

**The Meta Marriage: Links between Older Couples' Narratives and Marital Satisfaction**

by

Alexandra Milligan Brown

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Approved by

Amy J. Rauer, Chair, Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies  
Thomas A. Smith, Associate Professor and Director of Marriage and Family Therapy Program  
Megan Haselschwerdt, Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies

## Abstract

The current study was designed to explore the associations between older spouses' interactions during a relationship narrative task and their self-reported levels of marital satisfaction. We gathered data from 62 older married couples from the observations of dimensions of their interactions (e.g., positive affect, communication skills) during the joint narrative task. Hierarchical linear regression analyses were then conducted to reveal the unique contributions of one's own observed communication behaviors, those of one's spouses, and dyadic behaviors to marital satisfaction. Results revealed that husbands' observed communication behaviors (e.g., non-verbal, expressivity) were significantly positively related to their own and their wives' self-reported marital satisfaction. Further, wives' positivity (e.g., laughing, showing affection) was significantly positively associated with their husbands' reported marital satisfaction, although not with their own. Possible explanations for these findings and future directions are discussed with respect to previous research on gender differences and developmental changes in older adulthood.

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## Introduction

Couples in long-lasting marriages benefit more from their years together than those with shorter marital durations, as the benefits of marriage appear to accrue over time. Research suggests those married longer experience fewer health risks (Dupre & Meadows, 2007), greater wealth accumulation (Wilmoth & Koso, 2002), and more emotional support to act as a buffer during stressful life transitions (Bookwala, 2012) than those who are unmarried or married for shorter durations. There are clearly benefits of being together longer, but the nature of this time together likely varies greatly across couples, with some maintaining happy marriages throughout (Bachand & Caron, 2001) and others having less sanguine experiences (Hawkins & Booth, 2005). Even couples with relatively similar marital experiences and histories may have interpretations and recollections of this time together that are quite different. The question is, are these differences meaningful?

In fact, the ways couples think about and remember their lives together can add unique and valuable information beyond the nature of their experiences (Frye & Karney, 2004). Although the joint storytelling of marital history by a husband and wife has been happening informally for centuries, often told by older generations to their families over holiday dinners, only recently have researchers begun to capitalize on the information garnered through a couple's story. As a result, the behavioral components of relationship narratives have been found to be predictive of marital satisfaction (Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004). For example, compared to couples whose relationship stories end in a negative affective tone, those whose stories end in a positive affective tone have been shown to have higher relationship satisfaction,

more feelings of closeness, less conflict, and fewer break-up thoughts (Frost, 2013). Although this explanation shows how narratives link to marital satisfaction, it is equally plausible that marital satisfaction influences the nature of narratives. For instance, couples in happy marriages are likely to share warmer, more positive stories because they may have more of these stories to access than less happy couples. Acknowledging that narratives and marital satisfaction are intricately linked, we investigate here the pathway from narratives to marital satisfaction, as this is consistent with the extant literature on relationship narratives (Holmberg et al.).

Using the narrative technique, researchers have been able to capture the subtle yet distinct differences that emerge from couples' experiences even in their first few years together. What remains to be seen is how couples conceptualize and communicate about their relationships after sharing decades of life together and how this is linked to evaluations of their marriages in the later years. Given that Pasupathi and Mansour (2006) found that older adults are more likely than younger adults to use autobiographical reasoning in narratives and to integrate their experiences into their sense of self, focusing on the relationship narratives of older couples will likely yield important new information about the role of these narratives in marriage. Further, there is evidence to suggest that, contrary to other activities relating to memory cognition, older couples working in collaboration on story-retelling tasks perform as well as younger couples (Dixon & Gould, 1998). It may be that older husbands and wives develop expertise in working together on collaborative tasks, leading to older couples conceptualizing and communicating about their marriages differently than younger couples in relationship narratives.

