

## Construct of Attributional Style in Depression and Marital Distress

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Although important theoretically, consistency in attribution responses or attributional style has rarely been investigated empirically. The responses of 150 couples were used to examine whether consistency of attribution responses within attribution dimensions and consistency in the pattern of responses across attribution dimensions were associated with adaptational outcomes. Replicating previous findings, mean attribution scores correlated with depression and with marital distress. Consistency of attribution responses was unrelated to either adaptational outcome, whereas (a) theoretically derived pessimistic and optimistic attribution patterns were related to depression scores and (b) benign and nonbenign marital attribution patterns were related to marital satisfaction scores. The implications of these findings for the level at which attributional style is best conceptualized are discussed.

Since publication of the attributional reformulation of learned helplessness (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), numerous researchers have investigated the role of attributional or explanatory style in depression (for reviews see, Peterson, Meier, & Seligman, 1993; Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986). Although findings in this literature have not always been consistent (cf. Robins, 1988), there is considerable evidence to suggest that the attribution of negative events to internal, stable, and global causes is associated with depressive symptoms. In addition, there are data to support the conclusion that “depressive explanatory style is probably a risk factor for later depression” (Peterson et al., 1993, p. 223). The attributional reformulation of learned helplessness has also stimulated researchers to investigate the role of attributional style in understanding interpersonal relations, particularly within marriage. Strong support has been obtained to show that attributing negative relationship events to the partner and viewing the causes of such

events as stable and global is reliably associated with relationship distress. Longitudinal studies also have indicated that attributions predict later marital distress (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; for reviews see Baucom, 1987; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, 1994). Thus, individual differences in attributions have been linked to concurrent and future depression and concurrent and future marital discord.

It is surprising, however, that the existence of an attributional style or the “tendency to make particular kinds of causal inference . . . across different situations and across time” (Metalsky & Abramson, 1981, p. 38) has rarely been investigated empirically in the literatures on depression and marital discord. As Hill and Larson (1992) noted, confusion in the attribution literature has led some researchers to operationalize and measure “style” in terms of attribution content *per se*. What is often overlooked is the importance of considering consistency in responses and patterns of responses across attribution dimensions. Unfortunately, research that has considered attribution responses across dimensions has tended to sum scores on attribution dimensions across stimulus events on an attribution questionnaire. This approach presupposes rather than investigates cross-situational consistency in attributions.

In a notable exception to this literature, Cutrona, Russel, and Jones (1984) tested consistency in responses to events on the Attributional

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Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson et al., 1982) used in depression research. Using several factor models, Cutrona et al. found only weak evidence for an attributional style. Similarly, Arntz, Gerlsma, and Albersnagel (1985) found little consistency in attributions across situations and concluded that situational influences on attributions are more important than attributional style. Several other researchers (Barnett & Gotlib, 1988; Cutrona et al., 1984; Miller, Klee, & Norman, 1982) have suggested that the magnitude of the reliability coefficients of the ASQ reflects a lack of cross-situational consistency in attributions. This observation implies that either a traitlike cognitive style does not exist or that this style varies across different types of events or domains (Munton, 1985–1986). Although these findings question the usefulness of measuring a general attributional style, this construct is not without empirical support. Anderson, Jennings, and Arnoult (1988), using a different measure of attributional style, found support for consistency in attribution responses within moderately specific domains of events. Thus, the consistency implied by the attributional style construct may exist, but possibly not at a global level.

Theoretically, the construct of attributional style is important because it provides information beyond that obtained from the study of mean attribution responses and may therefore advance understanding of the relationship between attributions and adaptational outcomes. In particular, two hypotheses can be generated for the relationship between attributional style and adaptational outcome. First, the degree to which individuals display an attributional style may be associated with the adaptational outcomes of depression and marital distress. The degree to which an attributional style is used may lead to poor adaptational outcomes because the consistent use of a similar explanation for different events may reflect a maladaptive rigidity or simplicity in explaining events. Second, attributional style may interact with attribution content such that current levels of functioning are maintained whether the functioning is adaptive or maladaptive. In this event, the nature of the attributional style might differ across adaptive (e.g., external, unstable, and specific attributions for negative events) and maladaptive (e.g., internal, stable, and global attributions for negative events) levels of functioning, but the existence of an attributional

style per se would not be associated with adaptational outcome.

