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## SEE IT FROM MY POINT OF VIEW: VIDEOTAPE AND ATTRIBUTIONS IN HAPPY AND DISTRESSED COUPLES

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Two studies addressed the following questions: (1) Do husbands and wives from happy and distressed marriages differ in how they perceive and make causal attributions about their own and their spouse's behaviors, and (2) does alteration of visual perspective through videotape alter biased perceptual and attributional evaluations? A total of 58 married couples discussed problems in their relationships. Discussions of distressed couples were videotaped from three vantage points. Some subjects saw no videotape. Others viewed videotapes of their discussions from their own, their spouses', or an observer's vantage point. Spouses made perceptual and attributional ratings concerning their own and their partners' behaviors before and after the videotape intervention. Results indicate that while there were few differences between happy spouses' perceptions and attributions about themselves and their partners, distressed spouses' ratings of both themselves and their partners were distorted in a self-serving manner. Visual reorientation had no effect on evaluations of either oneself or one's spouse among distressed subjects. The implications of the findings for behavioral couple therapy and for the study of mechanisms underlying self-serving perceptual and attributional biases are discussed.

Couple therapists have long recognized that faulty self- and interpersonal perception and cross-blaming characterize partners in distressed relationships and often interfere with behaviorally oriented couples

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therapy (Wright & Fichten, 1976). Only recently, however, have spouses' faulty perceptions and cross-blaming causal attributions been considered appropriate targets for investigation and modification (e.g., Epstein, 1982). Little is known about maladaptive cognitions in distressed relationships or about how best to change them.

### ATTRIBUTIONAL PROCESSES

Studies of actor-observer attributional biases have demonstrated that actors are more likely to attribute their own behavior to situational requirements and less likely to attribute their behavior to dispositional causes than are observers (cf. Watson, 1982). Actors' attributions have also been shown to be self-serving, as they accept more responsibility for their successes than for their failures; observers usually accord less credit and more blame to actors than actors attribute to themselves (cf. L. Ross, 1977).

Motivational, information-processing, and self-enhancement explanations for attributional biases have been proposed. The motivational explanation stresses bias that is due to unconscious protection and enhancement of self-esteem. According to the information-processing view, self-serving biases occur because people usually intend and expect success, and are thus more likely to note covariation between their behaviors and positive outcomes. The self-presentation explanation views self-serving biases as conscious distortions intended to enhance public self-image (Riess, Rosenfeld, Melburg, & Tedeschi, 1981). Understanding these processes and how they influence attributions is both theoretically and practically important.

A number of variables that affect attributional tendencies have been identified. Of prime importance to the present investigation are these: the observer's attitude toward the actor, the nature of the interaction, and the attentional focus of each person.

Observers tend to make dispositional attributions for positive and situational attributions for negative behaviors of people whom they like. The reverse is true for those whom they dislike (D. T. Regan, Straus, & Fazio, 1974). Spouses from happier marriages attribute greater responsibility for positive acts, and lesser for negative ones, to their partners than spouses from poorer relationships (Thompson & Kelley, 1981). Nevertheless, defensive and self-justificatory attributions characterize spouses' attributions for conflict in both well-adjusted (Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976) and separated couples (Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978). In judgments concerning causes of interpersonal behavior, especially negative acts, partners' attitudes toward each other seem to be important.

When two people interact, each is both an actor and an active ob-

server of the other. During conflict, actor-observer differences are accentuated (Miller & Norman, 1975). Both conflict and the actions of each participant can be attributed to the actor's characteristics, to the active observer's characteristics, or to situational factors external to the dyad. Since the active observer can blame the other person for his or her (the observer's) own failures or can take credit for the other's successes, the observer's attributions can also reflect self-serving bias.

Several studies have found that actor-observer biases can be modified by altering the focus of attention through videotape, cognitive set, or self-focusing manipulation (e.g., Arkin & Duval, 1975; T. Regan & Totten, 1975; Storms, 1973). Others have not been able to replicate these results (e.g., Biggs, 1977; Ellis & Holmes, 1982; Taylor & Fiske, 1975).

