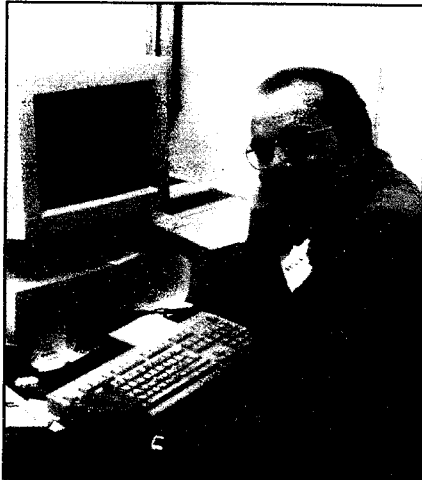


# Understanding marriage

## From fish scales to milliseconds



**Frank D. Fincham** gave the Presidents' Award Lecture at the Society's Annual Conference in Edinburgh, April 1997.

## From fish scales to milliseconds

*John and Joan list great sex and having a lot of fun together as some of the good things in their marriage. But they have concerns about the physical fights they get into and the frequent yelling that occurs in front of the children. In therapy, moments of intense affection are sometimes rapidly followed by ones of equally intense anger.*

*Pam and Paul report a very steady but uneventful life together, where nothing particularly positive or negative happens between them. Each spouse sometimes wonders if this is all marriage has to offer. In therapy it is difficult to engage Pam or Paul when talking about the marriage.*

**H**OW can we best understand and explain the behaviour of couples such as John and Joan and Pam and Paul? Historically, psychologists have shown relatively little interest in such questions. Although the study of marriage has not been central to any area of psychology, this circumstance appears to be changing with the emergence of personal relationships and family psychology as distinct specialities within the discipline. As psychologists researching marriage enter the mainstream of psychology there is both opportunity and danger.

The opportunity lies in cross-fertilization between marital research and areas of psychology not associated with the study of personal relationships. This should both increase psychology's contribution to understanding marriage and potentially enrich the discipline. In pursuing such opportunity, however, there is the danger of develop-

ing unidisciplinary myopia; no discipline or research perspective is likely to provide a complete, or even adequate, understanding of marriage.

In light of these observations it seems timely to recall Campbell's (1969) fish scale model of omniscience for interdisciplinary research — each researcher is akin to a fish scale possessing a unique specialty, with the combination of partially overlapping fish scales leading to omniscience. From this perspective, the scholar does not aspire to competence across disciplines, or even within a single discipline, but instead aims to be a novel fish scale whose research reflects the intersection of areas neglected by others. This article illustrates how the integration of marital research into mainstream psychology has created one fish scale that might advance understanding of a central construct in the study of marriage, and help us understand better couples like John and Joan and Pam and Paul.

### Marital quality: Current status

The most frequently studied topic in research on marriage concerns what has been variously labelled marital satisfaction, adjustment, success, happiness, companionship or some synonym related to the quality of the marriage (Glenn, 1990). The diversity of terms used reflects lack of agreement in defining marital quality, a task that is undertaken in the next section.

This focus on marital quality reflects the origins of research on marriage in addressing applied problems and the subsequent focus on understanding marital distress and marital breakdown, the deleterious consequences of which are well documented for both spouses (e.g. McAllister, 1995)



The Quest Men Republic

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and their children (e.g. Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Considerable progress has been made in developing psychometrically sophisticated measures of marital quality, in identifying the behaviours that distinguish distressed from non-distressed spouses, and in documenting the thoughts and emotions associated with marital quality (Fincham *et al.*, 1993; Weiss & Heyman, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

However, despite progress in developing a psychology of marriage (Fincham & Bradbury, 1990), the central construct of marital quality remains poorly understood. This is, in part, because most research on this topic is justified on the basis that it addresses practical problems 'with elements of theory being brought in on an incidental, ad hoc basis' (Glenn, 1990, p.818). The relative lack of theory has been particularly problematic in regard to the assessment of marital quality, making it difficult to determine what marital quality scales actually measure.

Most scales consist of heterogeneous items, responses to which are not conceptually equivalent. For example, the most widely used measures of marital quality (Marital Adjustment Test, Locke & Wallace, 1959;

Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Spanier, 1976) include a variety of items ranging from reports of specific behaviours (description) to inferences about the marriage (evaluative judgements). The best way to interpret overall scores is therefore unclear.

