

Perceived Responsibility for Marital Events: Egocentric or Partner-centric Bias?

Two studies were conducted to investigate (a) the association between marital satisfaction and an egocentric bias in spouses' perceived contributions to activities in marriage; (b) the robustness of this bias; and (c) the process that might underlie such a bias. In the first study 40 spouses estimated their own and their partners' contribution to relationship events. Spouses claimed to make greater contributions to negative relationship events than their partners were willing to attribute to them. This finding was replicated in a second study involving 50 spouses, and the opposite bias was also documented: for positive events greater contributions were assigned to the partner. In addition, Study 2 examined two hypotheses that may account for the egocentric bias, namely, the failure to take the perspective of the partner and the ease with which memories are recalled. No support was obtained for the perspective-taking hypothesis, and the data were equivocal regarding the ease-of-recall hypothesis. In both studies perceived contributions and marital satisfaction were strongly related. The findings are discussed in terms of the effect of a spouse's global sentiment toward the partner on his or her judgments of responsibility.

Recent research documents an egocentric bias in responsibility judgments for events in close relationships, such that each person in the relationship tends to claim a greater contribution to an activity than the partner is willing to attribute to

them (Ross and Sicoly, 1979; Thompson and Kelley, 1981). It is important to investigate this bias in marriage because of its potential relation to marital satisfaction. Equity theory proposes that judgments regarding partners' relative contributions to a relationship influence their feelings of satisfaction with the relationship (Walster, Walster, and Berscheid, 1978). An egocentric bias for positive relationship events could thus lead partners to feel underbenefited in a relationship and to make damaging inferences about each others' motivation for maintaining the relationship. Conversely, an egocentric bias for negative events might enhance relationship satisfaction, since the continuance of the relationship, despite one's greater contribution to negative events, could be inferred to reflect the partner's commitment. Because of the relevance of these processes for understanding marriage, the present studies investigate egocentric bias and its relation to marital satisfaction.

Despite its theoretical importance, data regarding the robustness of the egocentric bias are limited. Although it was found for 14 of the 36 activities investigated by Thompson and Kelley (1981; analogous data for Ross and Sicoly, 1979, are not reported), the magnitude of the bias tends to be small. Apparently, the measure used in previous studies, which requires respondents to mark a single line contrasting their own versus their partners' contribution to an activity, yields responses that tend to be "slightly above or slightly below the halfway mark on the scale" (Ross and Sicoly, 1979: 326). Evidence supporting an egocentric bias is restricted to this particular methodology, and it remains to be determined

Department of Psychology, University of Illinois, 603 E. Daniel, Champaign, IL 61820.

whether the bias will emerge when a scale with a clear midpoint is used. Furthermore, the question asked of respondents ("indicate the extent of your contribution to . . .") prompts them to think only of their contribution to the activity and has been shown to favor the occurrence of an egocentric bias (Ross and Sicol, 1979: Experiment 5). Thus, it is important to investigate the egocentric bias under conditions that do not specifically promote its occurrence.

Similarly, evidence for an association between egocentric attribution bias and relationship satisfaction is limited. Thompson and Kelley (1981) found that perceived self-contributions to positive events were inversely related to satisfaction, whereas similar judgments regarding negative events were unrelated to satisfaction. However, the egocentric bias accounted for less than 2% of the variance in satisfaction. In a second study, Thompson and Kelley (1981) replicated this finding for only two of five positive events. Moreover, clear interpretation of these findings is hindered by several factors, including the use of an unstandardized relationship satisfaction measure and the limited sample of events investigated. In the present studies we attempt to rectify the above shortcomings.

PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted to determine the existence of an egocentric bias over a variety of items when a clear response option exists that allows respondents to assign equal contributions to an activity and when they are not cued specifically to think only of their contribution to the activity. Subjects responded to a list of 29 activities after being told that for each activity they were to indicate "how much you and your partner contribute to each of these activities."¹ They responded on a 9-point scale (1 = "primarily partner" and 9 = "primarily self") with the explicit instructions that "the middle number, which is 5, would mean that you and your partner contribute equally to the activity." Sixty-six married women participated in the study; all had responded to an advertisement in a local newspaper asking for wives who were willing to take part in a survey on marriage. Subjects were interviewed over the telephone after it was established that the husband was not in listening range of the wife. Because our intent in the pilot study was, in part,

to replicate as closely as possible the Thompson and Kelley (1981) procedure, egocentric bias was defined operationally as the extent to which respondents rated themselves as accounting for more than one-half of the contribution for each item. It should be noted, however, that this definition (a) does not operationalize the bias exactly as defined earlier and (b) assumes that the sample does not contain the truly more active members of the relationship (see Thompson and Kelley, 1981).