In the study of attributional style, it is important to distinguish between two referents for this construct. Although attributional style can be conceptualized in terms of response consistency within each attribution dimension, it can also be conceptualized in terms of patterns of responses across several attribution dimensions. This second perspective is particularly important in attribution research given the hypothesized associations between depression and internal, stable, and global attributions and between marital distress and partner, stable, and globality attributions. These associations presumably underlie the practice of summing mean scores across attribution dimensions. However, it is the pattern of responses across dimensions that is theoretically important in both depression and marital literatures. Response patterns are not reflected in summated, composite scores, and patterns of responding can only be meaningfully analyzed by considering dimensions simultaneously.

In summary, attributional style can be conceptualized in two ways: (a) as the variance in responses on a single attribution dimension across events and (b) as the pattern of attribution dimension responses to an event and the extent to which this pattern occurs across events. This latter conceptualization can be investigated by examining either the number of patterns used across events or the number of events explained by a person's principal (i.e., most used) pattern. Neither of the two conceptualizations of attributional style is captured by the analysis of mean attribution scores or in analyses that collapse responses across dimensions to create summed indices. Finally, conceptualizing attributional style solely in terms of variance within single dimensions does not address the confound that necessarily exists between consistency of responses and extremity of responses.

To date, only one study has attempted to investigate attributional style with both variance in attribution responses and the pattern of responses across attribution dimensions. Baucom, Sayers, and Duhe (1989) found some evidence (5 of 20 correlations) that lower variance in responses on an attribution dimension was associated with marital distress. In a similar vein, the use of fewer patterns of responding across attribution dimensions was associated with mar-

ital distress in men but not in women, whereas greater use of a single pattern was related to marital distress in women but not in men. Although promising, such findings need to be replicated, especially in view of Baucom et al.'s (1989) decision to collapse responses across globality and stability attribution dimensions. No analogous studies involving attribution patterns were found in the depression literature.

The present study is the first to examine attributional style for both depressogenic and marital attributions conceptualized in terms of variability in responding within dimensions and patterning of responding across dimensions. Thus, this study not only allowed for the replication of Baucom et al.'s (1989) findings but also tested for the existence of the depressogenic attributional style introduced with the inception of attribution research on depression. Finally, the study addressed the level at which the construct of attributional style is best conceptualized. Because the depression literature assumes attributional consistency across domains and the marital literature assumes consistency only for the marital domain, this study examined whether attributional style occurs only within a particular behavioral domain or generalizes beyond a single domain.

## Method

### *Participants*

One hundred fifty married couples were recruited from marriage license records and from advertisements in the local media. Couples had been married an average of 3.6 ( $SD = 5.3$ ) years, averaged 0.9 ( $SD = 1.4$ ) children, and had a median family income of \$30,000–\$35,000. Husbands averaged 30.4 ( $SD = 7.3$ ) years of age and 15.4 ( $SD = 3.0$ ) years of education, and obtained a mean score of 108.5 ( $SD = 25.2$ ) on the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) and a mean score of 5.8 ( $SD = 6.5$ ) on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). Wives averaged 29.3 ( $SD = 7.0$ ) years of age and 14.8 ( $SD = 2.6$ ) years of education, and obtained a mean score of 111.9 ( $SD = 26.7$ ) on the MAT and a mean score of 8.0 ( $SD = 7.0$ ) on the BDI. The sample was primarily Caucasian.

### *Measures*

#### *Depressive Symptoms*

The BDI (Beck & Beamesderfer, 1974) was used to assess affective, cognitive, motivational, and phys-

ical symptoms of depression. This scale is highly correlated with clinical ratings and other measures of depression (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988). Participants were asked to report the degree to which each of 21 depressive symptoms had been present during the week.

#### *Marital Satisfaction*

Marital satisfaction was assessed with the 15-item MAT (Locke & Wallace, 1959), an extensively used measure that is widely accepted as an adequate index of marital satisfaction. The MAT has adequate reliability (split-half  $r = .90$ ), discriminates between nondistressed spouses and spouses who have documented problems (Locke & Wallace, 1959), and correlates with clinicians' judgments of marital discord (Crowther, 1985).

