

# Attribution Processes in Distressed and Nondistressed Couples: 4. Self-Partner Attribution Differences

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The importance of the self-other distinction for understanding the relation between attributions and marital satisfaction is examined in two studies. In Study 1, causal attributions for naturally occurring behavior by the self and spouse were investigated. Study 2 examined both causal and responsibility attributions for hypothetical behaviors. In both studies, the attributions of spouses seeking therapy were investigated in relation to those of happily married persons in the community. The results showed that self-other attribution differences varied as a function of marital distress. Nondistressed spouses showed a positive attribution bias by making more benign attributions for partner behavior as opposed to self-behavior, whereas distressed spouses showed a negative attribution bias by making less benign attributions for partner behavior than for self-behavior. These findings suggest that self-attributions may, in part, determine the impact of attributions for spouse behavior on marital satisfaction. The clinical relevance of the results and their implications for research on actor-observer attribution differences are outlined.

There has been widespread recognition that cognitive factors play an important role in the initiation and maintenance of marital distress, a viewpoint now supported by a growing number of empirical studies (e.g., Baucom, Bell, & Duhe, 1982; Baucom, Wheeler, & Bell, 1984; Doherty, 1982; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981; Fincham, 1985a; Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, in press; Fincham & O'Leary, 1983; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985; Jacobson, McDonald, Follette, & Berley, 1985; Madden & Janoff-Bulman, 1981). This research has been dominated by attribution theory and has focused on the causal attributions spouses make for their partners' behavior. In this article, we attempt to broaden the current perspective on attribution processes and marital dysfunction by investigating attributions made for the partner relative to those made for the self in distressed and nondistressed marriages.

A number of empirical findings now suggest that relative to nondistressed spouses, distressed spouses view the causes of their partners' negative behavior as reflecting enduring, global characteristics of their partners (i.e., internal, stable, and global attributions). Distressed spouses also tend to view positive part-

ner behavior as being situationally determined and thus reflecting temporary, situation-specific causes (i.e., external, unstable, and specific attributions). The same patterns of causal attributions have been found to characterize nondistressed spouses for positive and negative behavior, respectively (Baucom et al., 1982; Fincham, 1985a; Fincham et al., in press; Fincham & O'Leary, 1983; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985; Jacobson et al., 1985). There is some evidence that these attributional tendencies are related to the affective impact of partner behavior, which in turn affects intended behavioral responses (Fincham et al., in press; Fincham & O'Leary, 1983).

These findings raise an important question: What determines the significance accorded to attributions for partner behaviors by a spouse? A complete answer to this question requires consideration of attributions for partner behavior relative to those for one's own behavior. Consider, for example, a positive partner behavior and an identical behavior performed by oneself (e.g., "partner compliments me"; "I compliment my partner"). The attribution made for the partner's behavior is likely to have the most positive impact on the attributor when it is more benign (more internal, stable, and global; e.g., "my partner always cares about how I feel") than that made for one's own behavior (e.g., "I happened to be in a good mood"). Such a discrepancy is likely to accentuate the feelings generated by the partner's behavior and, in general, is likely to make the attributor feel especially positive toward his or her spouse. Similarly, perhaps the impact of a negative partner behavior (e.g., "partner shouts at me") is enhanced to the extent that attributions are less benign (less external, unstable, and specific; e.g., "my partner is self-centered and insensitive") than those made for one's own behavior (e.g., "I had a bad day at the office"). Again the discrepancy between self- and partner attributions is likely to produce particularly strong negative affect. In sum, we propose that

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the impact of a spouse's attribution for partner behavior varies as a function of the extent to which it differs from attributions the individual would make for his or her own similar behavior toward the partner.

The question raised earlier is important for both theoretical and applied reasons. From a theoretical perspective, it behooves marital researchers to determine the source of the attributional differences for partner behavior found between distressed and nondistressed spouses. Do these differences reflect a positive bias (i.e., a tendency to make more benign partner attributions than self-attributions) on the part of nondistressed spouses, a negative bias (i.e., a tendency to make less benign attributions for partner behavior than own behavior) on the part of distressed spouses, or both?<sup>1</sup> At the applied level, the resolution of this question has important implications. For instance, a clinical intervention may entail explicit consideration of the attributions an individual makes for his or her own behavior and comparison of these self-attributions to the attributions made for partner behavior. Such an intervention makes sense if distressed spouses show a negative bias in their attributions but not if they make similar attributions for both their own and their partner's behavior.

It is difficult to evaluate these arguments on the basis of existing data even though differences in attributions to the self and to another have been widely investigated in social psychological research. Jones and Nisbett (1972, p. 80) postulated a "pervasive tendency" for people to attribute their own actions to situational factors while attributing the actions of others to stable, personal dispositions. Two studies provide data relevant to self-partner attributional differences in close relationships. Orvis, Kelley, and Butler (1976) found that when explicit disagreements occurred between cohabiting couples regarding the cause of a behavior, subjects tended to see the causes of partner behavior as due to partner characteristics or attitudes; their own behavior was perceived as due to environmental factors, temporary internal states, the intrinsic quality of the activity, concern for partner welfare, or beliefs about what is preferable. These findings generally accord with the actor-observer differences posited by Jones and Nisbett (1972). Of greater relevance is Thompson and Kelley's (1981) finding that the more successful a romantic relationship is rated by its participants (including dating and marriage), the more likely they are to see the partner, rather than themselves, as being the cause of positive relationship events and to assume responsibility themselves for at least some negative events. As most subjects rated their relationship as highly successful, such findings suggest a potential positive bias regarding attributions for partner behavior as compared with self-attributions in nondistressed couples.