For each item the deviation of the sample mean from the midpoint of the response scale was tested for significance with a *t* test. Twenty-two of the 29 items had means greater than 5 and were thus in the egocentric direction (see Table 1); 12 were statistically significant deviations ($p < .05$). None of the means below the midpoint value differed significantly from it. In fact, the bias occurred for approximately the same proportion of items as in Thompson and Kelley's (1981) studies.

The findings of the pilot study suggest that the egocentric bias is reliable. However, these and other data supporting the existence of the bias remain tentative for two reasons. First, the use of a bipolar rating scale assumes an inverse (i.e., "hydraulic") relationship between one's own and one's partners' contributions to an event, an assumption that may not be shared by respondents. If the egocentric bias occurs only when respondents are forced to make this assumption, the phenomenon loses much of its significance. It is important therefore to demonstrate that the egocentric bias is not simply a function of a limited response option. Second, the operational definition of egocentric bias in some studies (e.g., Thompson and Kelley, 1981) does not reflect the manner in which the bias has been discussed at a conceptual level. Although the pilot data suggest that the bias is not an epiphenomenon, it is nevertheless important to demonstrate this effect when the bias is defined in terms of judgments made by *both* spouses in a couple. The following studies on the association between egocentric bias and marital satisfaction also examine these issues.

STUDY 1

This study investigates the egocentric attribution bias and its relation to marital satisfaction. An attempt is also made to identify the types of events for which this association is likely to occur.

TABLE 1. ITEMS USED TO ASSESS ATTRIBUTION BIAS

Item	Significance of Bias in Pilot Study
1. Complementing each other ^a	ns
2. Irritating each other ^a	.05
3. Being emotionally supportive of each other ^b	ns
4. Criticizing each other ^a	.001
5. Spending time on appearance for each other ^b	.001
6. Inconveniencing each other ^a	ns
7. Complaining to each other ^b	.001
8. Making each other wait ^b	ns
9. Breaking promises made to each other ^a	ns
10. Being sensitive to each other's needs ^b	ns
11. Taking care of each other when not feeling well	ns
12. Acting possessively toward each other	.05
13. Expressing fears and worries ^b	.001
14. Maintaining self-control during arguments ^b	ns
15. Providing pleasant surprises for each other ^a	ns
16. Acting indifferent or ignoring each other ^a	.05
17. Helping each other with problems from school, work, other people, the children, etc. ^b	ns
18. Making an effort to spend time with each other ^a	ns
19. The problems that arise in your relationship	ns
20. Initiating casual and enjoyable conversations	.05
21. Making decisions in the relationship	ns
22. Being assertive in the relationship ^b	ns
23. Initiating discussions about the relationship ^b	.001
24. Causing arguments that occur between the two of you ^b	.001
25. Doing chores around the house or apartment	.001
26. Resolving conflicts that occur between the two of you ^b	ns
27. Demonstrating affection for each other ^b	ns
28. Carrying the conversation when the two of you are alone ^b	.01
29. Planning leisure activities for the two of you ^b	(.10)

Note: ns = not significant.

^aNot significant for Thompson and Kelley (1981).

^bSignificant bias ($p < .05$) in at least one of Thompson and Kelley's (1981) studies.

Method

Subjects. Forty spouses participated in the study. They were recruited via an advertisement in a local newspaper that invited couples to participate in a survey on marriage. Over 90% of respondents participated in the study. The mean number of years married for the sample was 5.8 ($SD = 7.5$), and the median family income was \$20,000–\$25,000. Husbands averaged 30 ($SD = 8.8$) years of age and 14.6 ($SD = 2.6$) years of education, and scored 114.5 ($SD = 22.1$) on the Marital Adjustment Test (see below). Corresponding figures for wives were 28.8 ($SD = 8.4$) years, 14.5 ($SD = 2.01$) years, and 112.1 ($SD = 34.5$).