#### *Attributions Associated With Depressive Symptoms*

The ASQ (Peterson et al., 1982) was used to assess general attributions. The reliability of individual attribution dimensions on the ASQ is moderate (alpha coefficients typically range between .40 and .70) and test-retest reliabilities over several weeks to several months are high ( $r = .60$  or more). A voluminous literature on the correlates of the ASQ speaks to its validity (see Peterson et al., 1993). Because attribution responses for good events are quite inconsistent (Peterson et al., 1993), only the negative event items from the ASQ were used in the present study.

Each participant was presented with six hypothetical events (e.g., "You can't get all the work done that others expect of you") and instructed to vividly imagine the situation happening to him or her. Next, the participant was asked to write down the major cause of the event and to mark on 7-point rating scales to answer questions about the locus of the cause ("Is the cause of the event due to something about you or something about other people or circumstances?"; *totally due to other people or circumstances* = 1, *totally due to me* = 7), stability ("In the future will the cause of this event again be present?"; *will never again be present* = 1, *will always be present* = 7), and globality ("Is the cause something that just influences this event or does it also influence other areas of your life?"; *influences just this particular situation* = 1, *influences all situations in my life* = 7).

#### *Attributions Associated With Marital Satisfaction*

The Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992) was used to assess marital

attributions. The reliability of responses to individual attribution dimensions varies from .62 to .83. Two-week test-retest reliabilities were high ( $r = .60$  or more). The validity of the measure has been established by the demonstration of associations between RAM responses and attributions for actual spouse behaviors, for marital difficulties, and for spouse affects observed during marital interaction. Attributions for negative events have been most consistently related to marital distress (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), and we therefore used only negative partner behaviors as stimulus events.

Participants were presented with four negative partner behaviors (e.g., "Your spouse criticizes something you do") and were instructed to vividly imagine their spouse performing the behavior. Unlike the ASQ, respondents do not write down a major cause for the event and then rate the cause. Fincham and Bradbury (1992) argued that this task involves a high level of abstractness and sometimes results in judgments about the event itself rather than about its cause. To make the respondents' task as simple as possible, the RAM requires participants to rate their agreement with concrete attributional statements. Thus a spouse (e.g., the wife) rated her agreement with three statements on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). These statements referred to partner locus ("My husband's behavior was due to something about him [e.g., the type of person he is, the mood he was in]), stability ("The reason my husband criticizes me is something that is likely to be present again in the future"), and globality ("The reason my husband criticizes me is something that affects other areas of our marriage").

### Procedure

Participating couples were mailed two sets of materials with separate postage-paid return envelopes and a cover letter thanking them for their participation and instructing them on their task. They were asked to complete the questionnaires independently and to seal them in separate envelopes before discussing the project. Couples received payment after returning the completed materials. This procedure has been used previously in marital research and has yielded similar results to those obtained from completion of measures in the laboratory.

### Results

As husband and wife responses are not independent, separate analyses are reported for each spouse. Unless otherwise specified, the results pertain to the complete sample of wives and husbands.

### Replication of Prior Findings

Correlations between attributions and adaptation outcomes are shown in Table 1. All dimensions of the RAM correlated significantly with MAT scores for both spouses. Spouses with higher ratings of marital distress tended to provide attributions that were global and stable and that suggested that the spouse's negative behavior was due to the spouse. When entered simultaneously into a regression equation, the three marital attribution dimensions accounted for over a third of the variance in marital satisfaction: for husbands ( $R^2 = .36$ ),  $F(3, 143) = 27.67, p < .001$ ; and for wives ( $R^2 = .41$ ),  $F(3, 147) = 33.77, p < .001$ .

The correlations between the ASQ dimensions and depression scores were less consistent and lower in magnitude. For husbands and wives, depressive symptoms were associated with viewing the causes of events as more global, but only depressed husbands viewed causes as more stable and only wives located the causes in themselves. When entered simultaneously into a regression equation, the three ASQ dimensions predicted depression scores: for husbands ( $R^2 = .10$ ),  $F(3, 143) = 5.02, p < .003$ ; and for wives ( $R^2 = .07$ ),  $F(3, 143) = 3.66, p < .02$ . Finally, the correlation between depressive symptoms and marital distress was replicated for both wives ( $r = .44, p < .001$ ) and husbands ( $r = .40, p < .001$ ).