Is this a problem that should prompt concern? In some circumstances, it is not. For example, if the goal is to select 'happy' or 'satisfied' versus 'unhappy' or 'dissatisfied'

spouses, as is often done in research on marriage, the exact content of the measure used to select groups is less important than its ability to identify correctly the groups of interest. This may account for why some leading marital scholars conclude that the 'psychometric foundation is reasonably solid and need not be redone' (Gottman & Levenson, 1984, p.71).

However, to the extent that the goal is to develop theory for advancing under-

standing of marital quality, or to devise conceptually sound measures of marital quality, there is cause for concern (for a more complete analysis see Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Fincham *et al.*, 1997). The remainder of this article therefore re-examines the construct of marital quality.

## Reconceptualizing marital quality

This section outlines an approach to marital quality that is theoretically simple, can be easily used, accommodates neglected differences between couples, and allows greater precision in identifying correlates of marital quality.

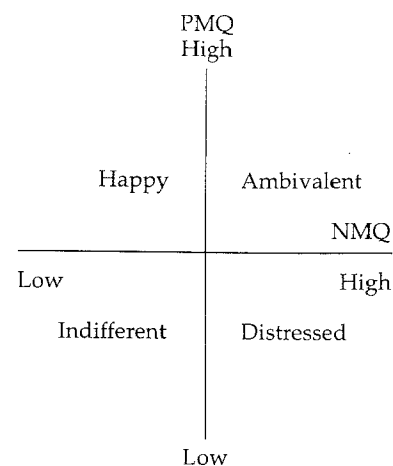
One response to the above lack of clarity has been to define marital quality in terms of subjective, global evaluations of the marriage, thereby providing a conceptually simple construct that allows the causes, correlates and consequences of marital quality to be examined in a straightforward manner. The approach presented here builds on this response by conceptualizing evaluative judgements of the marriage as bi-dimensional, comprising positive and negative dimensions.

What advantages does this approach have? First, it connects the study of marital quality to important developments in psychology that question the assumptions underlying the pervasive use of evaluative bipolar rating scales, namely, that positive and negative evaluations are reciprocally related. Thus, bipolar assessments function much like the balance knob on a stereo system that does not allow left (positive evaluations) and right (negative evaluations) speakers to function independently (Cacioppo *et al.*, 1997).

Second, it has the potential to make a greater distinction between couples,

particularly those who are neither high nor low in marital quality, and so capture more fully the diversity of marital relationships seen in everyday life.

Consider the two couples described at the beginning of the article. Both couples may report moderate levels of marital quality. However, in John and Joan's case, responses may reflect ambivalence or agreement with both positive and negative endpoints of bipolar items assessing marital quality, whereas Pam



PMQ = Positive Marital Quality  
NMQ = Negative Marital Quality

Figure 1: Typology of couples derived from a bi-dimensional conception of marital quality

and Paul's responses may reflect indifference or caring about neither endpoint.

The value of the proposed two-dimensional approach can be illustrated by the typology of couples shown in Figure 1. Marital research has investigated extensively happy and distressed spouses, but overlooked the distinction between ambivalent and indifferent spouses. It can be argued that ambivalent and indifferent spouses would be indistinguishable on traditional, unidimensional measures of marital quality, yet differ from each other on characteristics known to be connected with marital quality: for example, behaviour (distressed spouses show a higher ratio of negative to positive behaviour than nondistressed spouses, see Gottman, 1979) and attributions for spouse behaviour. Distressed spouses, relative to their happily married counterparts, tend to explain negative actions by their partner (e.g. partner unexpectedly comes home late from work) in a manner that is likely to promote conflict (e.g. 'he only thinks about himself and his needs'), rather than avoid conflict (e.g. 'he must have been caught in traffic', Fincham, 1994).

The first step in examining these hypotheses is to determine whether spouses make positive and negative evaluations of the marriage that are relatively independent. Drawing upon procedures used in attitude research (decomposing bipolar semantic differential scales into unipolar scales, see Thompson *et al.*, 1995), and in the study of affectivity (using a minor adaptation of a widely used measure of affectivity, Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1998), Fincham and Linfield (in press) indeed found a moderate, negative correlation between positive and negative evaluations of the marriage using both procedures.



No Room for the Green: Ulf

Fincham and Linfield (in press) also demonstrated the importance of distinguishing positive and negative evaluations. First, they showed that positive and negative dimensions accounted for variability in spouse behaviour and attributions for spouse behaviour over and beyond that which could be attributed to a traditional measure of marital quality or to each spouse's level of general affectivity. Second, ambivalent and indifferent spouses were moderately satisfied and indistinguishable on a traditional measure of marital quality, but differed from happy and distressed spouses on this traditional measure. Third, ambivalent wives, compared to their indifferent counterparts, reported a higher ratio of negative to positive marital behaviour and made more conflict-promoting attributions for their partner's behaviour.