The remaining studies that provide support for self-other differences in attributions (see Monson & Snyder, 1977, and Watson, 1982, for reviews) typically involve causal inferences for the behavior of acquaintances, strangers, or hypothetical others (Fincham, 1985b). Spouses in a marriage are clearly more than the actors and observers investigated in these studies, a fact that is likely to affect the attributions they make. For instance, it has been shown that attributions are influenced by factors such as expected future interaction (Knight & Vallacher, 1981) and the affect experienced by an attributor toward an ac-

tor (Goldberg, 1978, 1981; Regan, Straus, & Fazio, 1974), both of which characterize the marital dyad.

In fact, Taylor and Koivumaki (1976) found little support for differences in self-other attributions when subjects ascribed traits to a person (acquaintance, friend, spouse, self) or rated the causes of their behaviors on a dispositional-situational bipolar scale. Instead, a positivity effect emerged as persons were seen to cause good behaviors, whereas situational factors were considered to be the cause of bad behaviors, an effect that became more pronounced as a function of increasing familiarity with the target person. However, this research reflects two deficiencies common to most attribution studies on this topic. First, not all traits are seen as stable, global characteristics, whereas subjective uncertainty regarding the applicability of trait ascriptions, ambiguity of trait meaning, attributor neutrality, and situational attributions are confounded (Goldberg, 1981). Second, subjects found the dispositional-situational rating troublesome, a difficulty that pervades research using this distinction (Taylor & Fiske, 1975; Uleman, Miller, Henken, Riley, & Tsemberis, 1981). These difficulties, combined with the fact that the dimensions perceived to underlie causes vary across time and between people (Weiner, 1983), led us to investigate explicitly several dimensions that underlie the causes of behavior in marriage and to obtain subjects' ratings of these dimensions.

Thus, a true understanding of the role of attributions in marital dysfunction requires direct investigation of attribution processes in distressed and nondistressed couples. Kyle and Falbo (1985) recently used Taylor and Koivumaki's (1976) procedure to examine self-other attributions in a group of married student couples. Consistent with previous research, spouses in high-stress marriages were more likely to attribute positive partner behavior to situational causes and negative partner behavior to dispositional causes relative to spouses in low-stress marriages. Although group differences were also found for self-attributions (low-stress spouses made more dispositional attributions for positive behavior, whereas high-stress spouses exhibited the same tendency for negative behaviors), close examination shows that no self-other differences in attributions were found in either group. Unfortunately, the interpretation of these findings is difficult because a median split was used to form high- and low-marital-stress groups, using a measure of unknown validity. Therefore, it is not known whether couples in the high-stress group were clinically distressed. Consequently, further investigation is warranted in this area.

### Study 1

This study used naturally occurring behavior to examine self-partner attribution differences in maritally distressed and nondistressed couples. We hypothesized that an interaction

<sup>1</sup> The term *attribution bias* is widely used by attribution researchers, often without recognition of the fact that it implies the existence of a normative model. In this article we make no claims regarding the accuracy of attributions, as such claims are highly problematic. Rather, our use of the term is limited to the discrepancy between attributions made for spouse behavior and attributions an individual makes for his or her own behavior.

would be obtained between marital distress and attribution target (i.e., self vs. partner) for both positive and negative behaviors. However, no prediction was made as to whether such an interaction would reflect a negative bias on the part of distressed spouses, a positive bias on the part of nondistressed spouses, or both.

### Method

**Subjects.** Forty-four married couples participated in this study. Half of the couples were seeking marital therapy or had recently begun marital therapy (no more than three therapy sessions). The remainder were couples from the community who responded to an advertisement for research participants. Community couples in which both spouses scored below 100 on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) were excluded from the nondistressed group. The DAS scores of distressed ( $M = 81.5$ ,  $SD = 24.5$ ) and nondistressed groups ( $M = 113.7$ ,  $SD = 18.0$ ) differed significantly,  $F(1, 81) = 6.4$ ,  $p < .05$ . No sex difference or Sex  $\times$  Group interaction was found for DAS scores.

There were no differences between the distressed and nondistressed groups in number of years married, number of children, education, and age. The mean number of years married and number of children for the sample were 8.6 ( $SD = 3.7$ ) and 1.99 ( $SD = 1.1$ ), respectively. Husbands averaged 36.9 ( $SD = 9.5$ ) years of age and 15.9 ( $SD = 2.8$ ) years of education. Corresponding figures for wives were 35.5 ( $SD = 9.9$ ) and 15.2 ( $SD = 2.4$ ).

**Procedure.** The data for this study were collected as part of a larger data set that involved the investigation of several facets of family life. Clinic couples were contacted through cooperating mental health agencies and private practitioners. Community couples telephoned the laboratory in response to an advertisement in a local newspaper. For both groups of couples, a research assistant explained that the study involved peoples' perceptions of their family life and that couples were to be paid \$15 for their participation in the study. Arrangements were then made for the couple to come into the laboratory to participate in the study. Each spouse completed questionnaires independently and was given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the task if there was uncertainty about what to do.