Although the research is riddled with paradigmatic differences, variations in the type of attributions studied, and failures to replicate results, it does appear that (1) observers give more credit to people whom they like and attribute more blame to those whom they dislike; (2) active observation of an actor engaged in conflictual interaction may cause the observer to make attributions in a self-serving manner; (3) focusing attention on an individual affects attributions about that person's behavior; (4) observers attribute more dispositional causation, personal responsibility, and control over interaction to actors than actors are willing to assume; and (5) actors who are turned into observers of their own behavior by self-focused attention or by visual reorientation through videotape may make attributions that resemble those of observers.

One should take care, however, in generalizing these conclusions to attributions made by spouses. Spouses have much information about each other. During interaction, each is an actor as well as an active observer of the partner. Interaction can be conflictual or cooperative. Each spouse can emit positive and negative behaviors. Moreover, spouses may like or dislike each other. Thus, variables that affect college-student actors' and observers' attributions may not apply to married partners.

### SOCIAL PERCEPTION

Attributions are inferences about the causes of events that have been perceived. That perceptions of behavior can be affected by cognitive and motivational biases has been well documented (e.g., Howard & Rothbart, 1980). Yet the relationship between distorted perceptions and attributions has been infrequently studied. Attributional biases may be mere reflections of distortions in what is actually perceived. If perceptions can systematically influence spouses' attributions, behavioral couple therapists must understand the perceptual as well as attributional biases in both happy and distressed married partners.

## STUDY 1

One goal of Study 1 was to investigate perceptual and attributional differences between spouses from happy and spouses from distressed relationships. Spouses completed trait ratings and questionnaires concerning their perceptions of both their own and their partners' behaviors during arguments. Behaviors both at home and in the laboratory were evaluated. Couples also made attribution ratings concerning both the causes of the behaviors of each partner and about the amount of control each had over the atmosphere during conflictual discussion. Happy spouses were expected to perceive more of their partners' positive and fewer of their partners' negative behaviors than distressed spouses. Distressed spouses were expected to show more self-serving biases, both in their perceptions and in their causal attributions.

A second goal was to explore mechanisms underlying attributional biases. Self-serving attributional bias caused by self-presentational concerns is expected to occur when people do not anticipate external evaluation of their behavior (Schlenker, 1975). In the present study, an overly favorable evaluation of one's behavior at home was not susceptible to disconfirmation, while such an evaluation of behavior in the laboratory was susceptible. Therefore, if ratings are influenced by self-presentational concerns, evaluations of one's behaviors at home should be made in a self-serving manner; evaluations of behaviors in the laboratory should be more modest. If ratings are affected by nonconscious motivational or information processing factors, then no systematic differences between evaluations of behavior at home and in the laboratory would be expected.

## METHOD

## Subjects

Subjects were 28 volunteer married couples participating in a larger project (see Fichten, 1979; Fichten & Wright, 1983a). Ten couples whose couple-mean scores were 110 or more on the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (MAS) (Locke & Wallace, 1959) constituted the "happy" group, and 18 couples whose scores fell below 80 constituted the "distressed" group.

The mean MAS score was 123 for happy subjects and 63 for distressed subjects. Age ranged from 21 to 61, the mean being 39 for husbands and 36 for wives. Average education was 13 years. Couples had been married for 1 to 30 years, with a mean of 13. They had an average of two children.

## Measures

*Marital Adjustment Scale (MAS)*

This widely used measure of marital satisfaction (Locke & Wallace, 1959) was the major screening instrument.

*Trait Checklists*

Subjects completed two 87-item checklists (adapted from Anderson, 1968) of positive and negative traits.

*Marital Conflict Form*

Subjects responded to a list of 26 common areas of disagreement (Weiss & Margolin, 1977).

*Description of Problem Areas*

Subjects specified the distressing behaviors they wished their spouses to change.

*Self-Ratings and Spouse Ratings*

Subjects rated their (1) perceptions of their own and their spouses' behaviors during disagreement, (2) attributions about their own and their spouses' importance in determining the atmosphere during such discussions, and (3) attributions about the dispositional and situational causes of these behaviors. All items were constructed in a 10-point Likert-type format.

Sixteen items assessed perceptions of the frequency of eight facilitative and eight disruptive communication behaviors. These were adapted from the Marital Interaction Coding System (Hops, Wills, Patterson, & Weiss, 1977). Perception scores were summed, so that the higher score, the more favorable the evaluation. To assess attributions of control, subjects rated the importance of their own and their spouses' roles in determining the atmosphere during arguments. Three causal attribution items following each perception item evaluated the importance that subjects attributed to their own personalities, their spouses' personalities, and the discussion topics in determining their own and their partners' behaviors.