Another compelling reason to focus on older adults is that there are likely gender differences in how husbands and wives communicate about their long-lasting marriages. Holmberg and colleagues (2004) noted that relationship narratives among young couples in their

20s are indeed gendered. In fact, wives appeared to be more engaged with the narrative task, directing the flow of the relationship story, displaying a more dramatic style, and expressing more affective content than their husbands (Holmberg et al.). Further, gender differences have also been found in related tasks among older adults. For instance, there is evidence to suggest that older women share more memories in greater detail when describing their life histories (Pillemer, Wink, DiDonato, & Sanborn, 2003) and experience more intense emotion when sharing emotional memories than do older men (Levenson, Carstensen, Friesen, & Ekman, 1991). Thus, there is reason to believe that relationship narratives will uncover additional gender differences among long-lasting couples, which have previously only been observed among couples early in their marriages. To note, it is equally plausible that gender differences among older couples may not be as prominent, as numerous studies find that men and women become more androgynous as they age (Carstensen, 1991). In this case, older husbands and wives who have become more similar over the years may have developed roles unique to their own marital experience rather than adhering to traditional gender roles.

Accordingly, this study sought to uncover whether differences exist in how older couples tell the story of their lives together and whether those differences were meaningfully associated with marital satisfaction. The premise of this study is that there is likely variability in narratives even amongst older couples with similar levels of marital satisfaction, as happy older couples attribute their successful marriages to many different factors (Bachand & Caron, 2001). We propose that a relationship narrative task will be a good vehicle for tapping into the differences underlying older adults' marital interactions. As Fincham (2004) found that both verbal and nonverbal dimensions of couples' communication (e.g., emotion, self-disclosure, reciprocated behavior) uniquely predict relationship satisfaction, the dimensions chosen for this study (i.e.,

affect, communication skills, balance) have been shown to be critical to capture communication between couples and closely linked to marital satisfaction (ICDS; Kline et al., 2004). This type of observational approach allows us to examine the interaction patterns of married couples through the broader context of their relationship history (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Jacobson and Christensen (1996) suggest that clinicians should spend time finding out how unhappy couples met and started a relationship to provide them with temporary relief, as most couples enjoy recounting the better times. Thus, a study of older couples' relationship narratives could inform the use of this strategy with older spouses and improve the marital satisfaction of distressed couples in later life.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Background

The formulation of this study will be guided by Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) behavioral theory, which suggests that the ways spouses interact determine the quality of their relationships. These interactions, whether they be positive, negative, or mixed have been shown to accumulate over time and influence spouses' global judgments of marital quality (Gottman, 1999). For example, spouses that accumulated many positive interactions with one another were seen to consider a negative encounter as an exception to an overall good experience in marriage. On the other hand, spouses that accumulated many negative interactions were seen to attribute the interactions to a dissatisfying relationship, whereby those perceptions make the occurrences of negative interactions more likely. In Karney & Bradbury's (1995) review of 115 longitudinal studies with dozens of predictors of how marriages develop and change over time (e.g., demographics, background, personality, conflict behaviors, relationship values), behavioral interactions between husbands and wives were shown to be the most powerful and consistent predictors of marital satisfaction. Thus, observational research on couples' behavior has been given a well-deserved focus over the past several decades and has greatly informed both the direction of marital research and the strategies clinicians use to intervene in distressed marriages.

From behavioral theory, we would expect that happier, more stable relationships are those that have a higher proportion of positive to negative interactions (Gottman, Coan, Carrère, & Swanson, 1998). Happy marriages have been classified as those in which consistent positive interactions have been rewarded, influencing both spouses to feel satisfied in the marriage

(Weiss, 1984). In fact, the most cited difference between couples with happy and unhappy marriages is that happy, successful couples utilized more positivity and less negativity during conflict (Rauer & Volling, 2013). Couples who utilized more positivity during conflict and problem-solving tasks were seen displaying signs of pleasure including laughing, smiling, displays of affection, repair attempts, and validation of their partners' emotions (Gottman, 1999). Alternately, unhappy couples utilized more negativity, evidenced through anger, distress, sadness, domineering, or withdrawing, and these behaviors often resulted in a negative, escalating cycle (Fincham, 2004; Escudero, Rogers, & Gutierrez, 1997). These differing communication behaviors were observed between non-distressed and distressed couples regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or occupational status (Krokoff, Gottman, & Roy, 1988). However, these happy versus unhappy patterns have been largely defined based on couples' behaviors in conflict tasks (Fincham, 2004).