**Measure of attributions.** The Spouse Observation Checklist (SOC; Weiss & Perry, 1979) was used to generate a list of everyday behaviors for which attributions could be made. The SOC consists of 409 behaviors that could occur in a marital relationship on a daily basis. These behaviors are divided into the following 12 categories: affection, companionship, consideration, sex, communication process, coupling activities, child care/parenting, household management, financial decisions, employment/education, personal habits, and independence. Approximately 25% of the spouse behaviors were selected from each category to form the current measure. Items were selected that seemed to encompass a class of similar specific spouse behaviors on the SOC. For example, the SOC includes the following three items: spouse did the dishes; spouse cleared the table and put food away; and spouse helped do the dishes or other chores. The third item was selected for the current measure because it seemed to represent this group of items most inclusively. For the purposes of the study, the items were also reworded so that they referred to the respondents' own behavior (e.g., I helped do the dishes or other chores). Thus subjects were presented with a checklist containing potential behaviors performed by their partners and by themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Subjects examined the checklist and indicated which of the behaviors had occurred during the past 24 hr in the relationship. For each behavior checked off, they also indicated whether the impact of the behavior was positive, neutral, or negative (for their own behaviors, this response indicated the intended impact of the behavior on their partners). They then wrote down the one most important cause of the behavior and rated the cause in terms of the internal-external, stable-unstable, and

global-specific causal dimensions. The first dimension was assessed by three judgments: the extent to which the cause was due to the respondent, to the spouse, and to outside circumstances. Causal stability entailed a judgment regarding whether the cause would again be present in the future when the behavior occurred. Finally, the global-specific nature of the cause was examined by asking the subject to indicate the extent to which the cause affects other areas of the relationship and not only the behavior in question. All responses were made on 7-point rating scales.

### Results and Discussion

Responses to six categories of behavioral events were analyzed: partner behaviors and own behaviors that were rated positive, neutral, and negative in impact. Because subjects could respond to multiple behaviors in each category, average responses in each of the six categories were obtained for each of the five attribution questions. In view of the fact that attributions are influenced by both the attributional tendencies of the attributor and the event for which an attribution is made, we decided that information regarding at least two behaviors in a category was needed to yield meaningful results for that category of behavior. Thus, where a spouse checked off only one behavior in a category, the attributional data for that category were coded as missing.

Less than half of the respondents provided data in all six categories. The combined use of all six categories in a single analysis therefore would have resulted in too few cases being available to provide meaningful results. Consequently, the data pertaining to positive, neutral, and negative behaviors were analyzed in separate  $2 \times 2$  multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAS): Group (distressed vs. nondistressed) served as a between-subjects factor, with the target of the attribution (self vs. partner) comprising the repeated measure. As it can be argued that the responses of a husband and wife within a couple are not independent (despite the fact that they may be judging different behaviors), these analyses were conducted separately for each sex rather than treating husband and wife as separate observations in a single analysis.<sup>3</sup> This required six (Sex  $\times$  3 Types of Behavior) analyses. However, in the case of negative behaviors, the analysis for men could not be performed because too few cases contained complete data on the repeated measure.

The predicted interaction between marital distress and attribution target was obtained for women for both positive,  $F(5, 33) = 4.02$ ,  $p < .01$ , and negative behaviors,  $F(5, 13) = 3.89$ ,  $p < .05$ .<sup>4</sup> The mean scores and univariate  $F$  ratios associated with these interactions are shown in Table 1.

Simple main-effect analyses for positive behavior showed, first, that subjects were less likely to rate themselves as the cause of their partners' behavior than of their own behavior in both distressed,  $F(1, 37) = 9.16$ ,  $p < .01$ , and nondistressed,  $F(1, 37) = 27.33$ ,  $p < .001$ , groups. However, this difference appears to be more pronounced for the nondistressed group. Second, the

<sup>2</sup> A list of the SOC items used can be obtained from Frank D. Fincham.

<sup>3</sup> Treating spouses as a repeated measure in the analyses would have reduced their power to an unacceptable level because of missing data.

<sup>4</sup> The degrees of freedom differ because different numbers of data points were available for each set of analysis.

Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and F Ratios for the Marital  
Distress  $\times$  Attribution Target Interaction for Women

| Attribution        | Distressed        |                     | Nondistressed     |                     | Marital<br>Group $\times$<br>Attribution<br>Target <i>F</i> |
|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---|
|                    | Self-<br>behavior | Partner<br>behavior | Self-<br>behavior | Partner<br>behavior |   |
| Positive behaviors |                   |                     |                   |                     |   |
| Locus              |                   |                     |                   |                     |   |
| Self               |                   |                     |                   |                     |   |
| <i>M</i>           | 5.41              | 4.56                | 5.74              | 3.66                | 6.36*   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 0.83              | 1.32                | 0.97              | 1.44                |   |
| Partner            |                   |                     |                   |                     | 0.01  |
| <i>M</i>           | 4.45              | 5.12                | 4.07              | 4.78                |   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 1.28              | 0.98                | 1.40              | 1.10                |   |
| Outside factors    |                   |                     |                   |                     | 5.54*   |
| <i>M</i>           | 2.82              | 3.09                | 3.60              | 3.09                |   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 1.25              | 1.48                | 1.41              | 1.13                |   |
| Stability          |                   |                     |                   |                     | 1.83  |
| <i>M</i>           | 4.99              | 4.97                | 5.37              | 4.99                |   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 1.08              | 1.14                | 1.37              | 1.09                |   |
| Globality          |                   |                     |                   |                     | 7.89**  |
| <i>M</i>           | 5.83              | 4.51                | 5.89              | 5.84                |   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 0.70              | 0.88                | 0.72              | 0.62                |   |
| Negative behaviors |                   |                     |                   |                     |   |
| Locus              |                   |                     |                   |                     |   |
| Self               |                   |                     |                   |                     | 0.33  |
| <i>M</i>           | 5.20              | 3.99                | 4.84              | 3.09                |   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 1.30              | 1.40                | 1.63              | 1.32                |   |
| Partner            |                   |                     |                   |                     | 1.15  |
| <i>M</i>           | 4.19              | 5.67                | 2.40              | 4.28                |   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 2.10              | 0.97                | 2.09              | 2.38                |   |
| Outside factors    |                   |                     |                   |                     | 0.22  |
| <i>M</i>           | 3.01              | 3.83                | 4.38              | 4.54                |   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 2.22              | 2.67                | 2.31              | 1.67                |   |
| Stability          |                   |                     |                   |                     | 0.23  |
| <i>M</i>           | 4.75              | 5.21                | 4.12              | 4.23                |   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 1.76              | 1.21                | 1.56              | 0.83                |   |
| Globality          |                   |                     |                   |                     | 10.13**   |
| <i>M</i>           | 4.70              | 5.25                | 4.75              | 4.14                |   |
| <i>SD</i>          | 1.39              | 1.08                | 1.62              | 1.01                |   |

Note. Higher scores indicate higher ratings on the self, partner, external, stable, and global attribution dimensions.

