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CAUSAL INFERENCES FOR SPOUSE BEHAVIOR IN MARITALLY DISTRESSED AND NONDISTRESSED COUPLES

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This study investigated the causal inferences made by maritally distressed and nondistressed spouses regarding their partners' positive and negative behavior. The partners in 32 marital couples rated the most likely cause of hypothesized actions by their spouses on several dimensions, indicated the feeling evoked by each action, and stated what they would do in response to it. For positive acts, the nondistressed group rated inferred causes as more global and controllable, whereas distressed spouses considered the causes more global for negative behavior. Results from both regression and path analyses suggest that affective responses are more important than are causal attributions in predicting behavior. These results are discussed in relation to the emerging literature on cognitive marital therapy, and their therapeutic implications are outlined.

Marital therapists have recently begun to pay more explicit attention to the role of cognitive variables in producing and maintaining marital distress (Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981; Jacobson, 1978; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Weiss, 1978). This attention has focused mainly on the causal inferences spouses make regarding each other's behavior and reflects, in part, the influence of attribution theory in contemporary social psychology. The interest in spouses' attributions is based on two assumptions: first, that maritally distressed spouses arrive at different explanations for their partners' behavior than do their nondistressed counterparts; second, that these inferences influence their subsequent responses to such behavior. An attempt is made to address both these assumptions in the present study.

Unfortunately, statements on the role of causal inferences in distressed

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marriages and families (e.g., Doherty, 1981a, 1981b; Gelles & Straus, 1979; Hotaling, 1980; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Newman, 1981) lack a firm data base as little empirical work has been conducted since Wright and Fichten (1976) first noted the absence of research in this area. Nonetheless, causal attributions figure prominently even in behavioral treatment strategies (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979), and Baucom (1981) has recently formulated a treatment program that specifically teaches couples how causal attributions affect their relationship.[1] This development can be perhaps best understood by reference to Heider's (1958) original formulation, which gave birth to attribution theory.

According to Heider, people make sense of the world by drawing causal connections between variable, transient events and relatively stable, invariant ones. Heider's ensuing analysis of phenomenal causality rests on the premise that naive or common-sense psychology provides valuable insights. It is the subsequent face validity of attributional formulations that is beguiling and may partly account for their acceptance in the marital literature. Indeed, the intuitive appeal of attributional formulations often relies on implicit and unarticulated assumptions. This is apparent, for example, when terms such as "cause," "blame," and "responsibility" are used interchangeably in arguing that distressed spouses see each other as the source of their marital problems. Yet there is evidence to suggest that people respond differently to these questions (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Schultz & Schleifer, 1983). In any event, such claims are empirical ones, and we are not aware of any research that explicitly investigates whether distressed couples do in fact differ from nondistressed couples in terms of the causal inferences they may for spouse behaviors.

There is, however, some indirect evidence on this question. A familiar idea in the attribution literature is that observers tend to overestimate the dispositional causes of an actor's behavior (Heider, 1958; Ross, 1977). On the other hand, the actor tends to focus more on the situational determinants of his or her behavior (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Orvis, Kelley, and Butler (1976) found such differences in dating couples regarding negative behavior over which partners disagreed. In a subsequent study, Passer, Kelley, and Michela (1978) found that the attitude displayed toward the partner (positive vs. negative) is an important dimension along which perceived causes vary. One might therefore speculate that distressed spouses make more negatively valanced causal inferences than do nondistressed spouses for their partners' behavior. Research on conflict in dating couples

1. The notion that distressed couples exhibit idiosyncratic attribution patterns is not unique to behavioral marital therapy. In family therapy, for example, the technique of "reframing" or "redefining" (Minuchin, 1974), while not couched in attribution terms, in effect constitutes a form of reattribution that enhances a sense of mastery over the family problem.

and roommates (Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978; Sillars, 1981) provides indirect evidence on this question, in that respondents tended to overattribute causal responsibility to their partner and underestimate their own contributions. Moreover, Sillars (1981) found in two studies that this tendency, as well as the tendency to see the conflict as stable, was greatest when relationship satisfaction was lower, when the conflicts were important, and when their frequency was high. Each of the last three factors is relevant to marital distress.