## Design

A 2 × 2 between-groups (happiness × gender) × 2 within-groups (self vs. spouse) factorial design was used for most analyses. Additional within-group factors were included where appropriate.

### Procedure

Subjects completed the MAS, the Marital Conflict Form, the trait checklists, and the self-ratings and spouse ratings of typical conflictual interaction. Familiarity with videotaping being a requirement in the larger study, each couple saw a taped 10-minute interview of themselves discussing a neutral topic. Spouses then completed the description of problem areas about four moderately problematic issues in the relationship. One of these was randomly selected and used as the problem to discuss in a subsequent 10-minute videotaped session. Subjects then completed the self-ratings and spouse ratings, basing their answers on the discussion just concluded. Lastly, each couple's concerns about participating were discussed, and therapy referrals were given if requested. Six months later, subjects were mailed a variety of questionnaires, including the MAS and the perception items of the self-ratings and spouse ratings.

## RESULTS

### Perceptions

Ratings of typical behaviors during conflictual discussions were examined in a 2 (happiness)  $\times$  2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (self vs. spouse) analysis of variance (ANOVA). Results indicate that happy subjects saw both themselves ( $M=85.55$ ) and their spouses ( $M=91.65$ ) as more skilled at communication than did distressed ( $M's=72.67$  and  $53.42$ , respectively) subjects,  $F(1, 52)=51.66$ ,  $p<.001$ . While distressed spouses saw themselves as more skilled than their partners, this was not true for happy spouses,  $F(1, 52)=18.89$ ,  $p<.001$ .

Results on ratings of behaviors during the laboratory discussion replicated these findings: Happy subjects saw both spouses as more skilled than did distressed subjects,  $F(1, 52)=14.93$ ,  $p<.001$ , and while distressed subjects saw themselves ( $M=74.56$ ) as more skilled than their spouses ( $M=65.86$ ), happy subjects saw themselves ( $M=88.00$ ) and their spouses ( $M=90.50$ ) as equally skilled,  $F(1, 52)=5.38$ ,  $p<.05$ .

### Attributions

#### Trait Attributions

The number of positive and negative traits assigned to oneself and to one's spouse on the trait checklists were analyzed in a 2 (happiness)  $\times$  2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (self vs. spouse)  $\times$  2 (negative vs. positive) ANOVA. The

means in Table 1 show that happy couples attributed more positive than negative traits to both spouses but that distressed couples did not,  $F(1, 52)=17.97$ ,  $p<.001$ . Distressed subjects attributed relatively more positive and fewer negative traits to themselves than to their spouses; happy subjects did not make this distinction,  $F(1, 52)=5.48$ ,  $p<.05$ .

### Causal Attributions

Subjects evaluated the importance of (1) the personality of the emitter of the behavior, (2) the personality of the other person (spouse of emitter), and (3) the nature of the topic. Both typical and laboratory interaction behaviors were examined in 2 (happiness)  $\times$  2 (self vs. spouse)  $\times$  2 (facilitative vs. disruptive)  $\times$  3 (attribution to emitter vs. other vs. topic) ANOVAs.

For behaviors during typical disagreements, attributions to the emitter were higher than attributions to the other, which in turn were higher than attributions to the topic,  $F(2, 102)=33.17$ ,  $p<.001$ . Means for the happiness  $\times$  facilitative versus disruptive  $\times$  attribution interaction in Table 2 suggest that happy spouses, relative to distressed spouses, were more likely to make person attributions (emitter, other) and less likely to make topic attributions for facilitative behavior, while distressed spouses were relatively more likely to make person attributions and less likely to make topic attributions for disruptive behaviors,  $F(2, 102)=2.92$ ,  $p<.06$ .

Results on the laboratory discussions replicate the findings described above. The happiness  $\times$  facilitative vs. disruptive  $\times$  attribution interaction was highly significant,  $F(2, 104)=9.66$ ,  $p<.001$ . While attributions to the emitter ( $M=6.21$ ) were again highest, attributions to either the other ( $M=4.76$ ) or the topic ( $M=4.98$ ) were not significantly different,  $F(2, 104)=12.48$ ,  $p<.001$ ; this suggests that the laboratory setting influenced subjects' attributions to some extent.

