

Marital Sentiment Override: Does It Influence Couples' Perceptions?

This study investigated the effects of spouses' global sentiments (i.e., their marital bonds) on spouses' perceptions of their partners' specific affects. Ninety-six newlywed couples participated in the study. Positive or negative sentiment override was indicated when spouse ratings of specific affects differed from the coding of objective coders. For both positive affect and low-intensity negative affect, wives' marital bond predicted their ratings of their husbands' affect. In addition, there was evidence for positive sentiment override when wives rated husbands' low-intensity negative affect. As predicted, neither husbands nor wives were influenced by sentiment override when rating their spouses' high-intensity negative affects. These results suggest that marital bond serves as a perceptual filter through which wives evaluate their husbands' behavior.

Weiss (1980) theorized that reactions during marital interaction may be determined in part by a concept he called *sentiment override*, by which he meant a global dimension of affection or disaffec-

tion for one's partner and one's marriage, rather than objective responses to what has been said during the interaction. Spouses with *positive sentiment override*, he suggested, interpret their partners' messages in a positive manner regardless of the objective quality of the message. For example, spouses may state something using a neutral affect (as judged by observers) and still have the statement perceived as a positive message by their partners. In contrast, Weiss suggested that spouses with *negative sentiment override* typically interpret their partners' messages in a negative manner, compared to an observer's coding of the same message. For example, in negative sentiment override a neutral message (as judged by observers) may be perceived by a spouse as negative.

Data support the importance of Weiss's (1980) theory. Differential perception appears to have a significant influence on the meaning of the message conveyed. Robinson and Price (1980) trained in-home observers to rate the behaviors of both distressed and nondistressed couples. Couples were also asked to rate their own behaviors. A comparison of the raters' observations with the couples' observations suggested differences in perception. Nondistressed couples reported pleasurable behavior at a much higher hourly rate than distressed couples did. However, observations indicated that nondistressed and distressed couples displayed equivalent hourly rates of pleasurable behavior. Thus, the research by Robinson and

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Price indicates that distressed spouses simply do not perceive their partners' pleasurable behaviors as positive.

Notarius, Benson, Sloan, Vanzetti, and Hornyak (1989) suggested a methodology for systematically studying sentiment override by synchronizing and merging behavior coding streams and couples' perceptual ratings of messages. In their study, distressed and nondistressed spouses were selected based on the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959). They measured spouses' perceptions of each message sent by their partners using the "talk table" (Gottman et al., 1976), which facilitates only one spouse talking at a time. Their major finding, that distressed wives were more likely to perceive their husbands' neutral behavior (as rated by observers) as negative, provided support for the concept of negative sentiment override in distressed wives. The same result was not found for distressed husbands interpreting their wives' behavior. This same pattern of results was further supported by the findings of Denton, Burleson, and Sprenkle (1994).

It is logical to expect that sentiment overrides, as global processes, should affect spouses' expectancies about an impending interaction. Vanzetti, Notarius, and NeeSmith (1992) investigated spouses' expectancies of their partners' behavior prior to low- and high-conflict discussions. Spouses completed a 24-item adjective checklist predicting their partners' behavior during the discussion. Their results suggested that distressed husbands and wives expected more negative and fewer positive behaviors than nondistressed spouses did, consistent with the concept of negative sentiment override. Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips, and Osborne (1995) also found support for the relationship between expected partner behavior and marital satisfaction. In addition, they tested whether the relationship between marital satisfaction and pre-interaction expectations about partners' behavior was moderated by the ease with which spouses could call to mind their feelings about their partners and marriages. Correlations between marital satisfaction and expected partner behavior were higher among husbands whose sentiment was more accessible than for husbands whose sentiment was relatively less accessible, regardless of the level of marital satisfaction. No significant differences were obtained for wives. Spouses were also asked to indicate the extent to which they were experiencing positive (e.g., happy) or negative (e.g., angry) affects immediately prior to the problem-solving discussion. They also

found support for the relationship between pre-interaction affect and couples' marital satisfaction.