Two studies have examined attributions made by married persons. Madden and Janoff-Bulman (1981) interviewed wives ($n = 31$) in a college community and found that blaming one's spouse for marital problems was negatively associated with marital satisfaction. They also found that perceived personal control over conflicts was positively associated with marital satisfaction. Unfortunately, their idiosyncratic sample (all were college-educated, had high socioeconomic status, and had a very restricted range of marital satisfaction), together with the use of a nonstandardized measure of marital satisfaction, limits the utility of their results. The second study is similarly problematic. Doherty (1982) used newlywed subjects and measured causal inferences indirectly via responses to vignettes portraying hypothetical persons. His study is, however, of interest, as it explicitly investigates the implications of causal attributions for future behavior. Again, this was done indirectly. Wives' tendency to verbalize a negative intention or trait on the part of a story character was positively associated with observed negative criticism of the spouse ($r = .32$) and self-reported "angry responses" to coercive statements by the spouse ($r = .29$). No relationship was found for husbands. Sillar's (1981) data on roommate conflict are similarly suggestive in that blaming one's roommate was associated with conflict escalation, although the direction of causality is unclear.

EXPERIMENTAL OVERVIEW

This study attempted to address the lacunae described above by examining distressed and nondistressed spouses' causal inferences regarding their partners' positive and negative behavior. Rather than focus on the content of such inferences or simply the "dispositional–situational" or "internal–external" nature of these causes, we examined several underlying dimensions of perceived causality. First, subjects were asked to what extent the causes reflected something about their spouses versus something about themselves, other people, or the circumstances. The next two dimensions were derived from Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale's (1978) reformulation of Kelley's (1967) covariation model of causal attribution. The "stable–unstable" dimension refers to the extent that the cause is likely to be manifest on future occasions when the behavior occurs, whereas the "global–specific" dimension reflects the extent to which the cause is viewed as specific to the behavior described, as opposed to global and therefore affecting other areas of the marriage. The final dimension was that of "controllable–uncontrollable." This dimension was included because Weiner (1979) has found it to be an important one in his work on achievement motivation, and its relevance in the present context is indicated by Madden and Janoff-Bulman's (1981) findings. It assessed the extent to which the respondent perceived that the cause could be controlled.

In view of the dearth of previous data, specific hypotheses were not formulated. However, it was speculated that distressed couples might make more stable, spouse, global, and controllable attributions for negative behaviors than their nondistressed counterparts might. Such attributions carry important implications for future behavior and would therefore be consistent with the fact that distressed spouses track negative behaviors and respond negatively to them (Jacobson, Waldron, & Moore, 1980; Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974). Conversely, for positive behaviors, perceived causes may be viewed as more external to the spouse, specific, unstable, and uncontrollable by distressed spouses. The inverse patterns should obtain for nondistressed couples, as they tend to track and reciprocate positive behaviors (Jacobson *et al.*, 1980; Wills *et al.*, 1974).

Finally, the feelings evoked by the hypothesized behavior and the action taken in response to it were evaluated. On an intuitive level, one might expect that causal perceptions that are more stable and global and that implicate the spouse are likely to evoke negative affect and punishing responses for negative spouse behavior, whereas they are likely to lead to positive affect and rewarding responses when the spouse's behavior is positive.[2] The usefulness of the attribution dimensions and feelings in predicting the specified behavioral response was evaluated, and specific causal models were tested.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The distressed group comprised 16 couples who had come to the University Marital Clinic at Stony Brook for marital therapy and had completed an intake interview. However, it should be noted that none of the couples

2. Doherty (1981a, 1981b) has explicitly hypothesized some of these relationships in discussing conflict in intimate relationships.

was associated with the university. This group completed their participation in the study prior to beginning therapy.