Finally, it appears that for husbands the negative evaluative dimension accounts for more variability in scores on a traditional measure of marital quality than the positive dimension. But for wives, it was the reverse. In other words, women weigh the positive aspects as more important, and men the negative.

This preliminary evidence supports further investigation of a two-dimensional view of marital quality. Such research is likely to have far-reaching implications for understanding marriage.

Consider, for example, the substantial efforts made to research change in marital quality over time. From the current perspective, this research needs to be repeated. The conceptualization offered here suggests that changes in marital quality may follow several different paths that cannot be revealed by the unidimensional measures of marital quality used in past research.

For instance, it would be theoretically important if happily married spouses first increased negative evaluations only (became ambivalent) before then decreasing positive evaluations and becoming distressed, as compared to a progression in which negative evaluations increased and positive evaluations decreased at the same time. Such progressions may, in turn, differ in important ways from one where there is simply a decline in positive evaluations over time.

Documenting the existence of different avenues of change in marital quality, examining their causes, and exploring their consequences suggests a programme of research that may do much to advance our understanding of how marriages succeed and fail. Notwithstanding its potential, showing that spouses can have both positive and negative evaluations of their marriage does not go far enough in helping us understand couples such as John and Joan and Pam and Paul.

## From evaluation to action

A more complete account of marital quality requires us to specify when evaluations affect a spouse's behaviour. In the case of John and Joan, for example, why do they experience passion towards each other at one moment in time and experience intense negative affect towards each other at a different moment in time? Marital researchers have found that attributions for spouse behaviour influence subsequent responses to the partner (Fincham, 1994), but they have done little to document empirically the conditions under which marital quality influences behaviour. This reflects the influential view that spouses respond to partner behaviour and to questions about the partner/marriage merely in terms of their dominant sentiment

about the marriage (i.e. responses are noncontingent, Weiss, 1980). This 'sentiment override' hypothesis does not, however, help further our understanding of the vacillation in their behaviour by integrating the study of marriage with the broader literature on cognition-behaviour relations.

In this literature, it has been noted that attitudes can be viewed as an association

in memory between the mental representation of an object and an overall evaluation of that object (Fazio, 1995). This association can vary in strength such that, for some objects (e.g. 'spider' for spider phobics), their mere mention or presentation activates an evaluation automatically, whereas for others (e.g. 'table') an evaluative association is weak or non-existent.

The strength of this association is critical in understanding the relation

between attitudes and behaviour, because it determines whether the attitude is accessible or not when the person acts in relation to the attitude object. When the attitude is highly accessible, it is likely to affect subsequent behaviour.

Viewing marital quality — i.e. evaluative judgements of the marriage — in terms of attitude accessibility advances research on marriage. For example, the sentiment override hypothesis can be reconceptualized: the strength of the association between the representation of the partner and the spouse's sentiment (evaluation) towards that partner will determine whether the sentiment drives responses to his or her behaviour and to questions about the partner/marriage.

So, when asked about the partner's recent behaviour, an unhappily married spouse whose sentiment about the marriage is highly accessible is likely to report the occurrence of negative behaviours. In contrast, an unhappily married spouse whose sentiment about the marriage is less accessible is more likely to recall negative and positive behaviours.

Thus, the sentiment override hypothesis becomes more complex, and may only apply to a certain group of spouses (those with accessible attitudes) or conditions which prime evaluative judgements of the partner. In sum, this component of our analysis shows how marital quality may influence information processing, judgements, decision-making and behaviour in marriage.

Data to support these ideas have been obtained by using response latency, the number of milliseconds taken to make an evaluative response about the partner, as an index of the accessibility of marital quality. Fincham *et al.* (1995) adjusted response latencies for differences in baseline speed of responding and formed fast and slow groups that did not differ in marital quality (i.e. fast and slow groups were formed at each level of marital quality).

For men, fast responders' marital quality affected what they thought their wives would do in an upcoming interaction more than did that of slow responders'. Thus, among fast responders, marital quality predicted the extent to which a husband anticipated that his wife would exhibit positive behaviours (e.g. 'be supportive of me and my views') and negative behaviours (e.g. 'will interrupt me when I am speaking') during the discussion. For slow responders, the association between marital quality and expected wife behaviour was significantly weaker.

Similarly, for both husbands and wives, fast responders showed higher correlations between marital quality and judgements of partner contributions to negative marital events (e.g. 'causing arguments between the two of us').