To assess the relative dispositionality of attributions for one's own and one's spouse's behaviors, two derived attribution scores, emitter:

TABLE 1  
Means of Number of Own and Spouse's Negative and Positive Traits

GROUP	OWN TRAITS		SPOUSE'S TRAITS	
	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE
Happy	10.35	27.60	8.95	27.65
Distressed	17.00	21.25	21.61	18.92

TABLE 2  
Means of Causal Attributions for Typical Behaviors

ATTRIBUTERS	ATTRIBUTIONS FOR FACILITATIVE BEHAVIOR			ATTRIBUTIONS FOR DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR		
	EMITTER	OTHER	TOPIC	EMITTER	OTHER	TOPIC
Happy spouses	7.00	5.45	4.29	6.91	5.18	4.98
Distressed spouses	6.92	5.40	4.77	7.15	5.61	4.89

Note. The higher the score, the greater the importance of the attributions. Maximum score = 9.

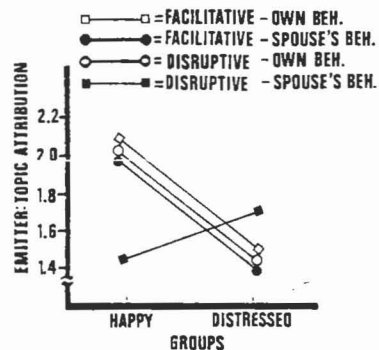
topic and emitter:other proportions, were calculated (the higher the score, the more dispositional the attributions). These were analyzed in 2 (happiness)  $\times$  2 (self vs. spouse)  $\times$  2 (facilitative vs. disruptive) ANOVAs.

Results for the emitter:topic proportions for typical behaviors show a tendency for happy subjects, compared to distressed subjects, to be more dispositional concerning their own behaviors than their spouses',  $F(1, 51) = 2.89, p < .10$ . Laboratory results replicated this finding. In addition, a significant happiness  $\times$  self versus spouse  $\times$  facilitative versus disruptive interaction,  $F(1, 52) = 4.10, p < .05$ , was found on laboratory data. Figure 1 shows that distressed subjects, compared to happy subjects, made relatively more internal attributions for their spouses' disruptive behaviors.

When emitter:other proportions were examined, ANOVA test results on typical behaviors revealed no significant differences. On laboratory data, however, the self versus spouse main effect,  $F(1, 52) = 5.56,$

FIGURE 1

Emitter:topic attribution proportions for laboratory behaviors. The happiness  $\times$  self versus spouse  $\times$  facilitative versus disruptive interaction is depicted. The higher the score, the more internal the attribution.



$p < .05$ , shows that both happy and distressed subjects made more internal attributions for their spouses' ( $M = 1.50$ ) behavior than they made concerning their own ( $M = 1.29$ ).

#### Attributions of Control

A 2 (happiness)  $\times$  2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (self vs. spouse) ANOVA on attributions of control over the atmosphere during typical behavior shows that happy subjects felt they ( $M = 7.50$ ) had more control over the interaction than their spouses ( $M = 6.75$ ), while distressed subjects felt their spouses ( $M = 7.00$ ) had more control than they themselves ( $M = 6.25$ ),  $F(1, 52) = 3.57, p < .07$ . On laboratory data, only a self versus spouse main effect was found; both happy and distressed subjects felt that their spouses were more controlling than themselves,  $F(1, 52) = 5.76, p < .05$ .

#### Follow-Up

Comparisons of pretest with follow-up data for six happy and 17 distressed subjects revealed no significant changes.

## STUDY 2

Study 1 provided little support for the existence of actor-observer attributional differences in couples. Numerous differences, however, were found in ratings by distressed and happy spouses concerning positive and negative traits and behaviors of each. While ratings of spouses from happy relationships showed no self-serving bias, those of distressed spouses showed self-serving tendencies in both perceptions and attributions; these were found for both actors (self-ratings) and active observers (spouse ratings).

In Study 2, an attempt was made to modify distressed spouses' self-serving biases by altering their focus of attention through videotape playback, a technique frequently used in behavioral couple therapy (Fichten & Wright, 1983b). Couples engaged in conflictual interaction in the laboratory while being videotaped. A subject either saw no videotape or, while hearing both sides, saw a videotape of himself or herself only, of the spouse only, or of self and spouse together. Perception and attribution ratings were made before and after the videotape intervention. Videotape viewing of oneself only was expected to alter self-serving perceptual and attributional biases, while viewing of the spouse only was expected to exacerbate these. A subject who viewed only one participant was also expected to attribute more control over the interaction to that person.