The couples had been married for an average of 8 years and had an average gross family income of $21,512 per year. Fourteen of these couples had children. Husbands averaged 33.7 years of age and 14.1 years of formal education. Five had been married previously. Of the wives in the distressed sample, five had also had previous marriages. As a group, they averaged 31.6 years of age and had an average of 13.2 years of formal education. On the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), a widely used self-report measure of marital satisfaction, husbands averaged 76.1 (range = 31–121) and wives averaged 65.4 (range = 10–114).

Inclusion in the nondistressed sample required that neither partner in a couple have a score of less than 110 on the Marital Adjustment Test. Couples were recruited by an advertisement in a local newspaper that asked for volunteers to participate in a study on marriage. All respondents were sent a demographic questionnaire and the Marital Adjustment Test. Those couples who met the criterion of a test score over 110 were then contacted and asked to come to the clinic for a single appointment. No information was given regarding the inclusion criteria for the study, and all couples agreed to participate. They were paid $20.00 upon completion of the study.

The nondistressed couples had been married an average of 9.9 years and had an average gross annual income of $24,500. In this sample, 12 couples had children. The husbands averaged 33.5 years of age and had an average of 15.3 years of education. Only one had been married previously. The wives' mean age and education was 30.8 and 14.1 years respectively, and two had been married previously. Marital Adjustment Test scores averaged 124.6 (range = 110–155) for husbands and 127.4 (range = 117–140) for wives.

There were no significant differences between the groups on age, years married, years of education, number of children, and family income. As might be expected, however, Marital Adjustment Test scores did discriminate between the two groups in the predicted direction, $F(1, 60) = 109.5$, $p < .001$. No sex or interaction effect was found on this measure.

MATERIALS

In addition to completing the Marital Adjustment Test and providing demographic information, each subject was given an attribution questionnaire. This scale consisted of 12 hypothetical situations, six describing positive actions by the spouse and six depicting negative acts. Commonly occurring acts were chosen to maximize the likelihood that subjects had at some point experienced them in their relationships. The items chosen reflected the various categories of marital behavior included in the daily checklists that have been used in behavioral marital therapy (Weiss & Perry, 1979). Hence items representing the domains of consideration/communication (e.g., your spouse pays careful attention to what you are saying—4 items), affection/sex (e.g., your spouse responds positively to your physical affection—4 items), instrumental activities (e.g., your spouse completes all his or her chores—2 items), and independence (e.g., your spouse includes you in an "outside" or extramarital activity—2 items) were used. Each domain contained an equal number of positive and negative actions. The format of the questionnaire was similar to that used in research on attribution styles and depression (cf. Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979). Hence, for each action portrayed, each subject was asked to name the one major cause for the spouse's behavior. The subject then rated each cause on 7-point scales as to whether it reflected something about the spouse and whether it was stable, global, or controllable by either spouse. It was anticipated that distressed and nondistressed spouses might differ in the degree of certainty with which they made causal inferences about their spouses' behavior. Hence the certainty with which subjects inferred causes was also assessed. If necessary, these ratings could be used to weight the above attribution judgments appropriately.

Each subject was also asked to react to the spouse's hypothetical behavior by stating two feelings he or she had in relation to each act. Subjects then gave an overall rating of their feelings regarding the act on a 7-point scale ranging from "extremely negative" to "extremely positive." Finally, subjects stated what they would do in response to each act by completing the item "I would . . . ." They then rated each action on a 7-point scale with "extremely punishing" and "extremely rewarding" as endpoints.

The following instructions were given for completing the scale and appeared on the first page of the questionnaire:

> Please try to vividly imagine yourself in the situations that follow. Each describes an action by your spouse that involves you. If such an event happened to you, what do you feel would have caused it? While events may have many causes, we want you to pick only one—the major cause if this happened to *you*. Please write this cause in the blank provided after each event. Next, we would like you to answer some questions about the *cause* and to state how the behavior described makes you feel. Finally, you are asked to provide your most likely response to the event. Several events are described. When you have completed your responses to one event proceed to the next. Please answer *all* the questions pertaining to each situation.