Materials. Fifteen graduate students served as expert judges in selecting items from the pilot study to reflect events that were positive versus negative, global versus specific, and instrumental versus expressive. A description of each of these dimensions was provided. Judges rated all events on a dimension after reading its description. The four

events with the highest mean rating on a dimension were chosen to represent that dimension. Fifteen events were selected in this manner, as several received high ratings on more than one dimension (the events as shown in Table 1 were judged as follows: positive, 3, 11, 15, 27; negative, 2, 4, 16, 24; global, 3, 10, 22, 27; specific, 11, 15, 17, 25; instrumental, 14, 21, 25, 29; expressive, 3, 10, 15, 27).

Items were administered in a random order. For each item, the respondent made two separate judgments: one concerned his or her own contribution to the event and the other reflected his or her partner's contribution. The sequence in which self- and partner-responsibility judgments were made was reversed after the administration of the first eight items. Thus the order in which the judgments were obtained was completely counterbalanced. Each judgment required the respondent to indicate on a 9-point scale the contribution to the activity.

The Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke and Wallace, 1959) served as the measure of

marital satisfaction. This widely used instrument has satisfactory reliability (split-half = .90) and discriminates between nondistressed spouses and spouses who have documented marital problems (Locke and Wallace, 1959).

Procedure. Each member of the couple was interviewed separately on the telephone. Care was taken to ensure that the partner was outside the listening range of the interviewed spouse. The interview comprised three components: the gathering of demographic information and establishment of rapport, the administration of the MAT, and obtaining ratings of contributions to joint activities. Each is described in turn.

The first part of the interview consisted of several demographic questions. If the interviewer felt that he or she had not yet established rapport with the person, these questions served as a basis for further interaction (e.g., by asking the respondent to describe what she did in her job). In the second phase of the interview, the respondent was told that some questions about marriage were to follow. The MAT was then administered in a manner that has been found to be an adequate means of assessing marital satisfaction via telephone (Krokoff, 1984). Finally, respondents were told that we were interested in the day-to-day life of couples and that a list of activities would be read to them. For each item they were to indicate "how much you and your husband contribute to each of these activities." They were then instructed in the use of the response scale. First they wrote down the numbers from 1 to 9 and put the words "no contribution" next to the 1 and "very large contribution" next to the 9. The use of the scale was then explained and the activity items administered.

Calculation of bias. Because responses were obtained from both members of a couple, it was possible to assess egocentric bias in the manner outlined in the introduction. The measure of attribution bias was obtained for each couple by subtracting from the responsibility attributed to the self, the amount of responsibility assigned to the respondent by his or her partner. The two values obtained were summed to yield an index of bias for the couple. A positive deviation from zero indicates egocentric bias in assessing contribution, whereas a negative deviation from zero indicates a partner-centric bias.²

Results and Discussion

To test the assumption that the contributions of self and partner to an activity are inversely related, the correlation between self and partner ratings was computed for each activity. These correlations were positive for husbands and wives, with 8 of the 15 differing significantly ($p < .05$) from zero for each sex. Thus, respondents tended to perceive their own and their partners' contributions to an activity as directly, rather than inversely, related.

The measures of egocentric bias were summed across the items within each of the six event categories. Except for positive events, the means of these indices for the sample were in the egocentric direction, that is, greater than zero. Separate t tests showed that the deviation for negative events ($M = 1.5$) differed significantly from zero, $t(19) = 2.28, p < .05$.

To examine the relationship between attribution bias and marital satisfaction, the indices for each of the six event dimensions were correlated with the combined MAT scores of the couple (see Table 2). As predicted, the bias for negative events was directly related to satisfaction, whereas the bias for positive events was inversely related to satisfaction. The inverse relations found for the remaining dimensions most likely reflect the positive tone of the items. Indeed, it is difficult to identify neutral items for these dimensions and hence they are not orthogonal to the valence dimension.