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

distressed group rated the causes of their own behavior as more global than the causes of partner behavior,  $F(1, 37) = 7.85, p < .01$ . Third, nondistressed women were more likely to see the cause of their partners' behavior as global than were distressed women,  $F(1, 37) = 4.8, p < .05$ . Fourth, there was a tendency for nondistressed women to rate the cause of their partners' behavior as less likely to reflect outside circumstances than was their own behavior,  $F(1, 37) = 3.58, p < .07$ . Regarding negative behavior, the distressed group saw the causes of partner behavior as more global than the causes of their own behavior,  $F(1, 17) = 4.87, p < .05$ , whereas the reverse was true in the nondistressed group,  $F(1, 17) = 5.36, p < .05$ . Also, the causes of partner behavior were seen as more global in the distressed group than in the nondistressed group,  $F(1, 17) = 4.9, p < .05$ .

The only other significant results concern the attribution-target main effect. This main effect was found to be significant in

all five analyses conducted: for women, positive,  $F(5, 33) = 7.51, p < .001$ ; neutral,  $F(5, 19) = 2.81, p < .05$ ; negative,  $F(5, 13) = 3.75, p < .05$ , and for men, positive,  $F(5, 24) = 4.51, p < .01$ ; neutral,  $F(5, 24) = 8.28, p < .001$ . Univariate analyses showed that subjects were more likely to see themselves as the cause of their own behavior than of their partners' behavior, and they were more likely to see the partner as the cause of partner behavior than of their own behavior. However, these main effects need to be interpreted in terms of the interactions reported earlier. No significant main effects were found for the ratings of outside circumstances, globality, or stability.

The results obtained in this study provide some support for the view that the discrepancy between self and partner attributions is related to marital distress. Where attribution-target differences were obtained, they showed that distressed women exhibited a negative attribution bias by making more benign attributions for their own behavior than for their partner's behavior. In contrast, nondistressed women made spouse-enhancing attributions. This effect was not limited to the internal-external dimension investigated in prior research and was most evident for the global-specific causal dimension. As in prior marital research, this causal dimension distinguished distressed from nondistressed women. This provides the first data to show that the attributional differences investigated in distressed and nondistressed spouses apply to naturally occurring behavior.

Unfortunately, these data provide only partial support for the self-partner attribution difference investigated. It is not clear why no effect was found for men. Given the reduction in the power of the tests conducted owing to incomplete data, it is perhaps noteworthy that any support was obtained for the hypothesis investigated. Clearly, a stronger test of the hypothesis is needed to evaluate adequately its merit. We attempt to do this in the second study.

## Study 2

In this study, greater control was exerted over the stimuli used to generate attributions. More specifically, spouses made attributions for preselected partner behaviors that were categorized as positive or negative on an a priori basis. They also made attributions for the same behaviors performed by themselves. In both cases they were asked to imagine the occurrence of the behavior in their relationship.

The fact that spouses made attributions for fewer behaviors in this study (and thus made fewer judgments) permitted a further important issue to be investigated. This issue concerns the nature of the attributions that give rise to self-partner attribution differences and is relevant to the process that underlies such attribution differences. Although Jones and Nisbett (1972) were primarily concerned with the role of cognitive factors in producing self-other differences in attributions, they did acknowledge the possible influence of factors such as the need to protect self-esteem and the "need to justify blameworthy action" (p. 80). In marriage, issues of accountability for one's action are central (Fincham, 1983, 1985b), and such factors cannot be considered incidental to potential self-partner attribution differences (cf. Jones & Nisbett, 1972, p. 92). In fact, recent data suggest that differences between distressed and nondistressed couples are much greater in regard to attributions of responsi-

bility than to causal attribution and that responsibility-relevant attributions are more closely related to the affective impact of partner behavior (Fincham et al., in press).<sup>5</sup> To the extent that any self-partner attribution difference in marriage involves justification and exoneration of behavior, an interaction with level of marital distress is likely to be most evident in relation to attribution of responsibility. Thus, it is possible that the limited results obtained in the first study might be due to the investigation of causal rather than responsibility attributions. This possibility is also investigated in Study 2.

## Method

**Subjects.** Seventy-six persons (38 men and 38 women) participated in this study. The distressed group comprised 36 persons who were seeking marital therapy at the University Marital Therapy Clinic at Stony Brook, New York. A nondistressed group of 40 individuals was recruited by means of an advertisement in a local newspaper that requested volunteers to participate in a study on marriage. Only persons who scored above 100 on the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) were invited to participate in the study. All eligible subjects agreed to participate. Although a different measure of marital satisfaction is used in this study, this should not render the findings of Study 1 and Study 2 incommensurate, as the DAS and MAT correlate highly ( $r = .86$ ; Spanier, 1976) and factor analyses of different marital-satisfaction measures generally yield a single, overall factor of marital satisfaction (see Fincham & Bradbury, 1986, for an analysis of issues relating to the assessment of marital satisfaction). Because the investigation concerns the attributions of individuals rather than of dyads, it is not necessary that subject spouses actually comprise sets of married couples. Hence no attempt was made to ensure that both members of a married couple participated (only 11% of the sample comprised couples).