The final scale administered was the short form of the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, 1967). This measure was included because there is recent evidence relating attribution styles to depression (Seligman *et al.*,

1979). It is therefore conceivable that causal attributions made in response to actions by one's spouse may be part of a more general attribution style and may simple reflect the individual's depression. The inclusion of this measure allowed the relationship between the attribution dimensions and depression to be evaluated.

PROCEDURE

As part of the intake procedure, couples coming to the University Marital Clinic routinely complete an assessment battery that includes a demographic questionnaire, the Marital Adjustment Test and the Beck Depression Inventory. At the end of the intake interview, the attribution scale was given to the couple and the directions for completing it were discussed. Nondistressed couples completed this questionnaire and the Beck Depression Inventory when they came to the clinic. Couples in both groups were given the chance to clarify any uncertainties they might have in completing their tasks. They were alerted to the fact that some questions pertained to the cause of the act described, whereas others referred to the action itself. The point at which this change occurred was marked for the first item in their questionnaire. Completion of the attribution questionnaire took 40–60 minutes.

RESULTS

The causes provided by subjects varied widely. For example, the event "Your spouse compliments you on your appearance" yielded responses such as "She always notices the way I look," "He wanted me to feel good," "Because he was in a good mood," "He is polite," and "Because I looked good." The causes were not formally analyzed, as there did not appear to be any obvious pattern to them and as they were solicited merely to obtain subjective ratings on the causal dimensions investigated.

Responses on each of the questions in the attribution scale were summed across the six positive spouse behaviors and six negative spouse behaviors to yield more reliable measures. Thus subjects obtained two subscale scores for each question, one pertaining to positive actions and one regarding negative acts. Table 1 shows the reliability (coefficient alpha) of each attribution subscale. The reliabilities of these subscales are satisfactory and somewhat higher than those reported for the similar attribution-style questionnaire (Seligman *et al.*, 1979) used in depression research.

These attribution data were analyzed in a series of 2 (distressed vs. nondistressed) × 2 (male vs. female) analyses of variance.[3] A similar analysis of the certainty with which subjects inferred causes yielded no significant results. Consequently, unweighted raw scores were used in these analyses. In regard to positive acts, differences between the two groups were found on the dimensions of globality, $F(1, 60) = 5.94$, $p < .02$, and controllability, $F(1, 60) = 11.16$, $p < .001$. As might be expected, nondistressed spouses saw the causes of positive acts as being more global and more controllable than did their distressed counterparts. No other significant main effects or interactions were obtained. For negative acts, the two groups differed only in relation to the perceived globality of the cause, $F(1, 60) = 21.7$, $p < .001$, as distressed couples considered the cause to be more global than nondistressed couples. Distressed couples also tended to rate the cause as more controllable ($p < .10$). Again, no other significant main effects or interactions were found.

It is worth noting that the groups differed in the feelings evoked by both positive acts, $F(1, 60) = 14.7$, $p < .001$, and negative acts, $F(1, 60) = 5.6$, $p < .025$. Similar differences were found for behavioral responses to positive, $F(1, 60) = 13.5$, $p < .001$, and negative acts, $F(1, 60) = 6.6$, $p < .025$. Nondistressed spouses felt more positive and were more rewarding in response to positive acts by their spouses. A similar pattern obtained for negative acts in that distressed spouses responded with more negative feelings and more punishing actions.