## METHOD

## Subjects

A total of 48 volunteer married couples (including the 18 distressed couples from Study 1) of average to extremely poor marital adjustment (couple-mean scores of 105 or less on the MAS) were subjects; they were randomly assigned to the four videotape conditions.

Mean MAS score was 82.5. Age ranged from 20 to 62, the mean being 37 for husbands and 35 for wives. Subjects had an average of 13 years of education. Couples had been married for .5 to 31 years, with a mean of 11.6. They had an average of two children.

## Design

A  $2 \times 4$  between-groups (2 gender  $\times$  4 video condition)  $\times$   $2 \times 2 \times 2$  within-groups (2 self vs. spouse  $\times$  2 facilitative vs. disruptive  $\times$  2 prevideo vs. postvideo) factorial design was used for most analyses. Additional within-groups factors were included where appropriate.

## Procedure

The procedure differed from that of Study 1 in the following way: After completing the self-ratings and spouse ratings based on the videotaped conflictual interaction, subjects "reflected" on the interaction for 10 minutes (the 18 distressed couples from Study 1 simply continued with the "reflection" task). In the no-video (placebo) condition, subjects wrote down their impressions. Subjects in the three video conditions saw and heard their videotapes. All heard both sides. Some subjects, however, saw themselves only, some saw their spouses only, and some saw both themselves and their spouses together. Then subjects again completed the self-ratings and spouse ratings. Lastly, couples' concerns about participation were discussed, and therapy referrals were made if requested. Six months later, subjects were mailed the follow-up questionnaires described in Study 1.

## RESULTS

## Perceptions

*Own and Spouse's Typical Behaviors*

As preliminary analyses revealed no sex differences, a one-way ANOVA (self vs. spouse) was used. Results confirmed those of Study 1, indicating that distressed spouses perceived their partners ( $M=63.59$ ) as

less skilled than themselves ( $M=76.52$ ) at communication,  $F(1, 95)=38.075$ ,  $p<.001$ . Self-ratings of 72% of subjects were higher than their spouse ratings. Only 25% evaluated themselves less favorably than their partners, while 3% rated both partners as equally skilled. The frequencies are significantly different from chance,  $\chi^2(1)=21.77$ ,  $p<.001$ .

*Effects of Videotape*

The  $2$  (gender)  $\times$   $4$  (video condition)  $\times$   $2$  (self vs. spouse)  $\times$   $2$  (prevideo vs. postvideo) ANOVA revealed only a self versus spouse main effect,  $F(1, 88)=9.162$ ,  $p<.01$ ; this indicates that subjects evaluated their own behaviors ( $M=78.31$ ) in the laboratory more favorably than those of their partners ( $M=72.64$ ). This replicates, in a laboratory context, the results on perceptions of typical disagreements. No video effects were found.

## Attributions

*Causal Attributions for Typical Behaviors*

A main effect for attribution was found on the  $2$  (gender)  $\times$   $2$  (self vs. spouse)  $\times$   $2$  (facilitative vs. disruptive)  $\times$   $3$  (attribution) ANOVA,  $F(1, 93)=71.305$ ,  $p<.001$ . The Tukey h.s.d. test ( $K=3$ ,  $df=186$ ) shows that attributions to the personality of the emitter were higher than attributions to the other person (spouse) ( $p<.01$ ), which in turn were higher than attributions to the topic ( $p<.05$ ). The self versus spouse  $\times$  attribution interaction,  $F(1, 93)=4.381$ ,  $p<.05$ , suggests that subjects made relatively more external attributions (spouses' personalities and topics) for their own behavior and more internal attributions for their partners' behaviors. Tests of simple effects indicate that subjects were more likely to attribute their own behaviors to the personalities of their mates than they were to attribute their spouses' behaviors to their own personalities,  $F(1, 279)=5.783$ ,  $p<.05$ . In addition, a self versus spouse  $\times$  facilitative versus disruptive  $\times$  attribution interaction,  $F(1, 93)=4.381$ ,  $p<.05$  (see Figure 2), was found. Tests of simple interactions showed that subjects made more emitter attributions for their spouses' disruptive and their own facilitative behaviors,  $F(1, 273)=4.068$ ,  $p<.05$ . They also made relatively more topic attributions for their own disruptive and their spouses' facilitative behaviors,  $F(1, 273)=6.056$ ,  $p<.05$ . Tests of simple effects revealed that subjects made more emitter attributions for their spouses' disruptive behaviors than for their own,  $F(1, 256)=6.662$ ,  $p<.05$ , and that they made more topic attributions for their own disruptive behaviors than for those of their spouses,  $F(1, 256)=6.882$ ,  $p<.001$ .