Table 1

*Pearson Product-Moment Correlations of Marital Attribution Dimensions and General Attribution Dimensions With the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)*

Attribution dimension	MAT		BDI	
	H	W	H	W
RAM				
Locus	-.36**	-.42**	.17*	.16*
Stability	-.48**	-.53**	.22**	.33**
Globality	-.58**	-.62*	.40**	.42**
ASQ				
Locus	-.07	-.13	.07	.21**
Stability	-.02	-.09	.20*	.05
Globality	-.03	-.08	.30**	.23**

*Note.* H = Husbands; W = Wives; RAM = Relationship Attribution Measure; ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire.

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

### *Attributional Style*

As noted earlier, attributional style has been conceptualized in terms of variability in responding to an attributional dimension and in terms of the pattern of responding across dimensions. We first examined consistency within dimensions and then examined patterning across dimensions using two different analytic approaches that focused, respectively, on theoretically important response patterns and on the consistency with which spouses used response patterns.

### *Attributional Style as Response Consistency*

Two procedures were used to assess attributional style as response consistency. First, following Baucom et al. (1989), we derived indices of consistency for responses across attribution dimensions by computing a variance score for the ASQ using all three attribution dimensions. A similar score was computed for the RAM. This procedure produced an overall index of consistency for each individual in regard to depressogenic and marital attributions; the more consistent an individual was in his or her ratings across situations, the more the person was considered to display an attributional style. Similar to Baucom et al.'s findings, participants showed a wide range of variability, which suggests that the concept of style may be more applicable for certain individuals than for others. The ASQ style index ranged from 0.06 to 6.49 for wives and from 0.00 to 7.89 for husbands. The RAM style index ranged from 0.00 to 5.94 for wives and from 0.00 to 7.33 for husbands. As might be expected, the style indices for the ASQ and the RAM were correlated (for husbands,  $r = .24, p < .01$ ; and for wives,  $r = .35, p < .01$ ). However, when examined in relation to adaptational outcomes, no significant correlations were found between this measure of attributional style and depression or marital satisfaction.

Second, we examined consistency of responding within each attribution dimension. That is, for each of the three ASQ and the three RAM dimensions, we computed a variance score across the stimulus events. For the ASQ, such scores were unrelated to depression, with one exception (stability score for wives,  $r =$

$.16, p < .05$ ). For the RAM, scores did not correlate significantly with marital distress either for husbands or wives.

### *Attributional Style as Response Patterns Across Dimensions*

We examined response patterns across dimensions in two ways. First, we analyzed theoretically derived response patterns. Second, we investigated the consistency with which spouses used response patterns.

*Use of theoretically derived response patterns.* We focused on four theoretically important attributional styles: the pessimistic (internal, stable, and global) attributional style associated with depression; the optimistic (external, unstable, and specific) attributional style related to the absence of depression; the nonbenign (partner locus, stable, and global) attributional style related to marital distress; and the benign (nonpartner locus, unstable, and specific) attributional style related to marital satisfaction (see Table 2).

Following Baucom et al. (1989), we categorized a rating as high on a dimension if it was above the midpoint of the response scale and as low on the dimension if it was at or below the midpoint.<sup>1</sup> Patterns were identified by looking at high versus low categories across dimensions. In this analysis, we began by determining the frequency with which individuals followed the theoretically derived patterns outlined above. For each of the four patterns investigated, scores were computed in the following manner. If responses to a stimulus item followed a given pattern (e.g., were pessimistic by being high on the locus, global, and stability dimensions), a score of one was assigned for that pattern. These scores were then summed, which created an index that reflected how many times the pattern was presented by the individual. Thus, the number of times a pattern could occur was determined by the number of stimulus items in the ASQ and in the RAM. For the ASQ, therefore, the index for each pattern ranged from zero to six, whereas the index for the RAM ranged from zero to four.