In order to examine the second issue addressed (viz., the relationship between causal attributions and stated behavior), regression analyses were conducted. The attribution dimensions were used to predict stated behavior. Given the nature of the controllability question, which asked about either spouse's control over the cause, this variable was not used in the regression analyses, as it carried no clear implications for responses to a spouse. Feeling ratings were included in the regression equations to examine the relative efficacy of cognitive and affective responses in predicting behavior. Owing to the sample size, these analyses were done with the

TABLE 1
Coefficient Alpha for the Subscales of the Attribution Questionnaire

	ATTRIBUTION DIMENSION			
BEHAVIOR	SPOUSE	STABILITY	GLOBALITY	CONTROL
Positive	.71	.69	.61	.79
Negative	.68	.58	.73	.67

3. A multivariate analysis of variance was not conducted, despite an inflated Type 1 error rate, as linear combinations of the variables were not of interest.

TABLE 2
Usefulness Indexes of Attribution Dimensions and Feelings

BEHAVIOR	R^2	SPOUSE	STABLE	GLOBAL	FEELING
Positive	.508**	.005	.037*	.003	.272**
Negative	.469**	.002	.004	.000	.406**

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .001$.

two groups combined. Separate analyses were done for positive and negative subscales. Both regression equations predicted a significant proportion of the variance in behavioral judgments ($p < .01$). The "usefulness" of each predictor was computed to assess the relative importance of each variable. The usefulness index is the amount R^2 would drop if the predictor were removed from the regression equation and the remaining variables were appropriately reweighted[4] (Darlington, 1968). As the test of zero usefulness is equivalent to the hypothesis that the variable has a population beta weight of zero, it can be tested for significance in the same way. Table 2 shows the R^2 values and usefulness indexes for the two equations. Affect accounted for over half the explained variance in both analyses, while the only significant attribution dimension was perceived stability. However, it was only important in relation to positive behavior and accounted for less than 4% of the total variance.

Further examination of these data was undertaken via path analysis. Specifically, single-step causal models, in which attributions determined judged behavioral responses, were compared to ones that included feeling as an additional intermediate variable. The increased proportion of variance in behavior judgments accounted for by the latter was significant in both positive, 27%, F (1, 59) = 31.5, $p < .001$, and negative, 41%, F (1, 59) = 45, $p < .001$, cases. In addition, a restricted model (in which there are more equations than unknowns) was contrasted with a saturated model (in which the number of equations and unknowns are equal, producing a unique solution). The former (see Figure 1) specified that attribution dimensions determine feeling responses, which, in turn, determine behavior. In the saturated model, three additional paths connecting the attribution dimensions and behavior directly are postulated. The large sample chi-square

4. When predictors are not intercorrelated, the usefulness index is simply the square of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient between the predictor and the criterion; when predictors are intercorrelated, the usefulness index constitutes the amount of variance accounted for in the criterion variable by the predictor variable, given all the other variables. Close examination shows that the usefulness index is equivalent to the square of the semipartial correlation coefficient in such cases.

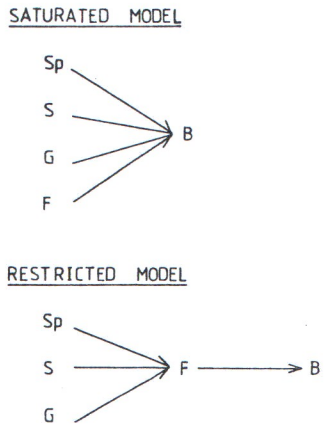

FIGURE 1
Path Diagrams of Relationships between Attribution Dimensions of Spouse as Perceived Cause (Sp), Stability of Cause (S), Globality of Cause (G), Feelings (F), and Behavior (B).

values (Kim & Kohout, 1970), which tested the difference between the relative amounts of variance accounted for by the two models, were nonsignificant—positive acts, $\chi^2(3) = .02$, $p > .10$; negative acts, $\chi^2(3) = .01$, $p > .10$—indicating that the additional direct paths between the attribution dimensions and behavior in the saturated model failed to contribute significantly to the predictive power of the restricted linear model.

In view of the above finding, it is reasonable to examine the extent to which the attribution dimensions predict feeling responses. Table 3 shows that causal inferences accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in affect only in the case of positive acts. Perceived stability of the cause was a significant predictor, together with perceived globality.