As anticipated, the distressed ( $M = 73.5$ ,  $SD = 20.5$ ) and nondistressed groups ( $M = 125.8$ ,  $SD = 14.3$ ) differed in marital satisfaction,  $F(1, 72) = 84.5$ ,  $p < .001$ . There were no significant differences between the groups in years of marriage ( $M = 9.5$ ,  $SD = 6.9$ ), income ( $M = \$33,100$ ,  $SD = \$13,880$ ), number of children ( $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = .2$ ), age (for husbands,  $M = 35.9$ ,  $SD = 6.9$ ; for wives,  $M = 33.1$ ,  $SD = 5.6$ ), and education (for husbands,  $M = 15.6$ ,  $SD = 3.1$ ; for wives,  $M = 15.0$ ,  $SD = 2.7$ ).

**Procedure.** The distressed group completed the materials used in this study as part of a battery of questionnaires administered during their intake interview. Nondistressed spouses came to the clinic for a single visit, during which they completed the attribution measure. Spouses in both groups were encouraged to ask questions regarding the task whenever they felt uncertain about what to do. Nondistressed spouses were paid \$10 on completion of the study.

**Measure of attributions.** Attributions were obtained for 12 stimulus items (2 targets  $\times$  2 behavioral valences  $\times$  3 behaviors). These included six behaviors (three positive and three negative) that were phrased to reflect spouse behavior (positive: your spouse shows understanding for your feelings; your spouse treats you more lovingly; your spouse responds positively to your suggestion to cuddle; negative: your spouse responds negatively when you put your arm around him or her; your spouse does not pay attention to what you are saying; your spouse is cool and unaffectionate) and six instances of own behavior (you show understanding for your spouse's feelings, you treat your spouse more lovingly, etc.). Thus a subject responded to three positive and three negative spouse behaviors and to the same behaviors performed by himself or herself. The behaviors were presented in a random order.

For each behavior, the subject made six judgments, three relating to causal attribution dimensions and three relating to responsibility. After

writing down the major cause of the behavior, subjects made a judgment regarding the locus of the cause. For partner behavior, they indicated whether the cause reflected something about his or her spouse or something about themselves, other people, or circumstances. In the case of their own behavior, the contrast was between something about themselves and something about their spouse, other people, or circumstances (for the purpose of analyzing these judgments, responses were scored so that higher scores indicated causes internal to the person who performed the behavior).<sup>6</sup> The remaining two questions asked about the stability and globality of the cause and were identical to those used in the first study. Responsibility attributions comprised three questions that asked respondents to assign blame or praise for the behavior and to report the intent and motivation that gave rise to the behavior. These latter judgments were included because they are the conceptual foundations for attributions of responsibility regarding intentional behavior (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980) and have been emphasized in theoretical analyses of family violence (Gelles & Straus, 1979; Hotelling, 1980). Subjects indicated the extent to which the behavior was intended to be positive or negative/destructive, was motivated by selfish or unselfish concerns, and was worthy of blame or praise. Responses to all questions were made on 7-point rating scales.

## Results and Discussion

Responses to each attribution question were summed across the three stimulus items in each category of behavior. Hence subjects received four sets of scores, two pertaining to their partner's behavior (positive and negative) and two regarding their own behavior (positive and negative). An initial analysis showed that the sex of the respondent did not influence responses either as a main effect or in interaction with other variables. Consequently, a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  repeated measures MANOVA was used to analyze the data: Group (distressed vs. nondistressed) served as a between-subjects factor, with the target of the attributions (self vs. partner) and the valence of the behavior (positive vs. negative) as within-subjects factors. The three causal-attribution and three responsibility-attribution ratings were the dependent variables. Significant main effects were found for all three independent variables: group,  $F(6, 68) = 4.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ; attribution target,  $F(6, 68) = 10.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and valence of behavior,  $F(6, 68) = 106.2$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, significant two-way interactions, which involved each of the independent variables, were also obtained. The second-order interaction was not significant. The mean scores pertaining to each cell of the design and the  $F$  ratios obtained for the first-order interactions are shown in Table 2. As the interactions qualify the interpretation of the main effects, we turn directly to them.

**Marital distress and self-partner attributions.** As predicted,

<sup>5</sup> The phrase *attribution of responsibility* is used in a more restricted manner than in Fincham's previous work. It approximates what has been referred to as moral responsibility (cf. Fincham & Jaspars, 1980). The use of a single, inclusive term to refer to several judgments relevant to the question of responsibility is not intended to deny the important conceptual distinctions that exist between them (see Shaver, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Although presented as Study 2 for conceptual reasons, this study was actually begun before Study 1. At that point, we were assessing the internal-external dimension with a single rating on a bipolar scale. Since that time, we have found that three separate ratings for the internal-external dimension as described in Study 1 are more appropriate (see Fincham, 1985a).

Table 2  
Means and Standard Deviations for Each Cell of the Study and *F* Ratios for First-Order Interactions