Emitter:topic and emitter:other proportions (described in Study 1) were also analyzed in  $2$  (gender)  $\times$   $2$  (self vs. spouse)  $\times$   $2$  (facilitative

vs. disruptive) ANOVAs. Results for the emitter:topic proportion show a self versus spouse  $\times$  facilitative versus disruptive interaction,  $F(1, 93) = 7.794, p < .01$ . Figure 3 shows that subjects made relatively more internal attributions for their own facilitative and their spouses' disruptive behaviors. Simple effects tests showed that subjects made more internal attributions for their spouses' disruptive than facilitative behaviors,  $F(1, 186) = 4.774, p < .05$ . Subjects also tended to make more internal attributions for their own facilitative behaviors than for their disruptive ones,  $F(1, 186) = 3.317, p < .10$ . On emitter:other proportions, subjects made more internal attributions concerning their spouses' behaviors than their own,  $F(1, 93) = 5.052, p < .05$ .

#### Effects of Videotape

Attributions about the causes of one's own and one's spouse's facilitative and disruptive behaviors in the laboratory were assessed before and after videotape viewing. ANOVAs revealed no significant main effects or interactions including the video factor in the analyses on either attribution scores or on attribution proportions.

Attributions of control over the atmosphere in the laboratory to oneself and to one's partner were measured before and after the videotape intervention. The 2 (gender)  $\times$  4 (video condition)  $\times$  2 (self vs. spouse)  $\times$  2 (prevideo vs. postvideo) ANOVA revealed only a self versus spouse main effect,  $F(1, 88) = 9.665, p < .01$ ; this indicates that subjects saw their spouses as more controlling than themselves. Again, no video effects were found.

FIGURE 2

The self versus spouse  $\times$  facilitative versus disruptive  $\times$  attribution interaction for typical behaviors at home. Maximum score = 10.

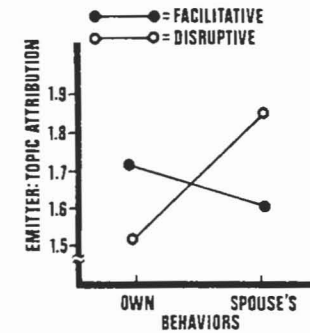
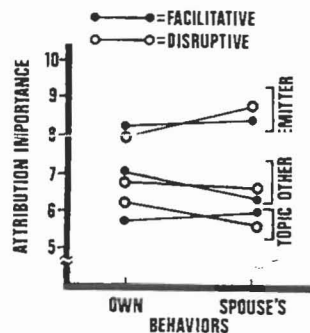


FIGURE 3

Emitter:topic attribution proportions for typical behaviors at home. The self versus spouse  $\times$  facilitative versus disruptive interaction is depicted. The higher the value, the more internal the attribution.

#### Follow-Up

ANOVAs on MAS scores of 51 subjects (53%) who returned questionnaires revealed no significant changes from pretest to follow-up. Perception scores and attribution-of-control scores from self-ratings and spouse ratings before intervention and at follow-up were used in two additional 2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (self vs. spouse)  $\times$  2 (pretest vs. follow-up) ANOVAs. Only self versus spouse main effects were found, indicating that subjects perceived themselves more favorably than their spouses,  $F(1, 45) = 18.126, p < .001$ , and that they attributed more control over the atmosphere during disagreements to their spouses than to themselves,  $F(1, 39) = 5.798, p < .05$ .

## DISCUSSION

Numerous differences between the perceptions and attributions of happy couples and distressed couples were found. Happy couples generally perceived and made attributions about the behaviors of both partners in similar ways. Distressed spouses' perceptions and attributions, on the other hand, were both biased in a self-serving manner.