A final question examined is the relationship between the attribution measures and depression. The Pearson product-moment correlations between the four attribution dimensions and Beck Depression Inventory scores were computed for both positive and negative acts. Of the eight correlations computed, only that between the perceived controllability of positive causes and depression was significant, r (64) = .258, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Partial support was obtained for the position that distressed and nondistressed couples differ in the nature of the causal attributions they make for spouse behavior. However, consistent differences were found only on the perceived globality of the cause; distressed couples considered the causes

TABLE
Usefulness Indexes of Attributional Dimensions

FEELING	R^2	SPOUSE	STABILITY	GLOBALITY
Positive	.258***	.020	.133**	.057*
Negative	.098	.031	.017	.060*

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

of negative spouse behaviors to affect various areas of their marriage, whereas causes of positive acts were seen as specific to the action portrayed. The other dimension on which the groups differed was controllability. Causes of positive events were seen as less controllable by distressed than by nondistressed spouses, while there was a tendency for distressed spouses to view causes of negative acts as more controllable. This result seems to contradict Madden and Janoff-Bulman's (1981) finding that marital satisfaction is positively associated with wives' perceived control over marital problems. The contradiction is, however, more apparent than real. The question used to tap this dimension in the present study precludes a direct comparison, as it does not specify the source of control. Consequently, responses may reflect, *inter alia*, a spouse's estimate of the partner's ability to control the cause of his or her behavior. To the extent that this is the case, distressed spouses' causal inferences are likely to confirm their dissatisfaction.

The above findings have two noteworthy implications. First, they suggest that distressed spouses are more willing to discredit positive spouse behavior (i.e., to see them as specific, beyond control), regardless of its attributed source. This implies that therapeutic attempts to increase positive behavior should not end when the behavior is manifest. Rather, further effort needs to be expended on the recipient spouse's processing of these changes to ensure that they are not discredited. For example, a spouse may believe that the partner changes his or her behavior just for the therapist, and that such changes will consequently be restricted to the areas dealt with in therapy. The importance of this issue is emphasized by the fact that such behavioral changes are explicit goals in the early stages of behavioral marital therapy (cf. Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Stuart, 1980).

Second, the causal analysis of negative acts yields more information for distressed couples, as causes are seen to affect other areas of the marriage and tend to be considered more controllable. Consequently, a distressed spouse is more likely to focus on the causes of negative actions, increasing the probability that they will be communicated to the partner and become part of the conflict between them. In a similar vein, nondistressed spouses are more likely to discuss the causes of positive spouse actions (seen as global and controllable). Such a pattern would be consistent with behavioral findings which show that distressed couples tend to track and respond to negative behavior, whereas nondistressed couples focus on positive actions (Jacobson *et al.*, 1980; Wills *et al.*, 1974). Further research is needed to determine whether these patterns do in fact occur.

Given the widespread belief that partners in a distressed marriage blame each other for their problems, the lack of a group difference on the dimension of spouse versus self, others, or circumstances is significant. Clearly, differences on this dimension and the stability dimension would have further strengthened the arguments made thus far. Several factors may account for the present findings. First, nearly all the acts used as stimuli were intentional ones and therefore implied attribution to the actor. Second, Kelley (1979) notes that couples describe relationship problems in nonspecific, general terms that contrast with the specific, discrete behaviors used as stimuli. It is possible that distressed and nondistressed couples do not differ when making causal inferences regarding such discrete behaviors, but that they may do so when judging global relationship problems. Third, the present task required deliberate causal analysis of spouse behavior, which could have attenuated differences that exist between the groups when more automatic, implicit attributions are examined (cf. Newman, 1981). Fourth, the attribution patterns which couples typically exhibit in their relationship may only be evident in relation to behavior which is salient to them, and not in relation to hypothetical actions. Finally, and perhaps most important, this study examined *causal* inferences and not perceived blame. Previous research shows that people respond differently to questions of cause and blame (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Fincham & Shultz, 1981; Shultz & Schleifer, 1983). Even though judgments of blame tend to entail judgments of causality, blame is assigned even when a causal analysis yields ambiguous results (cf. Fincham & Jaspars, 1980).