The present study sought to extend previous work on sentiment override in three ways. First, the objective ratings of couples' interactions were made more specific. Previous research on sentiment override has categorized observers' codings of partners' behaviors as either negative, neutral, or positive. Sher (1990, cited in Markman, 1991) suggested that the global category of negative communication is not specific enough when used to describe marital interactions. Research by Gottman and his colleagues (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Coan, Carrère, & Swanson, 1998) supports Sher's suggestion. In terms of divorce prediction, Gottman and colleagues have found that some negative affects are more corrosive to the marital relationship than others. For instance, the presence of contempt, defensiveness, criticism, and stonewalling in marital communication has been found to be predictive of marital dissolution in more than one study of marital stability (e.g., Gottman; Jacobson, Gottman, Gortner, Berns, & Shortt, 1996), whereas the presence of sadness or anger has been less predictive of marital instability. Because various negative emotions and behaviors appear to have different levels of toxicity in terms of relationship outcomes, an important next step in the study of sentiment override is to examine the power it has for the perceptual filtering of more specific types of marital communication. Perceptual biases may play a role in determining the actual impact of the emotion, but these biases or sentiment override may be effective only up to a certain intensity of negativity.

Second, instead of the talk table of Notarius et al. (1989), we used a synchronized continuous rating of the interaction with a video recall method; the rating dial does not constrain and interrupt the natural flow of interaction the way the talk table requires. The validity of the rating dial procedure has been established in previous research (Gottman & Levenson, 1985).

Third, the Oral History Interview (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992), a semistructured interview of the history of a couple's relationship, was used as a measure of global sentiments that spouses hold regarding each other and their relationships. Global sentiments will be referred to as the *marital bond* in this article. The marital bond appears to measure the perceptual biases spouses have about each other and their relationships. The marital bond has a moderate relationship to the construct of marital satisfaction (Carrère, Buehl-

man, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000). The marital bond score was chosen as a measure of sentiment override rather than marital satisfaction because it has a stronger predictive validity for marital stability (Buehlman et al.; Carrère et al.).

In this article we hypothesized that higher marital bond scores would predict a more positive rating of spouses' expressed affect for positive affects and low-intensity negative affects. In addition, consistent with the findings that high-intensity negative affects have been found to be predictive of marital instability, we expected that the perception of higher-intensity negative affect would not be influenced by marital bond. When comparing spouses' perceptions to those of objective coders, we hypothesized the same pattern of results. Specifically, we predicted that sentiment override would influence positive and low-intensity negative affects but not high-intensity negative affects.

METHOD

Participants

Between 1989 and 1992, a two-stage sampling procedure was used to draw a sample of newlywed couples from the Puget Sound area in Washington. Couples were recruited using newspaper advertisements. The wives of these recruited couples were then administered a screening phone interview that included the telephone version of the MAT (Krokoff, 1984; Locke & Wallace, 1959). Only the wives were interviewed at this screening stage of the study for financial and logistical reasons. The wives were chosen rather than the husbands because wives have been found to be better predictors of the state of a marriage (Denton et al., 1994; Floyd & Markman, 1983). The sample was selected so that there was an even distribution of marital satisfaction among the wives; that is, we had equal numbers of wives at each point of the marital satisfaction distribution. This even distribution was chosen so that we might oversample both the very happy and the very distressed couples in order to have the statistical power to determine differences between couples at the two ends of the continuum. Eligible couples were married for the first time within 6 months of participating in the study, were childless, and had no serious illnesses (e.g., cancer, cardiovascular disease, emphysema). The sample was also selected to match the racial and ethnic demographics of the

Metropolitan Seattle area (City of Seattle Planning Commission, 1990).

The newlywed study included a laboratory-based marital interaction session, a 24-hour stay in a studio apartment laboratory, a longitudinal follow-up study, and research on couples' transition to parenthood. This paper focuses on the study participants who took part in both the marital interaction laboratory session and the Oral History Interview.