In sum, this study shows that (a) the egocentric bias occurs even when respondents are not forced to make a single, comparative judgment for a relationship event, and (b) attribution bias is related to marital satisfaction, with the direction of the relation reflecting the valence of the activities. An important next step is to account for the existence

TABLE 2. ASSOCIATION BETWEEN EGOCENTRIC ATTRIBUTION BIAS AND MARITAL SATISFACTION

Event Type	Study 1	Study 2
Positive	-.51**	-.34*
Negative	.39*	.11
Global	-.64**	—
Specific	.59**	—
Instrumental	-.52**	—
Expressive	-.62**	—

Note: The items comprising the global, specific, instrumental, and expressive indices were all positive in tone.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

of this bias, a task that is undertaken in Study 2. In addition, it is curious that the deviation score for responsibility judgments relating to positive events was in the direction opposite to an egocentric bias. This suggests that a partner-centric bias may exist for positive relationship events, a possibility that is investigated in the next study.

STUDY 2

Study 1 shows that an egocentric attribution bias for negative events is not restricted to the limited conditions investigated in prior studies. The present study attempts to replicate this finding and to examine the possibility that a partner-centric bias may exist for positive events. It also examines two possible processes that may account for a portion of the variance in responsibility judgments. First, an attempt is made to explore further the current memory-based account given for the phenomenon. Second, an additional hypothesis, that egocentric bias reflects a failure to take the perspective of the partner, is tested.

It is maintained currently that the egocentric bias results from the differential availability in memory of information regarding one's own contribution to an activity relative to that of one's partner (Thompson and Kelley, 1981). According to this account, specific instances in which the self or the partner has performed the activity and the proportion of self versus partner instances, or the ease with which they can be retrieved, forms the basis of the responsibility judgment.

Data supporting this explanation, like those pertaining to egocentric bias itself, are limited. Both the proportion of self versus partner instances of an activity recalled following a responsibility judgment (Ross and Sicoly, 1979, Experiment 1; Thompson and Kelley, 1981, Study 1) and the willingness of respondents to say that they recalled more self-instances (Thompson and Kelley, 1981, Study 2) correlate with responsibility judgments. However, the fact that respondents could recall more self-instances does not demonstrate that they were using this information to make their judgments. A further problem with these data is that they may reflect respondents' attempts to justify their ratings post hoc. The present study therefore uses a less reactive measure of availability, namely, the time taken to estimate contribution to the activity. Respondents were also asked about the information they used to

make their judgments.

Additional explanations for the egocentric bias in close relationships have not been examined. One factor that might account for this bias is the failure of spouses to take the perspective of the partner. This is because perspective-taking, or the tendency to adopt the point of view of others, presumably affects one's judgment regarding the partner's contribution to an event. A spouse who takes the partner's perspective may be more likely to assign responsibility in the manner that his or her partner does, thereby reducing discrepancy or bias. Consequently, the relationship between the egocentric bias and marital satisfaction may also be due in part to perspective-taking.

Method

Subjects. Fifty spouses were recruited in the same manner as in Study 1. The average length of marriage was 5.7 ($SD = 5.5$) years and the median family income was \$20,000–\$25,000. Husbands averaged 28.8 ($SD = 4.6$) years of age, and 15.0 ($SD = 2.1$) years of education, and obtained a mean MAT score of 118.8 ($SD = 19.1$). The mean age, education, and MAT scores for wives were 28.2 ($SD = 5.1$) years, 14.3 ($SD = 2.2$) years, and 114.9 ($SD = 19.9$), respectively.

Materials. The four items used to investigate positive events and the four items used to investigate negative events in Study 1 served as stimuli. Two separate questionnaires were constructed that presented the items in the same randomly chosen order, with the constraint that each half of the questionnaire contain two positive and two negative items. Separate questions were asked regarding the respondent's contribution and his or her partner's contribution to the activity. The order of these questions was reversed halfway through each questionnaire and was counterbalanced across the two questionnaires.

Perspective-taking was assessed with the 7-item perspective-taking subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, which has adequate internal reliability (coefficient alpha = .75 for males and .78 for females) and has been shown to measure the tendency to adopt spontaneously the point of view of others (Davis, 1980, 1983).

Procedure. The procedure was similar to that used in Study 1, with three exceptions. First, the

measure of perspective-taking was administered after demographic information was obtained and before marital satisfaction was assessed. Second, after respondents had made the two contribution judgments for each item they were asked: "What information did you use to answer these questions?" This differs from Thompson and Kelley's (1981) procedure where the information relevant to each judgment was assessed only after all ratings had been made. The temporal proximity of contribution judgments and the inquiry as to the basis on which they were made was expected to yield more accurate information. Finally, all respondents allowed their contribution judgments to be audiotaped.