The relationship among various concepts used in the literature is also relevant to understanding the implications of causal attributions for behavior. In the present study, causal attributions predicted a significant proportion of the variance in behavioral responses for positive spouse behavior but not for negative spouse behavior. This finding runs counter to intuition and contradicts Doherty's (1981a, 1981b) theoretical analysis, which directly links causal perceptions regarding conflict to subsequent behavior. Again, however, previous data point to the importance of the construct measured, as it has been found that causal perceptions do not have a direct causal impact on judgments of restitution or punishment, but are instead mediated by judgments of blame (Fincham, 1980; Fincham & Shultz, 1981). It therefore appears that perceived blame may emerge as a

more important variable not only in distin... distressed and nondistressed groups, but also in predicting behavioral responses.

In addition, path analysis suggested that direct links between the causal dimensions and behavior were superfluous and that their effect was mediated by the affective response to the act. Feelings were, in turn, predicted by causal inferences only in the case of positive acts. It therefore appears that causal inferences add little to an understanding of affective and behavioral responses to negative acts. These data imply that responses to negative acts may be more immediate and involve less causal processing. This has three noteworthy implications. First, behavioral responses to negative actions are more likely to be based on the history of negative behavior exchange that couples have experienced; this supports the notion that behavior change should become an important initial goal in therapy. Second, it should not be assumed that reattribution in therapy leads to affective changes. Rather the modification of affect may need to be directly addressed. Third, to the extent that causal inferences are important, more implicit and automatic processes need to be examined (Newman, 1981). Hence explicitly examining latent causal assumptions regarding negative spouse behavior may be important therapeutically (Fincham, in press).

The relationship found among causal dimensions, affect, and stated behavior is heuristically important but should nonetheless be viewed with some caution. It is possible that the nature of this relationship changes as a function of variables that were not specifically investigated in this study. For example, the correlation between attributional and affective responses may increase as the actions judged become more conflictual. Similarly, it could be argued that the relationship between affect and behavior was inflated by the fact that both were measured by concrete, verbal responses and might therefore reflect subtle demand characteristics. In contrast, the causal attributions were more abstract, which may have attenuated the correlation with stated behavior. Moreover, it is quite possible that different results pertain to the relationship between attributions and real behavior. Clearly, research is needed to investigate these empirical issues. The value of such research is further emphasized by the need to replicate the results of the path analysis with a larger sample. Finally, it should be noted that the results of the path analysis are consistent with additional causal models that may be of interest. For example, a model that specifies feelings as the cause of attributions and behavior cannot be ruled out by the present data. This is an important consideration, as Newman (1981) has specifically suggested such a possibility in her attributional analysis of communication in intimate relationships. Further attempts to examine the causal relationship among causal attributions, affect, and behavior should therefore assess more complex bidirectional path models.

In sum, the present study represents a first step in the empirical evaluation of causal attributions in distressed and nondistressed marriages. Despite its limitations, the study has several important implications for the emerging literature on cognitive variables in marital distress. First, current writings focus exclusively on conflict or negative interaction. The present results redress this imbalance and point to differences between distressed and nondistressed groups regarding positive spouse behavior. The implications for therapy merit further attention. Second, most emphasis has been placed on inferences relating to the spouse as the source of events, which mirrors the overemphasis on the "dispositional–situational" or "internal–external" dimension of causes that has been common in clinical applications of attribution theory (Fincham, in press). However, the present study points to the importance of other causal dimensions. Finally, little support was obtained for the widespread notion that causal inferences influence responses to spouse behavior. While practical application cannot always await research, some caution is indicated lest the growth of cognitive marital therapy outstrip its empirical mandate.

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