A total of 96 couples completed the marital interaction session and the Oral History Interview. The mean demographic characteristics (with standard deviation in parentheses) for the couples at first contact were: (a) wife age = 26.0 years (3.6 years); (b) husband age = 27.2 years (3.9 years); (c) wife marital satisfaction = 122.2 (18.4); and (d) husband marital satisfaction = 116.3 (19). The ages of both husbands and wives are consistent with national median age of first marriage (wife age = 25.0 years; husband age = 26.7 years) as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Reports (1998). Couples had a combined median income between \$25,000 and \$39,000. The income range was from less than \$10,000 a year to \$84,000 a year. The mean educational level for both husbands and wives in the study was a 4-year college degree. Sixty-four percent of the couples had lived together before marriage (range of cohabitation from 1 month to 93 months).

Measures and Materials

Oral history coding. The Oral History Interview is a semistructured interview conducted with both husband and wife present (Buehlman & Gottman, 1996). The interview explores the history of the couple's relationship, each spouse's philosophy about marriage, and how their parents' marriages compare with their own marriage. A more complete description of the Oral History Interview and the protocol used to administer the interview can be found in Carrère et al. (2000).

The Oral History Coding System measures the marital bond, that is, couples' global perceptions about their marriage and about each other (Carrère et al., 2000). The marital bond was used as a measure of spouses' global sentiments. Carrère et al. suggest that the marital bond construct is a measure of spouses' perceptual biases about each other and the marriage. Carrère and her colleagues propose that the marital bond taps into marital cognitions described by other investigators, such as sentiment

override (e.g., Weiss, 1980) and selective attention to spousal behavior (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989). Baucom and his associates proposed that individuals pay selective attention to aspects of a situation that fit with a cognitive schema they hold (i.e., history of a marriage). This is problematic because couples only draw on a subset of information about a situation (a perceptual bias) to shape their ongoing behavior.

The Oral History Coding System indexes how the couple tells the story of their relationship. It focuses on the positive or negative nature of what spouses choose to recall from the history of their relationship (e.g., does the couple minimize the negative and emphasize the romance, or do they only remember what a struggle the relationship has been?). The coding system also measures how spouses describe and talk about their partners.

The Oral History Coding System (Buehlman & Gottman, 1996) assesses the marital bond by indexing 11 dimensions of a couple's marriage based upon the couple's responses to the interview. A full description of the coding system can be found in Buehlman and Gottman. Ten of the 11 dimensions are rated on an individual basis, and the final dimension is rated for the couple as a whole. Six of the 10 individual dimensions are positive in nature: (a) Fondness and Affection rates spouses' expressions of pride, fondness, and affection for their partners; (b) "We-ness" reflects the degree to which spouses use terms during the interview that indicate unification in the marriage; (c) Expansiveness measures how much elaboration spouses give about the topics covered in the interview. Each of these three dimensions is rated separately for husbands and wives, resulting in six positive dimensions.

Four of the 10 individual dimensions are negative: (a) Negativity indexes the extent to which spouses are critical of their partners and vague about what attracted them to their partners; (b) Disappointment and Disillusionment assesses the degree to which spouses express depression about the relationship or bitterness about marriage in general. Each of these two dimensions is rated separately for husbands and wives, resulting in four negative dimensions. One dimension indexes turmoil in the relationship: Chaos (one score per couple) rates the degree to which the couple reports experiencing numerous unexpected problems that they felt were out of their control. A net score for the marital bond was calculated by summing spouses' scores for Fondness and Affection, We-ness, and Expansiveness and reducing it by

their score for Negativity, Disappointment and Disillusionment, and the couple's score for Chaos. This scoring method was based on a principal component analysis that indicated that these dimensions were all members of one latent variable (Carrère et al., 2000).

Using the current sample, reliability for the marital bond scale was indexed by intraclass correlations, which ranged from .47 to .81 for the 11 dimensions. Overall reliability for the marital bond scale was .75. Construct validity of the marital bond scale has been demonstrated based on its relationship with both concurrent and longitudinal marital outcomes (Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000).