| Attribution                                | Positive behavior |                  |               |                  | Negative behavior |                  |               |                  | Interaction                |                             |                              |
|--|-------------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
|  | Distressed        |                  | Nondistressed |                  | Distressed        |                  | Nondistressed |                  | Group × Target<br><i>F</i> | Group × Valence<br><i>F</i> | Target × Valence<br><i>F</i> |
|  | Self-behavior     | Partner behavior | Self-behavior | Partner behavior | Self-behavior     | Partner behavior | Self-behavior | Partner behavior |                            |                             |                              |
| Causal attribution dimensions <sup>a</sup> |                   |                  |               |                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                            |                             |                              |
| Locus                                      |                   |                  |               |                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                            |                             |                              |
| <i>M</i>                                   | 9.38              | 13.53            | 9.46          | 12.95            | 10.22             | 12.86            | 12.23         | 13.51            | 1.18                       | 4.36*                       | 4.82*                        |
| <i>SD</i>                                  | 4.29              | 3.07             | 3.36          | 2.92             | 4.16              | 4.54             | 4.22          | 3.63             |                            |                             |                              |
| Stability                                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                            |                             |                              |
| <i>M</i>                                   | 15.75             | 15.92            | 17.54         | 17.82            | 14.39             | 15.69            | 14.41         | 14.38            | 1.13                       | 12.71**                     | <1                           |
| <i>SD</i>                                  | 3.01              | 3.06             | 3.31          | 2.66             | 3.27              | 2.85             | 3.23          | 3.00             |                            |                             |                              |
| Globality                                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                            |                             |                              |
| <i>M</i>                                   | 15.67             | 15.69            | 17.97         | 17.41            | 13.72             | 16.42            | 12.00         | 11.51            | 8.53**                     | 36.22**                     | 6.59*                        |
| <i>SD</i>                                  | 3.63              | 3.23             | 2.41          | 2.69             | 3.05              | 2.87             | 4.24          | 4.41             |                            |                             |                              |
| Responsibility attributions <sup>b</sup>   |                   |                  |               |                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                            |                             |                              |
| Intent                                     |                   |                  |               |                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                            |                             |                              |
| <i>M</i>                                   | 18.64             | 16.97            | 20.18         | 19.97            | 9.80              | 9.50             | 10.49         | 10.85            | 7.50**                     | 2.66                        | 5.10*                        |
| <i>SD</i>                                  | 2.92              | 3.59             | 1.33          | 1.49             | 3.25              | 2.64             | 2.28          | 2.96             |                            |                             |                              |
| Motivation                                 |                   |                  |               |                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                            |                             |                              |
| <i>M</i>                                   | 16.19             | 14.03            | 17.90         | 18.28            | 9.66              | 9.58             | 9.89          | 12.46            | 12.04**                    | 4.34**                      | 17.24*                       |
| <i>SD</i>                                  | 3.98              | 3.99             | 2.97          | 2.47             | 3.33              | 3.51             | 2.91          | 4.00             |                            |                             |                              |
| Blame/praise                               |                   |                  |               |                  |                   |                  |               |                  |                            |                             |                              |
| <i>M</i>                                   | 15.89             | 15.89            | 17.62         | 19.26            | 9.63              | 9.02             | 10.03         | 10.69            | 5.23**                     | 3.71                        | 2.96                         |
| <i>SD</i>                                  | 3.36              | 3.79             | 3.18          | 2.60             | 2.78              | 2.67             | 1.92          | 2.91             |                            |                             |                              |

<sup>a</sup> High scores indicate more internal, stable, and global attributions.

<sup>b</sup> Higher scores indicate more positive intent, unselfish motivation, and praise.

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

there was an interaction between marital group and attribution target,  $F(6, 68) = 3.51$ ,  $p < .005$ . Simple main-effect analyses were conducted to examine whether (a) self-partner differences in attributions were found in each group, (b) the groups differed in their attributions for partner behavior, and (c) the groups differed in regard to self-attributions. Univariate analyses were conducted, where appropriate, to examine overall findings in greater detail.

Regarding self-partner differences in attributions, simple main-effect analyses showed an attribution-target main effect for both the distressed,  $F(6, 68) = 7.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , and nondistressed,  $F(6, 68) = 6.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , groups. The only causal dimension on which self-partner differences were obtained was the global-specific dimension in the distressed group,  $F(1, 73) = 8.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ; attributions for partner behavior were seen as more global than self-attributions. However, the self-ratings ( $M = 15.67$ ) and partner ratings ( $M = 15.69$ ) for positive behavior were almost identical in this group. For responsibility attributions, distressed subjects considered their own behavior, relative to that of their partner, to reflect more positive intentions,  $F(1, 73) = 12.40$ ,  $p < .001$ , and unselfish motivation,  $F(1, 73) = 4.34$ ,  $p < .05$ . In contrast, nondistressed spouses viewed their partner's behavior as more unselfishly motivated,  $F(1, 73) = 8.07$ ,  $p < .01$ , and more praiseworthy than their own,  $F(1, 73) = 6.81$ ,  $p < .02$ . This pattern of findings suggests that both nondistressed and distressed persons manifest attributional biases, but in the opposite directions. For nondistressed spouses the bias is

a positive one in which attributions for partner behavior are more benign than for own behavior, whereas the reverse holds true for distressed subjects.

For partner behavior, a simple main effect was found that showed a difference in attributions between distressed and nondistressed groups,  $F(6, 68) = 5.87$ ,  $p < .001$ . Distressed subjects, relative to their nondistressed counterparts, made more destructive attributions for their partner's behavior (they saw causes as more global, inferred less positive intent and more selfish motivation, and considered the behavior less praiseworthy; corresponding *F* values were 7.94, 21.85, 26.21, and 23.37, respectively, and for all values  $p < .001$ ). However, for self-attributions, no significant simple main effect was found between distressed and nondistressed groups. This finding is consistent with that of Study 1. It contrasts with the group difference obtained by Kyle and Falbo (1985), which was, however, limited to the investigation of a single causal attribution dimension.

*Marital distress and attributions for positive versus negative behavior.* A significant interaction was obtained between the valence of the behavior for which attributions were made and marital distress,  $F(6, 68) = 7.5$ ,  $p < .001$ . Simple main-effect analyses regarding marital-group differences showed that distressed and nondistressed groups differed in regard to attributions for positive behavior,  $F(6, 68) = 5.92$ ,  $p < .001$ , and negative behavior,  $F(6, 68) = 3.72$ ,  $p < .005$ . As expected, nondistressed spouses made more benign attributions for positive

behavior than did distressed spouses (they saw causes as more global and stable, inferred unselfish motivation and positive intent, and deemed the behavior more praiseworthy; the  $F$  values associated with these effects were 13.20, 11.18, 21.42, 17.74, and 18.64, respectively, and for all values  $p < .001$ ). In a similar vein, compared with nondistressed persons, distressed spouses made more destructive attributions for negative behavior (they were more likely to locate the cause in the spouse, see it as global, infer selfish motivation, and assign more blame; corresponding  $F$  values were 4.11, 19.16, 5.60, and 4.83, respectively, and for all values  $p < .05$ ).