Although observational work on how couples handle conflict has yielded important insight into couple functioning, Cutrona (1996) stated that domains other than conflict might be as critical to observe interactions and predict marital outcomes. For example, couple interactions in the support domain (i.e., provision and receipt) have been found to predict key marital outcomes such as support satisfaction and marital love (Jensen, Rauer, & Volling, 2013). Not only have researchers used couple support tasks to learn more about marital satisfaction, but a few studies have also compared couples' behaviors in the context of both conflict and support to show that each domain explains something unique about how spouses evaluate their marriages. Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier, and Bégin (2003) studied the interactions of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples in both conflict and support tasks and found that partners' positive and negative behaviors in each domain accounted for differences in relationship satisfaction not

captured in the other. Moreover, Pasch and Bradbury (1998) found that for newlywed couples, wives' behaviors in a support task (e.g., support solicitation, provision) predicted their marital satisfaction two years later independently of their negative behaviors during a conflict task.

Given that the observation of couple domains beyond conflict have been linked to relationship satisfaction, it is imperative that we continue to examine additional interactional contexts to further our understanding of marital communication.

Because the context of couples' communication can influence the ways they relate to one another, researchers have begun to consider the importance of the tasks used to observe these interactions. To show that different behaviors can be elicited depending on the nature of couples' interactions, researchers designed a marital discussion task to observe couples in a more neutral emotional state and compared it to a problem-solving task (Melby, Ge, Conger, & Warner, 1995). The marital discussion task included both positive and negative questions to elicit a range of interactions (e.g., describe enjoyable times together, describe the frequency of disagreements of family issues) and, as predicted, spouses did demonstrate warmer and more supportive interactions in this marital discussion task than they did in the conflict task. The change of context from a problem-oriented task to a more general discussion about marriage highlights the importance of context in thinking about how we use observational tasks to study couple interactions. Providing further support for the importance of task design, Driver and Gottman (2004) observed couples' communication in a naturalistic apartment setting to tap into how couples interact in their everyday lives apart from prompts of problem issues. The researchers found that couples' enthusiasm during dinnertime conversations was associated with their use of affection during later times of conflict, a behavior previously seen to be predictive of marital happiness. As couples' dinnertime conversations were shown to link to their later problem-

solving discussions, there may be many untapped situations in which husbands and wives interact that would affect their overall experience of marriage and thus how they would rate their satisfaction with their relationship. These findings further demonstrate the need to consider different contexts to examine unexplored domains of couple communication.

## Narratives

The relationship narrative is one inventive domain in which researchers have further studied couples' interactions. The work of Diane Holmberg and colleagues (2004) from the Early Years of Marriage Project (EYM) suggests that how couples jointly share their relationship histories is predictive of their marital well-being. Their *Thrice Told Tales* documents the decade-long investigation of the relationship stories of 344 couples in their 20s as they reflected together about the development of their relationships. Couples' narratives were extensively coded in many areas (i.e., couple interaction, couple affect, thematic content) to reveal that their relationship stories were associated with their evaluations of marital satisfaction. For example, Holmberg and Holmes (1994) compared the stories of two sets of couples who were equally happy in their first year of marriage to the same couples' narratives a few years later, when one group remained happy and the other experienced a sharp decline in marital satisfaction. Both groups' narratives were similar in Year 1, however, at Year 3, the less happy group retold original Year 1 stories in a more negative tone than the continuously happy couples. On the other hand, happy couples' stories were more positive and these couples were shown to become more satisfied over time. The observation of the affective tone in couples' relationship histories were thus able to provide meaningful information about spouses' current and future evaluations of their relationships.