<sup>1</sup> The conceptual midpoint was used (as opposed to the sample midpoint) to ensure a consistent construct of high and low responses for all three attribution dimensions.

Table 2  
*Four Theoretically Derived Attribution Patterns and Associated Adaptational Outcomes*

Dimension	Adaptational outcome			
	ASQ		RAM	
	Depressive-pessimistic pattern	Nondepressive-optimistic pattern	Nonbenign pattern	Benign pattern
Locus	Internal	External	High	Low
Stability	High	Low	High	Low
Globality	High	Low	High	Low

Note. ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire; RAM = Relationship Attribution Measure; High = Rating on this dimension is greater than the midpoint; Low = Rating on this dimension is less than or equal to the midpoint.

First, we examined whether individuals who displayed the pessimistic pattern on the ASQ tended to display the nonbenign pattern on the RAM and, similarly, whether optimistic and benign patterns were related. Simple bivariate correlations revealed only one significant relationship: For wives, the optimistic pattern was associated with the benign pattern ( $r = .31, p < .01$ ). These results suggest that it is erroneous to assume that an individual exhibiting an attribution pattern associated with depression also presents a pattern associated with marital distress.

We next examined whether the patterns identified were related to depressive symptoms and to marital distress. Table 3 presents results showing that for the ASQ attributions, the pessimistic and optimistic patterns were significantly correlated with depression scores for husbands. The ASQ patterns and marital distress were not significantly related. For RAM attri-

butions, the benign and nonbenign patterns correlated significantly with marital distress scores and depression scores for both husbands and wives. Although corresponding correlations with marital distress and depressive symptoms differed significantly in only one case (husbands' nonbenign attributions,  $Z = 2.40, p < .05$ ), all differences in correlations were in the predicted direction, with correlations between the RAM and marital distress being larger than those between the RAM and depressive symptoms.

*Consistency in the use of attributional response patterns.* Two sets of analyses were done to assess how consistently individuals displayed attributional patterns. First, we determined how many patterns were utilized by each individual. We repeated the procedure used to assess how often the four theoretically derived patterns were used, but this time we included all possible patterns for attribution dimensions. Thus, eight combinations of high and low dimensions were possible. However, the highest number of patterns that could be used was determined by the number of stimulus events on the ASQ ( $n = 6$ ) and on the RAM ( $n = 4$ ).

Table 4 contains the percentage of the sample that used each number of patterns. The results showed that individuals varied in the number of patterns they used. It is interesting that spouses appeared to use fewer patterns when providing attributions on the RAM than when providing attributions on the ASQ, even after the different number of items on each scale were taken into account. Unlike our finding when separate dimensions were assessed, no significant correlation was found between an individual's consis-

Table 3  
*Pearson Product-Moment Correlations of Attribution Patterns With the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)*

Attribution pattern	MAT		BDI	
	H	W	H	W
ASQ pessimistic	-.08	-.02	.22**	.08
ASQ optimistic	.07	.14	-.21*	-.15
RAM nonbenign	-.47**	-.49**	.17*	.31**
RAM benign	.33**	.37**	-.23**	-.22**

Note. H = Husbands; W = Wives; ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire; RAM = Relationship Attribution Measure.

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

Table 4  
*Number of Patterns Displayed in Response to Four Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM) Items and Six Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) Items*

No. patterns displayed	Percentage of participants			
	ASQ		RAM	
	H	W	H	W
1	6	3	32	27
2	8	12	37	37
3	32	27	28	28
4	34	34	3	8
5	20	19	—	—
6	1	4	—	—

Note. H = Husbands; W = Wives.

tency in using ASQ and RAM attribution patterns. Similarly, no relation was found between the number of patterns used and depressive symptoms or marital distress.

Second, to allow comparison with Baucom et al.'s (1989) results, we also assessed consistency in patterns by computing the percentage of stimulus events explained by the individual's principal pattern. The results in Table 5 suggest that individuals tended to rely on their principal RAM attribution pattern more frequently than their principal ASQ attribution pattern. Again, however, this measure of consistency did not correlate significantly with either depression or marital distress scores.