Attributional differences regarding positive and negative behavior were found to be significant for both distressed,  $F(6, 68) = 36.56, p < .001$ , and nondistressed,  $F(6, 68) = 78.81, p < .001$ , groups. However, the differences were less marked for the distressed group and occurred on fewer attribution dimensions. The valence of the behavior was not related to the causal-attribution ratings of distressed subjects but was associated with responsibility attributions (positive behaviors were considered to be more unselfishly motivated, positively intended, and praiseworthy, with  $F$  values of 123.84, 214.63, and 132.46, respectively; for all values  $p < .001$ ). For nondistressed subjects, the valence of the behavior affected both causal and responsibility attributions (the causes of positive behavior were rated as more stable and global, more unselfish motivation and positive intent were inferred, and the behavior was considered more praiseworthy; associated  $F$  values were 45.97, 93.78, 212.86, 309.78, and 217.82, respectively, and for all values  $p < .001$ ).

In sum, the attributions of distressed spouses were less benign than those made by nondistressed spouses and tended to show less differentiation between positive and negative behaviors.

*Self-partner attributions and positive versus negative behavior.* The interaction between attribution target and valence of behavior was also found to be significant,  $F(6, 68) = 8.04, p < .001$ . Although not directly relevant to marital distress, this finding is important because it demonstrates that what has been called the self-attribution bias also occurs in close relationships (Weary, 1979).

Simple main-effect analyses for attribution target revealed that self-attributions are more benign than partner attributions for both positive,  $F(6, 68) = 13.82, p < .001$ , and negative events,  $F(6, 68) = 6.01, p < .001$ . Overall, subjects made more benign attributions for their own behavior than their partner's behavior. For positive behavior, they saw themselves as having more positive intent and unselfish motivation and deserving greater praise ( $F$  values were 13.67, 4.94, and 14.04, respectively,  $p < .05$ ). For negative behavior, self-attributions were less global, but the motivation for the behavior was more selfish ( $F$  values were 7.03 and 7.29, respectively,  $p < .01$ ). In contrast to these findings, the cause of partner behavior was seen as more internal for both positive and negative behavior,  $F(1, 73) = 48.94$  and  $7.87$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ . According to a motivational bias interpretation, self-attributions should be more internal for positive behavior. The finding on this attribution dimension is consistent with the self-other difference predicted by Jones and Nisbett (1972) rather than that predicted by a motivational bias.

Simple main-effect analyses for the valence of the behavior, however, favor a motivational bias interpretation of this interac-

tion. Attributions for positive and negative behavior differed for both self,  $F(6, 68) = 96.94, p < .001$ , and partner,  $F(6, 68) = 63.84, p < .001$ . In both conditions, attributions for positive behavior as compared with negative behavior were seen as more stable ( $F$  values of 22.38 and 20.60,  $p < .001$ , for self and partner, respectively), global ( $F$  values of 64.39 and 23.04,  $p < .001$ , for self and partner, respectively), reflective of positive intent ( $F$  values of 495.09 and 319.87,  $p < .001$ , for self and partner, respectively), unselfishly motivated ( $F$  values of 293.42 and 141.92,  $p < .001$ , for self and partner, respectively), and deserving of more praise ( $F$  values of 238.35 and 273.72,  $p < .001$ , for self and partner, respectively). However, the differences between attributions for positive and negative behavior were more accentuated for self-attributions than for partner attributions. This finding is consistent with the view that spouses are influenced by concerns regarding self-presentation when making attributions in their relationships.

## General Discussion

### *Attributions for Partner Behavior and Self-Behavior*

These data replicate the findings of previous studies that report differences between nondistressed and distressed spouses in the causal attributions they make for partner behavior. Again, the global-specific dimension appears to be the most consistent in differentiating distressed from nondistressed spouses (Fincham et al., in press; Fincham & O'Leary, 1983; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985), although the groups have also been found to differ on both stable-unstable and internal-external dimensions (Baucom et al., 1982; Fincham, 1985a; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985; Jacobson et al., 1985).

Although the reason for the lack of consistency in findings regarding the stability dimension is not clear, where differences on this dimension have been obtained, distressed couples in the community who are not seeking treatment have been included in the study. It is possible that the very act of seeking marital therapy is inconsistent with viewing the causes of problem behavior as stable and that only spouses who do not seek therapy view the causes of their marital difficulties as stable. The lack of consistent findings on the internal-external dimension most likely reflects the inadequate conceptualization and measurement of this dimension at the dyadic level. A bipolar internal-external rating scale seems inadequate to capture the distinctions spouses make regarding the locus of causality for partner behavior in marriage. It seems important to consider the spouse, the self, the spouse in relation to the self (an interpersonal attribution; Newman, 1981), the relationship, and outside circumstances as potentially independent loci for the cause of spouse behavior (see Fincham, 1985a, for a discussion of this dimension).

Finally, the pattern of attributions found for partner behavior was somewhat similar for naturally occurring behavior and hypothetical behavior. In a similar vein, the same pattern of self-attributions was obtained for these two forms of behavior. These findings are consistent with those obtained in a study by Madden and Janoff-Bulman (1981) that showed no differences between wives' attributions for hypothetical vignettes of con-

flict situations and their attributions for actual conflicts they experienced with their husbands. Although not central to the issues investigated, this finding is important in assessing the validity of prior studies, most of which have asked spouses to imagine previously reported partner behaviors (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985) or hypothetical partner behaviors (Baucom et al., 1982; Doherty, 1982; Fincham et al., in press; Fincham & O'Leary, 1983).