The audiotapes were used to assess response latency and to code the information reported as the basis for the contribution judgments. Response latency for the first judgment comprised the interval between the last word used to describe the event and the spouse's response. For the second event, it constituted the interval between the prompt for the second judgment given by the experimenter and the respondent's judgment.

Following Thompson and Kelley (1981: 474), we coded the information respondents gave as the basis upon which they made their judgments, in terms of the *referent* of the statement (self only, partner only, couple only, self followed by partner, partner followed by self, or uncodable) and the *type* of information (specific instance of activity, enduring quality, the way things are typically done, or uncodable). All responses were assigned to one referent category and one type category by one coder, and a random 33% of the responses were coded independently by another. The proportions of agreement between the two coders were 89% and 78% for the referent and type coding, respectively.

Results and Discussion

Egocentric bias. Attribution bias was calculated in the same manner as in Study 1, with a deviation from zero in the positive direction indicating a egocentric bias. The mean bias score for negative events ($M = 3.0$) was significantly greater than zero, $t(25) = 4.0$, $p < .001$, thus replicating the finding obtained in Study 1. For positive events the mean bias score ($M = -1.0$) was again negative and, in the present case, differed significantly from zero, $t(25) = -2.77$, $p < .05$. Thus, reliable

evidence was obtained in this study for a bias opposite to the egocentric bias. It should be noted that these biases occurred even though self and partner judgments were again found to be positively correlated, average $r(25) = .48$, $p < .05$.

In regard to the relation between bias and marital satisfaction, the results of Study 1 were partially replicated. Table 2 shows that while the bias for positive events was again inversely related to satisfaction, the relation for negative events was in the predicted direction but was not statistically significant. These lower correlations may reflect the fact that marital satisfaction scores were less variable in Study 2 than in Study 1.

Availability explanation: Response latency. To examine response latencies, a 2 (order of response: first vs. second) \times 2 (target: self vs. partner) \times 2 (event: positive vs. negative) repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted. A significant main effect was found for response order, $F(1, 23) = 135.94$, $p < .001$, as reaction times were lower for second ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 3.40$) than first responses ($M = 11.54$, $SD = 2.02$). Significant main effects were found also for type of event, $F(1, 23) = 4.86$, $p < .05$ (positive events, $M = 4.98$, $SD = 3.16$; negative events, $M = 5.45$, $SD = 3.3$); and attribution target, $F(1, 23) = 5.05$, $p < .05$ (self, $M = 5.51$, $SD = 3.47$; partner, $M = 4.93$, $SD = 2.96$). However, these latter two main effects need to be interpreted in terms of the significant interaction obtained between them, $F(1, 23) = 6.33$, $p < .05$. Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations pertaining to this interaction. It can be seen that the interaction is due to the shorter response latency for partner contributions to positive events. No evidence was obtained to support the view, implied by the availability explanation, that self-related judgments would be made more quickly.

TABLE 3. MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR THE ATTRIBUTION TARGET \times EVENT TYPE INTERACTION

Event Type	Attribution Target	
	Self	Partner
Positive		
Mean	5.50	4.47
SD	3.50	2.72
Negative		
Mean	5.52	5.39
SD	3.47	3.15

Note: Higher numbers represent longer response latencies (in seconds).

Two points should be considered regarding the above results. First, the main effect obtained for the order in which the questions were asked suggests that the process underlying the assessment of one's own contribution to an event and the contribution of one's partner are not independent. That is, either information relevant to both the self and partner may be retrieved regardless of the referent of the contribution judgment, or information retrieved to form the first judgment may provide a basis for making the second. This second possibility is consistent with the availability explanation but, because the order of judgments was counterbalanced, does not account for the biases found for the judgments. Second, response latency in the present study presumably measures a two-stage process: the retrieval of information and the use of that information to form a judgment. To interpret these results as a test of the availability hypothesis, we must assume that the duration of the second stage is the same for self and partner judgments and that differences in reaction time therefore reflect differences in speed of retrieval.