We also examined the intercorrelations between the three indices of style (i.e., response consistency, number of patterns used, and percentage of stimulus events explained by the principal pattern). As the results in Table 6 indicate, for both husbands and wives the three indices were significantly correlated for both general and marital attributions. As expected, the correlation between the number of patterns and the percentage of events explained by the principal pattern was highest, thus reflecting that a common construct was assessed in these analyses.

In summary, individuals varied in the consistency of their attributions, indicating that the notion of an attributional style may be more relevant for some persons than for others. Significant correlations were found between theoretically derived attribution patterns and their expected adaptational outcomes, which suggests that the style construct is meaningful. Be-

cause RAM attribution patterns tended to occur more consistently than did ASQ attribution patterns, the style construct appears most relevant for marital attributions.

## Discussion

### *Replication of Findings*

The present study provided the opportunity to reexamine several previous findings. Phenomena that were replicated include the following.

1. Higher global attribution ratings on the ASQ were related to depressive symptoms, and there was some evidence of a similar relation for the internal (wives) and stability (husbands) attribution dimensions. Together, the three ASQ dimensions accounted for a significant portion of the variance in depression scores for both husbands and wives.

2. The tendency to see the cause of marital events as located in the partner, as stable, and as global was directly related to marital dissatisfaction. The three RAM attribution dimensions accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in marital distress scores for husbands and wives.

3. Marital distress was associated with more depressive symptoms in husbands and wives.

### *Attributional Style*

Although most attribution research has focused on mean attribution scores by collapsing responses across dimensions to form summed indices, the findings of the present study em-

Table 5  
*Percentage of Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) and Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM) Items Explained by Participants' Principal Pattern*

No. patterns explained	Percentage of participants			
	ASQ		RAM	
	H	W	H	W
6	5	3	—	—
5	4	7	—	—
4	12	14	33	30
3	34	38	31	30
2	45	38	36	40
1	0	0	0	0

Note. H = Husbands; W = Wives.

Table 6  
Intercorrelations Between Three Indices of  
Attributional Style

Index	Husbands			Wives		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
ASQ						
1. Var.	—			—		
2. No.	-.25**	—		-.37**	—	
3. Per.	.21**	-.80**	—	.37**	-.80**	—
RAM						
1. Var.	—			—		
2. No.	-.47**	—		-.42**	—	
3. Per.	.43**	-.95**	—	.47**	-.93**	—

Note. ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire; RAM = Relationship Attribution Measure; Var. = variance score for ASQ and RAM items; No. = number of patterns displayed in response to ASQ and RAM items; Per. = percentage of ASQ and RAM items explained by principal pattern.

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

phasize the importance of researchers investigating consistency of responses within dimensions and patterns of responses across dimensions. Individuals varied considerably in the consistency with which they provided attributions within dimensions and in the extent to which their responses conformed to particular patterns across dimensions. Given such individual differences, researchers and clinicians should be cautious in assuming that the style construct is equally relevant for everyone. In addition, it is important to specify clearly the referent for attributional style given that within-dimension variability and across-dimension patterning may differ in their contribution to understanding adaptational outcomes. Consequently, the results for each of these conceptualizations of attributional style are considered in turn.

As anticipated, variability in responses on ASQ attribution dimensions and on RAM attribution dimensions was significantly correlated. However, the magnitude of the correlation was low, showing that the variability indices from the two attribution measures shared less than 15% of their variance in common. Thus, separate indices were retained and each was examined in relation to its associated adaptational outcome. The ASQ index was unrelated to depressive symptoms, and the RAM index did not correlate with marital distress. Similar results were obtained for each individual attribution

dimension. With one exception—wives' ASQ stability dimension and depressive symptoms—no significant correlations with depressive symptoms or marital distress emerged.

Thus, at the level of response variability, we were unable to replicate Baucom et al.'s (1989) finding that "relationship adjustment is correlated with greater variability in attributions across situations" (p. 603). However, this discrepancy in findings may be more apparent than real for two reasons. First, using five attribution dimensions for negative events, Baucom et al. found no correlation with marital distress for husbands and only three of the five correlations were significant for wives. Moreover, the size of the correlations was quite low (average  $r = .25$ ) and their statistical significance most likely resulted from the large sample investigated. Thus, evidence for an association between variability in attribution responses and marital distress is relatively weak. Second, the inclusion of couples seeking marital therapy in Baucom et al.'s study may be relevant, as clinical observation suggests that such couples are often quite rigid in their perceptions of the partner and the marriage, a characteristic that is often grist for the therapeutic mill. It is therefore possible that response consistency may be more important in clinical samples than in nonclinical samples.