#### PERCEPTIONS

Happy spouses perceived their own and their partners' behaviors during conflict to be more facilitative than distressed subjects. They also perceived themselves and their spouses to be equally skilled, while distressed subjects perceived their own behavior to be more facilitative

than their spouses'. This finding of self-serving perceptual bias in distressed couples was extremely robust; it occurred three times, including in the laboratory, where subjects were videotaped and knew their behavior would be evaluated.

#### TRAIT ATTRIBUTIONS

Actor-observer differences were not found in trait attributions; subjects attributed as many traits to themselves as to their partners. Happy spouses attributed more positive than negative traits both to themselves and their spouses, while distressed partners attributed both more negative and fewer positive traits to their spouses than to themselves. Thus, trait attributions of distressed couples appear to be self-serving.

#### CONTROL ATTRIBUTIONS

M. Ross and Sicol (1979), arguing in favor of an information-processing explanation of attributional mechanisms in couples, demonstrated that spouses (presumably nondistressed) took more responsibility for daily events than their partners granted. In the present study, happy spouses, too, attributed more control to themselves than to their spouses over typical conflict. Distressed spouses, on the other hand, did the reverse; this suggests that motivational considerations may have affected the ratings.

#### CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS

As in other studies, spouses erred by overestimating dispositional causes of behavior. For typical behavior, both happy and distressed spouses indicated that the personality of the emitter of behavior was most important, followed by the personality of the other person; least important was the topic discussed. Even in the laboratory, where conflictual topics were assigned, the personality of the emitter, whether it was one's spouse or oneself, was still considered the most important cause.

Only one analysis provided support for the existence of actor-observer differences. All other causal attribution ratings were affected by the happiness of the couples and the facilitativeness of the behaviors. Happy spouses took more dispositional responsibility for their behaviors than did distressed ones. Unlike distressed spouses, who made more dispositional attributions for disruptive behaviors, happy spouses attributed facilitative behaviors more dispositionally than disruptive behaviors. Happy spouses made more dispositional attributions about their partners' facilitative behaviors than about the partners' disrupt-

tive ones. Distressed spouses, on the other hand, made more dispositional and fewer situational attributions about their spouses' disruptive and their own facilitative acts. Thus, while happy spouses' ratings were not self-serving, distressed spouses' ratings, both as actors and observers, were biased in a self-serving manner.

#### VIDEOTAPE AND VISUAL SALIENCE

Videotape playback from any visual perspective had no effect on distressed spouses' perceptions of themselves or their partners, or on their attributions about the causes of behavior. Nor was more control over interaction attributed to the person viewed. The absence of videotape effects was surprising. Not only did many participants in the study spontaneously comment on the insight they had gained by watching their videotapes, but reports in both the clinical and social psychological literatures suggest that videotape playback is a powerful therapeutic technique.

#### MECHANISMS UNDERLYING BIASES

Distressed spouses' perceptions of their own and their partners' behaviors are unrelated to trained observers' evaluations (Fichten & Wright, 1983a). According to the information-processing view, this might be explained by a high level of actor-observer engagement and by visual salience effects. Yet, when distressed spouses saw on videotape what observers typically see, their ratings did not change. When the spouses were visually salient during conflictual interaction in the laboratory, happy spouses attributed greater control to their partners than to themselves—a reversal of their retrospective ratings. In distressed couples, neither a change from active to passive observation nor visual salience affected attributions of control.

That actor-observer differences and visual salience effects did not appear reliably in this investigation was surprising, given the findings of laboratory studies on college students. While many such studies demonstrated that rational information processing does take place (cf. Langer, 1978), the present results suggest that when people who know each other well and who have strong feelings about each other make ratings about meaningful, personally relevant behavior, such rational processing may not occur. As only distressed spouses showed self-serving bias, a purely information-processing explanation of the results would be strained. Of the alternative explanations that remain—namely, public self-presentation and motivationally induced bias—motivationally induced bias seems to explain the findings best.

According to Baumeister (1982), the self that is served by self-serv-



ing biases can be either private or public. People trying to enhance their public images can make conscious, intentional distortions. Private self-esteem is enhanced only by unwitting or unconscious distortions. Overly favorable evaluations of one's behavior are made when high ratings are not susceptible to disconfirmation, thereby increasing public self-esteem; behavior is typically more modest when future evaluation is expected (Schlenker, 1975; Weary, 1980).