Marital satisfaction. The MAT (Krokoff, 1984; Locke & Wallace, 1959) was administered to wives during the initial telephone interview, and the paper-and-pencil version of the MAT was administered to both spouses just prior to coming to the laboratory. The MAT is used to assess marital satisfaction and is frequently used in marital research because of its strength in reliably and validly distinguishing between happily and unhappily married couples. The telephone version of the MAT includes the same items used in the paper-and-pencil version of the MAT (Krokoff, 1984). Higher scores on the MAT represent greater marital satisfaction.

The Specific Affect coding system. The Specific Affect (SPAFF) coding system (Gottman, McCoy, Coan, & Collier, 1996) was used to code couples' expressed affect during the marital interactions. Two remotely controlled, high-resolution cameras filmed upper-torso frontal views of both spouses during the interaction sessions. The images from the two cameras were combined in a split-screen image through the use of a video special effects generator. VHS video recorders were used to record the behavioral data. Two lavalier microphones were used to record couples' audio interactions. The computer synchronized video data, behavioral codes, and rating dial data by utilizing the elapse time codes imposed on the video recordings.

SPAFF was used to index the specific affects expressed during the marital problem resolution session. SPAFF focuses solely on the affects expressed and draws on facial expression (Ekman & Friesen, 1978), vocal tone, and speech content. Coders categorized the affects displayed using 5 positive affect codes (humor, affection, interest,

validation, surprise), 10 negative affect codes (anger, tension, domineering, sadness, disgust, whining, belligerence, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling), and a neutral affect code. Every videotape was coded in its entirety by two independent observers using a computer-assisted coding system that automated the collection of timing information; each coder noted only the onsets of each code. A time-locked confusion matrix for the entire videotape was then computed using a 1-second window for determining agreement of each code in one observer's coding against all of the other observer's coding (Bakeman & Gottman, 1986). The diagonal versus the diagonal-plus-off-diagonal entries in these matrices were then entered into a repeated measures analysis of variance using the method specified by Wiggins (1977).

The Cronbach's alpha generalizability coefficients (e.g., Bakeman & Gottman, 1986) were computed for each SPAFF code: humor (.96), affection (.86), interest (.75), validation (.96), surprise (.56), anger (.86), tension (.95), domineering (.84), sadness (.72), whining (.81), disgust (.37), belligerence (.91), contempt (.67), defensiveness (.97), and stonewalling (.75).

Rating dial. Spouses' perceptions of their partners' expressed affect during the marital discussion were measured using a rating dial. Immediately following the marital interaction, spouses viewed a videotape of their interaction and rated, in a continuous manner, how positive or negative they felt about their partners during the interaction. The rating dial consists of a small box attached to each of the two chairs. On the box is a dial that can be turned in a 180-degree radius from one side marked extremely negative to the other end marked extremely positive, with neutral indicated in the middle of the turning radius. The output of the rating dial signal is converted to a continuous numeric scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 9 (*very positive*) with 5 as the mid-mark (*neutral*).

Procedures

Marital interaction laboratory procedures. The marital interaction assessment consisted of a discussion by the husband and wife of ongoing disagreements in their marriage. A facilitator interviewed the couple about areas of contention in their relationship and then assigned the most emotionally salient topics for the couples to discuss during the marital interaction. Following the in-

terview, couples were asked to sit quietly, with their eyes open, without interacting with each other during a 2-minute baseline. The couples then discussed the chosen topics for 15 minutes. Continuous video recordings were collected during the interaction. Immediately following the interaction, couples were asked to view the videotape of their problem-solving session two times. During the replay of the marital discussion, the couples used the rating dial to indicate how positively or negatively they felt during the interaction and how they thought their partner felt during the interaction in counterbalanced order. Their perceptions about their partners' expressed affects were used for the analyses described in this paper. Video recordings and data from the rating dial were collected and synchronized and subsequently averaged over 1-second intervals.

Oral history interview procedures. The Oral History Interview was conducted in one of two types of settings. Those couples who spent 24 hours in the studio apartment laboratory were interviewed after dinner in the living room area of the apartment laboratory. Those couples who did not take part in the apartment laboratory component of the study were interviewed in their homes.