Although the content of couples' narratives has helped researchers find clues about couples' marital satisfaction, the method of delivery of that content is a critical yet understudied component. This is in contrast to observational studies using conflict and problem-solving tasks, which have focused almost exclusively on the behavioral components of couple interactions (Gottman, 1999) and given scant attention to the content of couple problems (Sanford, 2003; Williamson, Hanna, Lavner, Bradbury, & Karney, 2013). Behavioral processes within couples' relationship narratives have been shown to provide researchers not only with information on a couples' past, but also its present and future quality. For example, the observation of spouses' behaviors, such as fondness (e.g., affection, positive affect), negativity towards spouse (e.g., disagreement, negative affect), engagement (e.g., expressiveness), and we-ness (i.e., identifying as a couple versus individual), seen in couples' narrative were found to be associated with their self-reported marital happiness (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992). The same study also found marked gender differences in the variables that predicted later marital satisfaction. Specifically, the negative behaviors that husbands displayed towards their wives (e.g., low fondness, high negativity) during interviews were more strongly related to whether couples were later separated or divorced than were the same behaviors displayed by wives.

Not only have couples' interactions during their narratives been helpful to tap into their relationship satisfaction, but they may also be a useful assessment to predict or detect risk factors of an unhappy marriage. Buehlman and colleagues' (1992) earlier-mentioned study was actually able to predict divorce among couples with 94% accuracy based on their interactions in a narrative task. Similarly, using a composite score of both positive (e.g., husband and wife fondness and engagement, couple we-ness) and negative (e.g., marital disappointment) dimensions of couples' interactions during a discussion of couples' relationship histories,

Doohan, Carrère, and Riggs (2010) found that couples scoring highest on the positive dimensions and lowest on the negative dimensions fared better later (e.g., highest levels of marital satisfaction). Their results also suggest the need for further examination of gender differences during narrative interactions, as husbands and wives scoring highest on the negative dimensions had discrepancies in their reports of marital satisfaction that appeared to be problematic.

Beyond the use of couples' narratives as assessment of their current and future marital satisfaction, we also see that couples' narratives may change over time, in effect mirroring the ways that their relationships develop. Although some aspects of narratives have been seen to remain relatively constant throughout the first several years of marriage, such as spouses' ability to negotiate a joint narrative, changes have been observed in how couples communicated about their marriages even across the early years (Holmberg et al., 2004). For example, couples' narratives became less dramatic and less emotional upon retelling their story at Year 7 than it was when they first told it during Year 1. This indicates that couples' interactions likely continue to fluctuate throughout the course of their relationship.

We must consider the suggestion of Holmberg and associates (2004) to study relationship narratives during other important transitions in couples' lives, as most of the narrative studies have been conducted with newlyweds in their 20s, at the beginning stages of marriage. Given that researchers have been able to uncover changes in couples' narratives after only a few years of marriage, how might couples' interactions when describing their relationship history look after spending decades together? As older couples' communication patterns have likely continued to develop over the course of many life transitions (e.g., launch of children, retirement, declining health), their relationship stories may elicit different types of interactions than young

couples only recently adjusting to the new stage of marriage. Thus, there remain key questions to be answered as to how these couples interact in sharing their extensive relationship histories and how older spouses have learned to communicate with one another over the course of that history.

