



## CORRELATES OF EXPRESSED AND FELT EMOTION DURING MARITAL CONFLICT: SATISFACTION, PERSONALITY, PROCESS, AND OUTCOME

Robert L. Geist and David G. Gilbert

Department of Psychology, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-6502, U.S.A.

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**Summary**—Relationships among marital satisfaction, personality, felt and expressed affects, and conflict resolution during conflict discussions of married couples were assessed. Specific affects were measured using a behavioral coding system (SPAFF) and a self-report measure (POMS). Correlations between behaviorally coded and self-reported affects varied across specific emotions. Generally, self-reported affects correlated more highly than expressed affects with conflict resolution, marital satisfaction, and neuroticism. Neuroticism correlated with wives' felt and expressed affects and with husbands' felt, but not expressed, negative affects. Extraversion correlated with husbands' and wives' expressed anger and with husbands' self-reported anger. Felt and expressed negative affect correlated negatively with degree of reported conflict resolution. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

### INTRODUCTION

Conflict resolution patterns are generally considered to be one of the most important determinants of marital satisfaction (Barry, 1970; Knudson, Sommers & Golding, 1980). No marriage is without its share of problems, yet couples vary widely in their methods of attempting to resolve these problems. When resolving conflicts, couples often experience emotional arousal. Research has consistently found that maritally satisfied partners experience less negative affects during conflict resolution than maritally dissatisfied partners (Gottman, 1979; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 1986; Schaap, 1982). Furthermore, as compared to neutral or positive affect, negative affect is the best discriminator between distressed and non-distressed couples (Gottman, 1979; Schaap, 1982).

Spouses' ability to resolve conflict depends on the problem-solving skills they use during the process of conflict resolution (Birchler, Clopton & Adams, 1984; Birchler & Webb, 1977). To better understand this process, researchers have looked at specific behaviors and affects that occur during conflict interaction. Affect in marital interactions is usually assessed using the global categories of positive, negative, and neutral (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). The Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF) was designed to break down global affect categories into a number of specific affects (Gottman, 1988; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Though Gottman and Krokoff (1989) correlated SPAFF codes with concurrent and long-term marital satisfaction, research has yet to examine how specific affects exhibited in marital interactions correlate with self-reports of corresponding/analogous moods or with personality traits such as neuroticism and extraversion. Yet there is evidence that marital satisfaction is related to: (1) neuroticism (Eysenck & Wakefield, 1981), (2) relationship beliefs and expectations (Kurdek, 1991), (3) expressiveness (Kurdek, 1991), and (4) causal and responsibility attributions (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988). In addition, stable relationship variables such as conflict style (Knudson *et al.*, 1980; Krokoff, 1991) have also been found to be mediating variables in marital interaction and satisfaction.

To reconcile how behavior, affect, communication behaviors, and stable trait and relationship variables influence marital satisfaction and interaction, Bradbury and Fincham (1987; 1989) propose that both state and trait variables interact to influence, and be influenced by, marital interaction. In this model, the way each spouse processes their partner's responses is affected by contextual factors. The two proposed sets of contextual factors are proximal and distal. The proximal factors include the thoughts and feelings that a spouse has immediately before processing a given behavior. The distal factors refer to psychological traits that are more stable, such as personality variables, beliefs

and expectations, relevant memories, and chronic mood states. To date, research on this model has focused primarily on distal context factors (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Kurdek, 1991), although Bradbury and Fincham (1988) have examined causal and responsibility attributions, which they consider to be proximal context factors. Bradbury and Fincham (1988) found that both proximal variables (attributions) and distal variables (sex role and relationship beliefs) contribute separately to explaining the variance in marital satisfaction. The present study will expand on this by focusing on the personality traits of neuroticism and extraversion.

Neuroticism–stability and extraversion–introversion account for more of the variance in personality measures than other higher-order personality dimensions (Kline & Barrett, 1983). Neuroticism is characterized by the disposition to experience anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional lability (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). Extraversion is characterized by dominance, assertiveness, sociability, activity, and, to a lesser extent, impulsivity (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). Though researchers have found a negative relationship between neuroticism and marital satisfaction (Eysenck & Wakefield, 1981; Kelly & Conley, 1987), research using observational and behavioral measures (e.g. Gottman, 1979; Schaap, 1982) have rarely assessed the relation of neuroticism and extraversion to marital interaction styles.

This study examined relationships between specific affects, neuroticism, and extraversion during marital conflict resolution. It also assessed relationships between specific affects, self-reports of affect, marital satisfaction, and degree of perceived conflict resolution. The SPAFF was used to break down only the negative affect dimension into its component affects (i.e. anger, disgust, etc.). The present study collapsed across the specific positive affect codes to obtain a global code for positive affect. This decision was made because negative affect has consistently been found to be a significantly better discriminator between distressed and non-distressed spouses (Birchler, Weiss & Vincent, 1975; Gottman, 1979; Gottman & Levenson, 1986; Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Schaap, 1982).

It was hypothesized that negative SPAFF codes would correlate positively with neuroticism, that anger and contempt–disgust would correlate positively with extraversion, and that whining and tension–anxiety would correlate negatively with extraversion. In addition, the validity of the behaviorally determined SPAFF dimensions was assessed by comparing the SPAFF dimensions with corresponding self-reported affects assessed via the Profile of Mood States questionnaire [(POMS) McNair, Lorr & Droppleman, 1981].

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Ss were 56 married couples recruited by newspaper advertisements in Gainesville, Florida. They were paid \$12 for their participation. The mean age of the participants was 30.96 yr ( $SD = 11.27$ ), the mean length of marriage was 6.78 yr ( $SD = 9.29$ ), and the spouses had an average of 15.51 years of education ( $SD = 2.42$ ). Mean marital satisfaction score, as measured by the Marital Relationship Inventory (MRI) (Locke & Williamson, 1958), was 98.92 ( $SD = 12.91$ ).

### *Instruments*

*Couples' Problem Inventory (CPI)*. (Gottman, 1979). This self-report instrument assesses the severity of 10 common marital problems: money, communication, in-laws, sex, religion, recreation, friends, alcohol and drugs, children, and jealousy. The inventory ranges in severity from “not a problem” (0) to “very severe” (100), and each spouse also indicates the duration of each problem.

*Marital Relationship Inventory (MRI)*. (Locke & Williamson, 1958). This self-report instrument contains 22 items measuring marital satisfaction. The MRI has been shown to be a valid measure of marital satisfaction (Burgess, Locke & Thomas, 1971). It correlates with other measures of marital satisfaction (Locke & Wallace, 1959) and discriminates between clinic and non-clinic couples (Gottman, 1979; Gottman, Markman & Notarius, 1977).

*Specific Affect Scoring System (SPAFF)*. (Gottman, 1988). The Specific Affect Scoring System uses videotapes and verbatim transcripts to code global affect into specific negative affects (anger,

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