RESULTS

Overview of Analyses

Both the marital bond score and SPAFF codes were used to address the hypotheses in the study. Objective observers identified expressed affects displayed by spouses on a second-by-second basis using SPAFF. For a number of the affects, there was a low frequency of occurrence, consequently limiting the power to detect differences in perception. These affects included surprise, interest, sadness, disgust, whining, and stonewalling. As a result, these affects were dropped from the analyses. Neutral and tension were not included in the analyses because the categories did not have an affective valence (i.e., they were neither positive nor negative affects). At the time of the coding, validation had not been refined to include a high and low category. High validation includes reflective understanding, an appropriate code for a positive affect. In contrast, low validation consists of back-channeling behaviors that are open to interpretation as to whether they are positive or not. Because the low- and high-validation behaviors were mixed, they were not included in the analyses.

The remaining affects were affection, humor, anger, domineering, belligerence, contempt, and defensiveness. To increase the power of detecting differences in the remaining affects, composite scores were created. These composite scores consisted of positive affect (affection and humor), low-intensity negative affect (anger and domineering), and high-intensity negative affect (belligerence, contempt, and defensiveness). The decision to break the negative affects into two groups was based on previous research indicating that only the high-intensity negative SPAFF affect codes are predictive of divorce (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Gottman et al., 1998).

A subset of the spouses was included in the analyses. For a spouse to be included in the analysis of a composite affect, the partner had to have displayed at least one of the individual affects included in the composite score during the marital discussion. For example, a husband's marital bond score was used to predict his rating of his wife's low-intensity negative affect only if his wife expressed anger or domineering during the interaction. The number of spouses included in each analysis varied, because not all spouses displayed all possible composite affects.

Affects displayed for 3 or more continuous seconds were selected and included in the analyses to allow the spouse time to react when using the rating dial. Using spouses' rating dial values for their perceptions about their partners, a mean rating score was calculated for the composite scores of positive affect, low-intensity negative affect, and high-intensity negative affect expressed by their partners. For example, the seconds that a husband displayed the affects of anger and domineering were isolated as low-intensity negative affect, and then the wife's mean rating dial score for the corresponding seconds that her husband expressed either anger or domineering was calculated. Regression analyses used spouses' marital bond to predict their rating of partners' expressed affect. Because of the significant relationship between marital bond and marital satisfaction based on the MAT, for any significant effects, the regression equation was also calculated while statistically controlling for the MAT to determine the unique predictive power of marital bond. The number of spouses included in each analysis reflects the number of partners displaying at least one of the affects in the composite score.

For the effects that were significant based on the composite score, additional regression analyses were performed on the individual affects in-

cluded in the composite score. To determine which component of the composite score was involved in the effect, the marital bond was used to predict the individual affects within the composite score. For example, if the husbands' marital bond significantly predicted their ratings of their wives' low-intensity negative affect, then the husbands' marital bond was used to predict their ratings of their wives' expressed anger and domineering separately. As with the composite scores, for any significant predictions of the individual affects, the predictions were also calculated while statistically controlling for the MAT to determine the unique contribution of the marital bond.

To determine the operation of positive or negative sentiment override, spouse ratings were compared to the objective quality of the affect. For example, if the composite score of positive affect is rated as negative by spouses when it has the objective quality of being positive, the difference suggests the operation of negative sentiment override. On the other hand, if the composite score of positive affect is rated as positive by spouses when it has the same objective quality, there is no evidence of positive sentiment override. For this reason, the presence of positive or negative sentiment override was investigated by comparing the objective quality of an affect to spouses' perceptions of the composite scores that were found to have a significant relationship with marital bond. A mean rating of the composite score was calculated for spouses scoring low, moderate, and high on the marital bond to determine whether individuals who varied in their marital bond score qualitatively differed in their perception of their spouses' behavior. For example, do wives who scored high on the marital bond view their husbands' positive affect as positive, negative, or neutral, and does their perception differ from that of those who scored low on the marital bond? To continue the example, the mean rating dial score of positive affect for spouses in each of the three groups was compared to the objective view of positive affect to determine if negative sentiment override was operating and, if so, which groups were affected.