Distressed spouses evaluated their own behaviors more favorably than their spouses' and made self-serving attributions about both their own and their partners' behaviors in private (home) and public (laboratory) contexts. These findings do not support a public self-presentation explanation. Rather, the results suggest that motivational factors cause distressed spouses actually to see more of their own positive and fewer of their own negative behaviors.

The present research supports the proposal of M. Ross and Sicoly (1979) and Riess *et al.* (1981) that a full understanding of self-serving biases will reveal them to have multiple causes; information processing explains some of the ratings made by happy couples, but motivationally induced biases provide the best understanding of distressed couples' evaluations.

Using videotape to alter actors' and observers' focus of attention will probably not change perceptions or attributions when people evaluate their own behaviors and those of well-known others during relevant conflictual situations in which each person is both actor and active observer. Well-established motivationally induced attributional biases may not respond to salience interventions that alter attributional biases caused by information-processing factors.

Neither videotape playback nor verbal feedback had any effect on the communication behaviors of distressed spouses (Fichten & Wright, 1983a). The present findings suggest that behaviors, especially one's spouse's negative acts, are assumed to be caused by personality rather than situational factors. Having made the attribution "My partner is like that," distressed spouses may not expect their partners to be able to improve their behaviors. Not anticipating improvement by their partners, distressed spouses have no reason to change their own behaviors, especially if they perceive themselves as more skilled than their partners. Thus, perceptual and attributional biases may preclude behavioral improvements.

Bandura (1977) has argued that while cognitive factors are heavily implicated in clinical problems, behavioral techniques may be the most potent means of altering cognitions. One behavioral technique is asking spouses to monitor the positive behaviors of each partner in order to track behavioral improvements. Focusing on positive acts may ex-

ert its impact on behavior through alteration of perceptual and attributional biases; this possibility deserves further investigation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicate that not only actors' but active observers' attributions can be self-serving. Little evidence of actor-observer attributional bias or of visual salience effects was found. The results suggest that intimate knowledge of another person and motivational factors may influence the way in which attributions are made, as well as the way in which attributions are altered. To understand the basis of perceptual and attributional biases in "real life," studies should focus on actors and observers who participate in relevant and meaningful interactions. Cooperative and conflictual tasks should be used to investigate the effects of attitude, involvement, and familiarity.

Since self-serving bias was found not only in attributions but also in perceptions, future studies should investigate what information is perceived, stored, and retrieved before assessing attributions about the causes of what has been perceived. The exploration of conditions under which information-processing, motivational, and self-presentational biases are predominant could lead to the formulation of interventions that are differentially effective in modifying self-serving biases.

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## FRIENDLINESS AND ITS CORRELATES

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A 40-item questionnaire measure of friendliness, SACRAL, was administered with other questionnaire items about friendship to a sample of 45 undergraduate college students. Based upon previous work with SACRAL, it was expected that relatively low scorers, unlike the high scorers, had behaviors inconsistent with their beliefs about themselves as being friendly, and therefore would report feeling more tense in social situations and finding such situations more difficult than the high scorers. These predictions were supported. Although there was no evidence of the groups' differing in social skills related to discussing a problem with a friend, high scorers claimed to feel very friendly and at ease in presenting themselves to others, stated they infrequently experienced loneliness, seemed more verbal in discussing problems, and in general professed to be more at ease in and available for social participation than those who scored lower on SACRAL. The findings suggest the investigation of the relationship between friendliness and self-actualization, as well as of qualitative differences in the experiencing of friendships.

Friendliness is usually considered an acquired social skill, which is prominently displayed throughout the life cycle and which is of special significance in childhood and adolescence, when the influence of peers is pronounced (McCandless, 1970; Youniss, 1980). As popularly understood, "friendliness" refers to a set of behaviors, such as seeking the company of others, smiling, greeting, rewarding, sharing, cooperating—in short, what is subsumed under the topic of prosocial behavior (Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977). This common-sense notion of friendliness is validated when people are asked to behave in a friendly manner.

For example, in a study by Rosenfeld (1966), one group of college students was instructed to interact with designated peers (targets) as if they were interested in becoming the targets' friends, while a second group was asked to interact in order to be alienating. The first group smiled and talked more than the second and tried to be attentive to the targets.

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