In summary, the findings regarding within-dimension variability are consistent with the view that attributional style may maintain current levels of adaptation, but style per se is not related to depression or marital distress in nonclinical samples. Although mean attribution scores may vary across levels of adaptation, variability in responding does not appear to be associated with either adaptive or maladaptive outcomes.

The above conclusion does not apply when one considers the findings obtained for patterns of attributions across attribution dimensions, thereby emphasizing the significance of the manner in which attributional style is conceptualized. When viewed in terms of patterns, the theoretically derived pessimistic and optimistic attributional styles described in the depression literature and the benign and nonbenign styles found in the marital literature were significantly correlated with their expected adaptational outcomes. Thus, when considering across-dimension patterning, theoretically derived patterns are associated with their hypothesized adaptational outcomes. It is interesting that the pat-



terns obtained on the two measures of attributions tended to be unrelated (only wives' optimistic ASQ and benign RAM patterns were correlated). This result stands in contrast to the reliable associations found between style indices on the two attribution measures when style was conceptualized as response variability within attributional dimensions.

When all possible attribution patterns were analyzed, consistency of pattern use was unrelated to adaptational outcome. Moreover, the frequency with which attributional patterns were used was unrelated to depression or to marital distress. These findings rule out pattern use per se as the critical factor in understanding adaptational outcome and suggest that only attribution patterns which are theoretically linked to adaptational outcomes yield significant findings. Thus, the interaction of pattern content and pattern consistency must be considered.

It is possible that pattern use by those with poor and good adaptational outcomes reflects the same process. This issue has been raised in both the depression and marital literatures. Depression researchers have examined the association of mood to judgments, whereas marital researchers have explored the phenomenon of sentiment override, whereby a spouse responds to inquiries about the marriage in terms of sentiment toward the other spouse rather than in terms of data relevant to the question asked (Weiss, 1980). In both cases, we postulate that the dominant feeling (about the self in depression studies or about the partner in marital research) influences the way in which individuals perceive an event, process information about it, and make judgments regarding the event.

In summary, when attribution dimensions are considered simultaneously and theoretically generated attribution patterns are analyzed, a relationship between attributional style and adaptational outcome is found. These findings are consistent with those obtained for mean attribution scores and are among the first to demonstrate the existence of response patterns linked to adaptational outcomes as predicted in the depression and marital literatures.

### Conclusion

Although evidence of attributional styles was found for both within-dimension response variability and across-dimension response patterns,

the data indicated that attributional style may be best studied within a particular behavioral domain. The data for response patterns suggested more consistent use of attributional styles for RAM attributions as compared with ASQ attributions. This conclusion is also supported by analyses that consider attributional content alone in the comparison between general and marital attributions (cf. Horneffer & Fincham, 1994). Caution, however, is needed in drawing conclusions about attributional style and the level at which it is best conceptualized. Although both conceptions of the attributional styles investigated yielded individual differences, it is clear that not all respondents can be characterized as having an attributional style. An important task for future researchers is to determine the origins of such styles and the conditions under which they are evoked.

The present findings suggest that the study of attributional style merits further empirical attention. As Bem and Allen (1974) noted, "unless an individual's variance on a particular trait dimension is small, it makes no sense to attach psychological significance to his [or her] mean on that dimension" (p. 512). In addition, unless the hypothesized relationships between attribution dimensions and adaptational outcomes are replicated at the level of across-dimension patterning, it makes little sense to use such constructs as "depressive explanatory style." Our findings suggest that variability may be most meaningfully studied within specific domains, as this level of analysis may more fully capture the notion of style. Although promising, the results of the present study need to be replicated with a more diverse sample with regard to psychopathology and demographic variables to establish the viability of this approach to the study of attributional style.

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