Sentiment Override

Wives rating their husbands' positive affect codes. Table 1 summarizes analyses of the wives' ratings of their husbands' expressed affect. The marital bond of the wives was positively related to their ratings of husbands' positive affect, accounting

TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF SIMULTANEOUS REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR WIVES' MARITAL BOND PREDICTING THEIR RATINGS OF HUSBANDS' EXPRESSED AFFECTS

Variable	n	B	SE B	β	Controlling for Marital Adjustment Test		
					B	SE B	β
Composite affects							
Positive	81	.012	.005	.250*	.009	.006	.184
Low-intensity negative	47	.021	.009	.320*	.022	.011	.326*
High-intensity negative	91	.005	.005	.102	.000	.006	-.009
Positive affects							
Humor	79	.013	.005	.267*	.011	.006	.229*
Affection	28	.010	.009	.200	.007	.011	.146
Low-intensity negative affects							
Anger	38	.029	.010	.417***	.027	.013	.374**
Domineering	23	-.002	.015	-.025	.004	.015	.059

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .07$. *** $p = .01$.

for 6.3% of the variance, $F(1, 79) = 5.24, p < .05$. After controlling for MAT, the marital bond did not significantly predict wives' ratings of their husbands' positive affect. The marital bond of the wives accounted for 7.1% of the variance in their ratings of husbands' expressed humor, $F(1, 77) = 5.92, p < .05$, reflecting a positive relationship. The finding was marginally significant after controlling for wives' MAT, because the marital bond accounted for 5.2% of the variance, $F(1, 76) = 3.6, p < .07$. The wives' marital bond did not significantly account for their ratings of husbands' expressed affection.

Wives rating their husbands' low-intensity negative affect codes. The marital bond of the wives was positively related to their ratings of husbands' expressed low-intensity negative affect, accounting for 10.2% of the variance, $F(1, 45) = 5.12, p < .05$. The wives' marital bond significantly predicted their ratings of their husbands' low-intensity negative affect after controlling for marital satisfaction based on the MAT, accounting for 10.6% of the variance, $F(1, 44) = 4.30, p < .05$. The marital bond of the wives accounted for 17.4% of the variance in their ratings of husbands'

expressed anger, $F(1, 36) = 7.58, p < .01$, reflecting a positive relationship. This relationship remained after controlling for marital satisfaction, accounting for 14.0% of the variance, $F(1, 35) = 4.11, p = .05$. The marital bond of the wives did not predict their ratings of their husbands' expressed domineering.

Wives rating their husbands' high-intensity negative affect codes. The marital bond of the wives did not predict their ratings of their husbands' expressed high-intensity negative affect.

Husbands rating their wives' affect codes. The marital bond of the husbands did not predict their ratings of their wives' expressed positive affect, low-intensity negative affect, or high-intensity negative affect.

Mean ratings of the marital bond groups for affects with significant results. Table 2 summarizes the mean ratings of the composite affects that were found to have a significant relationship to marital bond. Wives rating their husbands' positive affect were generally positive, with significant differences between the three groups, $F(2, 78) =$

TABLE 2. WIVES' MEAN RATINGS OF HUSBANDS' EXPRESSED COMPOSITE AFFECTS BY LOW, MODERATE, AND HIGH MARITAL BOND SCORES

Type of Affect	Low Marital Bond			Moderate Marital Bond			High Marital Bond		
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	M	SD	n
Positive affect	5.1 _a	0.9	28	5.2 _a	1.0	28	5.7 _b	0.8	25
Low-intensity negative affect	3.9 _a	1.3	18	4.9 _b	1.2	15	5.0 _b	1.4	14

Note: Different subscripts within rows indicate the means are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level.