Wife of the Bosses, 20th Century Fox

These results were replicated across two different procedures used to assess response latency.

Although these findings have provoked some controversy (Baucom, 1995; Beach *et al.*, 1995), they have important implications. For example, because spouses whose marital quality is highly accessible are likely to process information about the partner in terms of their marital quality, one can hypothesize that, relative to spouses whose marital quality is not as highly accessible, their marital quality will remain stable over time. This is precisely what has been found for both husbands and wives when examining test-retest correlations on the Marital Adjustment Test over six-, 12- and 18-month periods (Fincham *et al.*, 1997). Given the noise in reaction time data and the use of only four partner stimuli to form fast and slow groups, it is quite remarkable that millisecond differences in responses predict the stability of marital quality.

Perhaps the most important implication of such findings is that the vast literature on the correlates of marital quality needs to be reworked. The overall correlation between marital quality and other variables may be misleading if the magnitude of the association turns out to be higher for one category of spouses (fast responders) and lower for another (slow responders). Previously non-significant correlations may turn out to be significant, at least for one group of spouses, and some correlates of marital quality may prove to be more important than previously thought.

The significance of this element of the analysis is further emphasized by the observation that much cognitive processing in close relationships is automatic and occurs outside of conscious awareness (Fincham, Bradbury & Scott, 1990). Yet research on marital cognition has focused almost exclusively on cognitions that are the result of deliberate processing. The analysis outlined in this article provides a broader window on the cognitive literature and provides new areas of inquiry for the marital field.

## The need for synthesis

The final step in gaining a more complete understanding of marital quality is to synthesise the observations offered in the preceding sections by arguing that positive and negative dimensions of

marital quality can each be studied in terms of their accessibility. Hence, the relative strength of each association is likely to be important in understanding the impact of marital quality on information processing, behaviour and so on.

Applying the analysis of ambivalence offered earlier, it can be argued that the extent to which the accessibility of positive and negative marital quality dimensions are similar in magnitude — and the extent to which their absolute magnitude is high — will predict inconsistency in marital behaviour, in the processing of partner behaviour, and so on. This is because marital quality dimensions are most easily primed under such conditions and positive and negative dimensions would, on average, have an equal probability of being primed.

We are now finally in a position to understand better couples such as John and Joan: the behaviour of a spouse who shows tenderness towards the partner followed rapidly by negative behaviour towards the partner can be explained by a change in the accessibility of the negative marital quality dimension. For example, Joan in responding to John's tenderness may do or say something that fires the association between her mental representation of John and a negative evaluation. Alternatively, she might access a thought that triggers this association.

These ideas have not been investigated directly and remain speculative. However, there is some indirect data to support two elements of the suggested synthesis. First, the accessibility of positive and negative marital quality evaluations appear to be relatively independent: the time taken to make evaluations of positive and negative spouse behaviours were not highly correlated. Second, as spouses make more similar ratings on positive and negative dimensions and as these ratings increase in magnitude (i.e. they experience ambivalence), they should have greater difficulty making a single, overall judgement of the partner. Thus, greater ambivalence towards the spouse should increase the time taken to make a summary, evaluative judgement of the spouse. The significant correlation found between a measure of ambivalence and the speed of making an overall evaluative judgement (husbands = .35; wives = .47) supports this prediction.



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## Conclusion

Like my research programmes on cognition in marriage (Fincham & Bradbury, 1991) and on the marital conflict-child adjustment association (Grych & Fincham, 1993), the developing research programme on marital quality described in this article is too far removed from psychopathology to fall into mainstream clinical psychology, too clinical for mainstream social psychology or experimental psychology, and insufficiently child-focused for mainstream developmental psychology (though current research is assessing its utility for understanding child-parent relations). Yet just as the cross-fertilization between these two existing research programmes and mainstream clinical, social and developmental psychology appears to be fruitful (Fincham, Bradbury & Beach, 1990; Grych & Fincham, 1992; Fincham, in press), there is considerable scope for a mutually beneficial interplay between the study of marital quality and of attitudes and attitude-behaviour relations.

A natural response in crossing disciplinary boundaries in this way is to aspire to mastery of the subdisciplines, an inclination that can soon lead to paralysis when the impossibility of its achievement is realized. In this circumstance, Campbell's (1969) analysis is positively liberating and has made possible the journey from fish scales to milliseconds described in this article.

## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Marital quality and marital stability are two distinct constructs that have given rise to separate literatures. The focus in this article is on marital quality (for a review of research on marital stability, see White, 1990).

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