Availability explanation: Information usage. The distribution of responses across the referent categories differed significantly from that expected under the hypothesis of equal distribution, chi-square = 109.54, $p < .001$ (self only, 9%; partner only, 6%; couple only, 34%; self followed by partner, 24%; and partner followed by self, 24%). Although the absolute values vary, the pattern of responses for the same categories coded by Thompson and Kelley (1981) is similar. The overwhelming majority of responses do not refer to only one person in the relationship, as implied by the availability explanation.

With regard to the type of information retrieved, 2% of the responses mentioned specific instances, 64% made reference only to the way things were typically done, 21% mentioned only enduring qualities, 11% referred to an enduring quality for one person and the way things are typically done for the other person, and 2% of the responses mentioned some other type of information. These data are contrary to the view that the availability heuristic influences judgments via the recall of specific instances of the activity. However, they do not rule out definitively the operation of the availability heuristic for two

reasons. First, the availability heuristic might affect the ease with which higher-order representations are retrieved from memory, and these representations (e.g., of how things are typically done, enduring characteristics), rather than the specific behaviors relating to them, may suffice to judge contributions to the event. Second, it is possible that recall of specific instances may guide judgments but that respondents either summarized this information in their reports to the experimenter or chose to give reports that focused on typical and dispositional information because they provide better justification for the judgments made than ones which simply mention specific instances.

Perspective-taking explanation. We hypothesized that perspective-taking would influence egocentric bias by affecting the partner-contribution ratings. As predicted, the combined perspective-taking score of the couple correlated positively with responsibility assigned to the partner for positive events, $r(25) = .47$, $p < .01$. This correlation remained significant even when marital satisfaction was partialled out of the association, $r(25) = .40$, $p < .05$. However, no significant relationship was found for negative events, $r(25) = -.07$, $p > .05$. More important, perspective-taking and the index of attribution bias were unrelated for both positive, $r(25) = .23$, $p > .10$, and negative events, $r(25) = -.11$, $p > .10$. It thus appears that attribution bias does not stem from the failure to adopt the perspective of others.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

These studies demonstrate that the tendency to assume a greater contribution for events and activities in a relationship than one's partner is willing to grant, is limited to certain types of events. Strong evidence was obtained to support the existence of an egocentric bias for negative events. For positive events, however, the nature of the bias varied across studies. In the pilot study some evidence was obtained for the existence of an egocentric bias, whereas Study 1 suggested that the opposite bias might occur, and an *underestimation* of one's contribution to positive events was found in Study 2.

To understand these findings it is necessary to consider the nature of the judgments made and

the processes that might underlie such judgments. In the pilot study and in prior research, respondents were asked to make a single judgment of relative contribution to each activity. Logically this requires retrieval of information about the self and about the partner, followed by the integration of this information to yield a single judgment. Respondents may have adopted a simplifying strategy for this complex task by first retrieving information relevant to the self, because it is easier to access, and then using this information to estimate relative contribution. This constitutes the familiar availability explanation for the egocentric bias. In contrast, the judgments in Studies 1 and 2 were relatively simple and straightforward, as each person's contribution to the activity was judged separately. There should thus be no need to adopt a simplifying strategy, a factor that would account for the absence of an overall egocentric bias. But why should a bias of any sort occur, let alone one that is specific to the valence of items and varies as a function of their positive versus negative nature?

The concept of *sentiment override* may provide an answer to this question. Weiss (1980) uses this term to signify that spouses' responses to partner behavior are determined largely by their general sentiment toward the partner rather than by anything about the behavior itself. The general sentiment experienced toward the partner is believed to affect responses to questionnaires about the partner and the marriage (see Fincham and Bradbury, 1987). Thus the judgments of partner contribution in Studies 1 and 2 are likely to reflect sentiment override. Partner judgments for positive and negative events may therefore be made on the basis of a simple match-mismatch procedure between the evaluative component of the representation of the partner and the valence of the item. The lower response time associated with partner judgments is consistent with the operation of such a simple process; this contrasts with the retrieval of more complex self-relevant information for judgments of one's own contribution.