3.76, $p < .05$. When compared to the other two groups, the high marital bond group was more positive. When rating their husbands' low-intensity negative affect, there were also significant differences between the three groups, $F(2, 44) = 3.34$, $p < .05$. Wives in the moderate and high marital bond groups perceived this composite affect as neutral, whereas those in the low marital bond group perceived low-intensity negative affect as significantly more negative.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that sentiment override serves as a perceptual filter through which wives evaluate their husbands' behavior. This study provides the first empirical evidence for the effects of positive sentiment override for wives. Wives who scored low on the marital bond rated their husbands' expression of low-intensity negative affect (anger and domineering) as a negative emotion, whereas wives who scored higher on the marital bond rated their husbands' expression of anger as a neutral emotion. Although the finding should be interpreted with caution because of limited sample sizes, when the affects were examined on an individual basis, it was wives' perception of their husbands' anger that was related to wives' global sentiments (as indexed by the marital bond score). Gottman et al. (1996) defined *anger* as a nonmanipulative tool for emphatically airing a complaint. It is important to note that this definition excludes such expressions as mockery, taunting, or defensiveness, which have been found to be corrosive to a marriage (Gottman, 1994; Gottman et al., 1998). Previous findings indicated that the expression of anger by either the husband or the wife in and of itself does not predict marital success or failure (Gottman et al., 1998). However, the present results suggest that the manner in which wives *perceive* their husbands' anger may influence marital interactions. In stable, happy marriages, wives are less likely to escalate affects such as anger to a higher level of negativity (Gottman et al., 1998). Perhaps it is the ability of wives to interpret a low-intensity negative affect in a more positive manner that reduces the likelihood of escalating a lower-level negative affect, such as anger, to a higher level.

Wives' marital bond scores predicted their ratings of husbands' positive affect. However, there was no evidence for the operation of negative sentiment override, because wives' perceptions of their husbands' positive affect were consistent

with the perceptions of objective raters. In addition, wives' perceptions of their husbands' high-intensity negative affects were not influenced by their global sentiments. The results suggest that sentiment override appears to be effective only up to a certain level of toxicity for wives. Once the negativity reaches a higher level, positive sentiment override no longer appears to influence wives' perception of their husbands' affect. Thus, these results may provide insight into why these high-intensity negative affects are destructive to a marriage. Regardless of the wives' global sentiments about their relationships, overall, they viewed these high-intensity affects as negative communication patterns.

In contrast to the significant findings related to wives, husbands were not influenced by their global sentiments when examining wives' expression of positive affect, low-intensity negative affect, or high-intensity negative affect. The lack of significant results for husbands' perceptions of their wives' expressed emotion is contrary to predictions, but not contrary to past research, which has found sentiment override concepts to hold only for wives. The gender differences in the findings may be related to the suggestion by Helgeson (1994) that wives are more vulnerable to a stressor that focuses on the broad motive of communion, which emphasizes relationship concerns, characterized by attention to and focus on others. A marital conflict interaction may be representative of this type of stressor and thus result in gender differences in the presence of positive sentiment override.

Limitation and Qualifications

To increase the ability to detect differences, affects were grouped into composite categories. Many of the analyses conducted suffered from small sample sizes. Caution must be used when interpreting the findings, as the differences found are likely to be meaningful, but the lack of findings may be attributable to limited power. These findings need to be replicated in future studies using a larger sample size for each affect. In addition, for spouses to be included in the analysis of positive affect, low-intensity negative affect, or high-intensity negative affect, their partners had to display one of the affects included in the composite category during the marital discussion. Because of this necessary requirement, not all spouses were included in each analysis. When attempting to generalize the findings, it is impor-

tant to consider the possibility that there may be important differences between those spouses who expressed the affect and those that did not.

Conclusions and Implications

These results extend prior research suggesting that marital cognitions are associated with positive sentiment override among wives, but not among husbands. These results are particularly important because of the use of more specific, objective ratings of spouse affect. Through the use of this more precise account, we identified differences in the perception of emotions. These perceptual biases may directly influence the outcome and course of ongoing dialogues in a marriage. Consistent with divorce predictions, certain affects may be resistant to the filtering effects of sentiment override. These results suggest that the marital bond, at least in wives, may protect couples when disagreements arise through the operation of positive sentiment override.

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