower on the MAT tended to offer relatively maladaptive attributions (cause = $-.30$, responsibility = $-.28$; $p < .05$). When only nonviolent husbands were considered, these associations remained reliable: cause, $-.35$, $p < .05$, and responsibility, $r(42) = -.38$, $p < .01$.

² The attributional data collected at Time 1 have been used to examine the association between attributions and behavior (see Miller & Bradbury, 1995).

³ We used the most inclusive approach possible (i.e., either husband or wife report) for defining violence. However, in both Study 1 and 2, none of the results changed substantively when violence was defined by husbands’ or by wives’ report only.

Table 2
Prediction of Attribution Indexes From Violence and Marital Satisfaction: Study 1

Predictor	Attribution measure							
	Relationship Attribution Measure				Areas of Difficulty Questionnaire			
	Cause		Responsibility		Cause		Responsibility	
	ΔR^2	F	ΔR^2	F	ΔR^2	F	ΔR^2	F
Overall ($dfs = 2, 118$)	.19	14.0**	.22	16.8**	.25	18.1**	.13	7.8**
Conflict Tactics Scale ($dfs = 1, 119$)	.00	<1.0	.02	3.7	.00	1.7	.00	<1.0
Marital Adjustment Test ($dfs = 1, 119$)	.15	19.1**	.12	17.8**	.20	28.5**	.09	11.1**

Note. For individual predictors, R^2 was computed by removing each variable from the equation and examining the decrease in R^2 ; these values therefore reflect the unique variance associated with the predictor. ** $p < .01$.

Distress and Violence as Predictors of Attributions

Cross-sectional analyses. To address whether violence would account for unique variance in attributions, we used CTS and MAT scores to predict either the causal or responsibility indexes. Table 4 indicates that MAT scores, but not CTS scores, were a significant predictor of responsibility attributions and that CTS scores and MAT scores made independent contributions to the prediction of causal attributions. These results emphasize the need to assess and distinguish both types of attribution in subsequent marital violence research.

Longitudinal analyses. To determine whether attributions predicted later satisfaction in nonviolent spouses, we computed two regressions in which Time 2 MAT scores were predicted from Time 1 MAT scores and either the causal or the responsibility attribution index. The first equation was significant, $R^2 = .38$, $F(2, 36) = 10.90$, $p < .001$, but the causal index did not account for unique variance beyond Time 1 MAT scores:

causal index, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, *ns*, and Time 1 MAT, $\Delta R^2 = .37$, $p < .001$. The second equation was also significant, $R^2 = .33$, $F(2, 37) = 9.32$, $p < .001$, and in this case the responsibility index accounted for unique variance in Time 2 MAT scores beyond that accounted for by Time 1 MAT scores: responsibility index, $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $p < .05$, and Time 1 MAT, $\Delta R^2 = .25$, $p < .001$.

General Discussion

We examined the association between attributions and marital distress, instituting controls needed to interpret clearly data pertaining to this association. In Study 1, the familiar, inverse association was found between maladaptive attributions and marital distress, a result that was not altered when violent husbands were excluded from the sample. Similarly, when both satisfaction and violence were used to predict attributions, the variance shared by satisfaction and each attribution measure was not a function of the association between satisfaction and marital violence.

Study 2 added to these findings by documenting associations between causal and responsibility attributions and marital satisfaction in a newlywed sample. With violent spouses excluded from the sample, causal and responsibility attributions still correlated significantly with marital satisfaction. This study also examined whether the inclusion of violent spouses in past research might account for the longitudinal association found between attributions and satisfaction. Among nonviolent spouses, responsibility attributions emerged as a significant predictor of later satisfaction.

These findings are consistent with a large

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Variables in Study 2

Variable	M	SD
Marital Adjustment Test		
Time 1	120.4	17.4
Time 2	110.5	22.6
Relationship Attribution Measure (Partner Behavior)		
Causal attributions	38.8	9.4
Responsibility attributions	28.3	9.5
Conflict Tactics Scale	0.5	1.3

Table 4
Prediction of Attributions From Violence and Marital Satisfaction: Study 2

Predictor	Relationship Attribution Measure			
	Causal attributions		Responsibility attributions	
	R^2 change	F	R^2 change	F
Overall ($dfs = 2, 55$)	.19	6.4**	.07	2.1
Conflict Tactics Scale ($dfs = 1, 56$)	.11	6.8**	.00	<1.0
Marital Adjustment Test ($dfs = 1, 56$)	.08	5.4*	.07	4.0*

Note. For individual predictors, R^2 was computed by removing each variable from the equation and examining the decrease in R^2 ; these values therefore reflect the unique variance associated with the predictor. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

body of literature but run counter to Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson's (1993) finding. It is possible that this discrepancy may result from the fact that the samples used were not comparable. In the present studies, we examined samples similar to those examined in prior marital attribution research, whereas Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson (1993) studied men receiving treatment for their abuse. It is therefore possible that treatment status, or some characteristic indexed by such status, may account for the different findings across studies.⁴

Documenting the distress-attribution association in recently nonviolent samples does not address the potential influence of marital violence in altering the relation between husbands' marital satisfaction and its correlates. Examination of the interplay among violence, distress, and attributions showed that satisfaction predicted attributions independently of marital violence in established marriages (Study 1) and in a newlywed sample (Study 2). Contrary to expectation, Study 2 also showed that violence accounted for unique variance in causal but not responsibility attributions. This finding suggests that it is important to distinguish causal from responsibility attributions and that violence researchers should routinely examine both types of attributions.

Several factors need to be considered when interpreting the present results. First, the samples were assessed only for violence during the preceding 12 months, and therefore some men in the nonviolent groups may have been violent in the more distant past. Second, although the community samples studied facilitate comparison with prior research on the attribution-marital distress association, they suggest caution in generalizing findings to clinical samples.

Finally, the associations studied may vary for attributions that pertain to specific situations or events that trigger violence.

Notwithstanding the preceding considerations, the present studies have yielded two important findings. First, the attribution-distress association does not simply reflect the presence of violence in some maritally distressed men. Second, marital attributions are a correlate of marital violence, independent of marital satisfaction. These findings support the focus on cognitive variables in recent models of marriage and marital violence, and they challenge researchers to determine which cognitive phenomena are common to distress and violence and which are unique to each of them.

⁴ Interestingly, attributions are related to satisfaction in couples seeking general marital therapy (e.g., Fincham, 1985), and hence factors associated specifically with treatment for abuse may be important.

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