According to the sentiment-override hypothesis, one might expect a group of satisfied couples, such as those used in the present studies, to assign little contribution to their partners for negative events and to assign a great deal of contribution to them for positive events. It is important to note,

however, that this does not rule out the operation of the availability heuristic. That is, the sentiment-override hypothesis predicts the obtained results even if respondents overestimated their own contribution to activities. Given a tendency on the part of respondents to assume a greater contribution to both positive and negative events, and the operation of sentiment override regarding partner judgments, the size of the judgment bias should be greater for negative than for positive events. This was indeed found to be the case.³

One implication of the sentiment-override hypothesis is that the satisfied couples studied are likely to have affected the results obtained. For distressed couples, an egocentric bias in perceived contribution is most likely to occur for positive events, because these spouses presumably give low ratings for their partners' contributions to such events. The inverse bias should occur for negative events. Any general tendency to overestimate self-contributions would result in the bias being stronger for positive than negative events. If this is indeed the case, then the inclusion of a greater proportion of distressed couples in Study 1 (MAT scores < 200: 20%) than in Study 2 (MAT scores < 200: 8%), together with the expectation of a weaker bias for positive events, might account for the fact that the bias for positive events was in the predicted direction but not significant in Study 1, whereas it was significant in Study 2. Despite its appeal, the sentiment-override explanation should be viewed with caution until tested directly.

Two limitations of the present studies point to the need for further research on this topic. First, the use of interviews to obtain data may have affected the results. It is therefore important to investigate in future research the relationship between public (i.e., interview) and private (i.e., questionnaire) answers to questions regarding contributions to activities to ensure that the present results are not limited to the manner in which responses were solicited. Second, the findings need to be replicated with a sample of couples that reflects the full range of marital satisfaction. Despite these limitations, the present studies document the existence of an attribution bias in spouses' perceived contribution to relationship events and show that the bias is related to marital satisfaction.

NOTES

We thank Paula Williams for her help in coding the data. This article was written while the first author was supported as a faculty scholar by the W. T. Grant Foundation and by Grant No. 1-5-32169 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Frank Fincham or Thomas Bradbury.

1. Twenty-three of the items were from those used by Thompson and Kelley (1981), although some were rephrased slightly to focus on the dyad (e.g., "irritating the other" became "irritating each other").
2. The egocentric attribution bias is by definition a dyadic phenomenon, and hence the data were not analyzed at the individual level. It should be noted that the bias may reflect an overestimation of one's own contribution, an underestimation of the partner's contribution, or both of these possibilities. Although it may be intuitively attractive to examine sex differences in egocentric bias, such analyses would be misleading. It is not possible, by definition, to calculate a "husband" bias and a "wife" bias. Thus, our analyses were limited to the dyadic level.
3. Further evidence in support of the sentiment-override hypothesis was obtained by calculating the correlations between marital satisfaction and responsibility attributed to the partner. The sentiment-override hypothesis predicts a positive correlation between an individual's marital satisfaction and responsibility ratings for positive relationship events; a negative correlation is expected between marital satisfaction and negative relationship events. These predictions were strongly supported in Study 1 (for positive events: $r = .79, p < .01$; for negative events: $r = -.66, p < .01$), and the findings were replicated in Study 2 (for positive events: $r = .47, p < .01$; for negative events: $r = -.46, p < .01$).

REFERENCES

- Davis, Mark H. 1980. "A multidimensional approach to individual differences in empathy." *JSAS Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology* 10: 85.
- Davis, Mark, H. 1983. "Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44: 113-126.
- Fincham, Frank D., and Thomas N. Bradbury. 1987. "The assessment of marital quality: A reevaluation." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 49: 797-809.
- Krokoff, Lowell. 1984. "The anatomy of negative affect in working-class marriages." *Dissertation Abstracts International* 45: 7A. (University Microfilms No. 84-22, 109)
- Locke, Harvey J., and Karl M. Wallace. 1959. "Short marital adjustment and prediction tests: Their reliability and validity." *Marriage and Family Living* 21: 251-255.
- Ross, Michael, and Fiore Sicol. 1979. "Egocentric biases in availability and attribution." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37: 322-336.
- Thompson, Suzanne C., and Harold H. Kelley. 1981. "Judgments of responsibility for activities in close relationships." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 41: 469-477.
- Walster, Elaine E., G. W. Walster, and Ellen Berscheid. 1978. *Equity: Theory and Research*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Weiss, Robert L. 1980. "Strategic behavioral marital therapy: Toward a model for assessment and intervention." Pp. 229-271 in J. P. Vincent (ed.), *Advances in Family Intervention, Assessment, and Theory*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.