Unlike attributions for partner behavior, self-attributions in distressed and nondistressed marriages have received little attention. No group difference for these attributions was found in our studies. However, this does not necessarily indicate that self-attributions are unrelated to marital satisfaction, as our findings may result from the fact that membership in a clinic or a community group does not always provide a veridical reflection of marital satisfaction. Thus, self-attributions may vary as a direct function of marital satisfaction when a more sensitive index of the latter is used (i.e., scores on a marital adjustment test). In any event, we have argued that self-attributions are important when they are considered in relation to attributions for partner behavior.

### *Self- Versus Partner Attributions*

As predicted, marital distress was related to self-partner attribution differences. Both distressed and nondistressed spouses were found to exhibit such differences. However, the direction of the discrepancy differed for each group. Distressed spouses made less benign attributions for their partner's behavior than their own behavior, a pattern referred to earlier as a negative attribution bias. In contrast, nondistressed spouses showed a positive attribution bias, as they made more benign attributions for their partner's behavior than their own behavior. It is precisely this pattern of attributions that is likely to maximize the impact of negative partner behavior for distressed spouses and positive partner behavior for nondistressed spouses. That is, distressed spouses may discredit positive spouse behavior, because they do not believe it matches the motivation that characterizes their own behavior, and instead focus on negative partner behavior. The discrepancy between partner attributions and self-attributions for such behavior is likely to result in a strong affective response and reciprocation of the negative behavior. A sense of righteousness on the part of each spouse would not be surprising (e.g., "I am not motivated by such selfish concerns"), and this may account in part for the long chains of negative interchanges (e.g., "she/he is not going to get away with it") that distinguish distressed from nondistressed spouses (Gottman, 1979). On the other hand, the positive attribution bias of nondistressed spouses will lead them to minimize the impact of negative partner behavior and focus on positive behavior. These partner behaviors most likely result in warm, positive responses and a sense of relationship well-being that allows each spouse to exchange positive behaviors noncontingently (Gottman et al., 1976). Too great a positive attribution bias could, however, result in individual self-esteem problems for the spouse who might feel excessively indebted to the partner and unable to match his or her standards.

### *Clinical Relevance*

These data are consistent with the viewpoint just articulated, but the findings do not provide information on the processes that give rise to the significance accorded to partner attributions. Thus, although plausible, the processes described require direct investigation. Nonetheless, the biases found may have an important clinical implication. They suggest that it is insufficient to help distressed spouses make similar attributions for self- and partner behavior. Rather, marital satisfaction seems to be associated with viewing the partner's behavior through rose-colored glasses and making attributions accordingly. It therefore may be difficult to alter attributions directly when this is the goal of the intervention. However, initial changes in attributions may be affected directly by helping distressed spouses to make at least equally benign attributions for their own and their partner's behavior. Moreover, the results obtained in regard to the responsibility attributions point to the importance of accountability in marriage. Clinically, this suggests that attribution-related interventions focus on responsibility attributions as well as causal attributions (see Fincham, 1985b).

### *Relevance for Research on Actor-Observer Attribution Differences*

No evidence was obtained for the actor-observer attribution differences (Jones & Nisbett, 1972) noted in prior attribution research or for the simple positivity effect (good behaviors are attributed to persons, whereas bad behaviors are attributed to situational circumstances) found in research involving close relationships (Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976).<sup>7</sup> It therefore appears that the conditions under which there is a pervasive tendency to attribute another's actions to stable personal dispositions while attributing one's own similar actions to situational requirements is actually more complicated than Jones and Nisbett (1972) have suggested. Our findings suggest that at the very least the valence of the behavior and the quality of the relationship between the observer and actor need to be taken into account.

### *Causal Versus Responsibility Attributions*

These results also constitute further evidence that points to the need to broaden attribution research in marriage to include attributions of responsibility. Unlike causal attributions, which identify the factor(s) producing an outcome or behavior, responsibility attributions concern the acceptability of the outcome or behavior according to a set of standards or normative criteria. In marriage such criteria are often implicit and constitute the expectations spouses have for each other's behavior. Thus, a causal attribution may often result from an inquiry as to why the partner's behavior violated the attributor's expectations, which involves the issue of accountability or responsibility. The exact conditions under which causal and responsibility attributions overlap in this way remains to be determined. The causal-attribution differences found between distressed and nondistressed spouses may occur only when such attributions entail

<sup>7</sup> Here the term *positivity effect* refers to several causal attribution dimensions as well as to attributions of responsibility.

an evaluative component, a contention that may account for inconsistent results obtained for these attributions.

### Conclusion

The attributions of nondistressed spouses distinguished between positive and negative behavior more strongly than did those of distressed spouses. This is similar to findings regarding attribution style in nondepressed and depressed persons (Peterson & Seligman, 1984) and is important because depression is known to occur fairly frequently in maritally distressed spouses (Beach, Jouriles, & O'Leary, 1985). It is therefore possible that maritally distressed spouses may simply manifest the general attributional style associated with depression (Peterson, Villanova, & Raps, 1984). This possibility could materially alter the conceptualization of what appears to be a marital problem. Future research on attribution processes in distressed and nondistressed spouses should therefore assess whether the attributions found are specific to the relationship or part of a general attributional style. The self-partner attribution differences found also need to be replicated in a more naturalistic context, and the processes that give rise to the differences require further investigation. Despite these limitations, our studies provide data that point to the importance of partner and self-attributions in providing a more complete account of attribution processes in distressed and nondistressed spouses.

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