### **Communication and its Links to Marital Satisfaction Among Older Couples**

To provide a better picture of what couples' communication patterns might look like in older adulthood, we draw upon a small body of literature that has sought to utilize observational work to understand how adults successfully communicate with each other. In perhaps the most widely cited study of older couples' marital communication, Carstensen, Gottman, and Levenson (1995) used an observational coding system to compare emotional behaviors and emotional reciprocity among middle-aged and older couples and posited that older couples used communication strategies to limit the negativity in their interactions. Couples' conversations were coded on positive (e.g., affection, humor) and negative (e.g., contempt, sadness) dimensions across three tasks: (1) a positive, mutually agreed on pleasant topic, (2) a neutral discussion of the events of the day, and (3) a negative, problem area of continued disagreement. Carstensen and colleagues found that older spouses displayed more affection toward one another and expressed less negativity than middle-age spouses in the problem discussion in particular. Older wives, however, continued to express more emotion overall (positive and negative), suggesting that gender differences in spouses' interaction behaviors are maintained well into the later years of marriage. The change in communication dynamics appears developmentally driven, as research found that older adults experienced positive emotion just as frequently and intensely as younger adults but older adults experienced negative emotion less frequently (Levenson et al., 1991). Although this study was not conducted with couples, it suggests that emotional life for couples in older adulthood likely looks different from couples that are younger

and just starting out, thus influencing the ways older couples would share their relationship stories.

Not only have studies of older couples revealed differences between their emotional expressions and those of younger couples, but recent work also suggests that older couples may be able to collaborate with more expertise than younger couples, which has bearing on how they might approach a relationship narrative task. For example, older couples outperformed their own individual scores and the scores of nominal pairs on a demanding computer problem-solving task (Peter-Wright & Martin, 2010). The researchers posited that dyads with a long history of solving problems together might reach optimal performance, which was supported by the fact that most couples reported their completion of the computer task to be reflective of their everyday collaboration efforts. Relatedly, Dixon and Gould (1998) compared the collaboration skills of groups of older and younger couples with older and younger non-coupled dyads in the retelling of complex stories. Analyses of performance on the task showed that older couples performed as well as younger couples in the story retelling, despite well-known declines in individual cognition in later life. These older couples performed better together than other non-coupled groups of older adults and were seen to be experts in jointly and accurately rating their recall performances. Both of these studies suggest that a task designed to recall their own relationship memories may demonstrate well-practiced collaborative communication skills among older couples. Further, optimal performance for one older couple may look different from another older couple based on their own individual experiences of collaborating together.

### **The Current Study**

Given what we know about the influence of couples' interactions on their marital quality and how interactional patterns may differ in older adulthood, this study intends to explore how

older spouses' interactions during a narrative task may be related to both husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction. As spouse's interactional behaviors (e.g., positive affect, engagement) in a narrative task have been shown to explain meaningful differences in spouses' marital satisfaction (Holmberg & Holmes, 1994), we plan to focus on these dimensions to capture communication between couples. The focus on couples' behaviors in a relationship narrative task is novel, as most of the literature of observed communication in marriage has been examined through the lens of problem-solving and support tasks (Melby et al., 1995). Though this previous work has greatly informed the literature of how couples' interactions influence their marital quality, we posit that couples' behaviors during a task in which they are not primed for a specific type of interaction (e.g., discuss a problem with spouse, provide spouse with support) will be more reflective of how they naturally communicate in the later years. This more naturalistic task will allow us to examine which aspects of couples' collaborative efforts to share their relationship histories are more closely associated with their marital satisfaction. Further, given the gender differences observed in the work of Holmberg and colleagues (2004), we will explore whether there will be differences in what aspects of couples' discussions are most salient for husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction. This study will allow us to begin to examine how aspects of communication may look different in a relationship narrative task among aging couples, informing the strategies clinicians use to intervene in and improve marital satisfaction in the later years.

## Method

### Participants

Sixty-four married heterosexual couples were recruited as a part of a study investigating marital relationships and well-being in older adulthood. Participants were recruited through advertisements in newspapers, churches, and other organizations in a community in the Southeast United States. In order for couples to be eligible for participation, they had to meet three criteria: (1) couples had to be married, (2) couples had to be at least partially retired or working less than 40 hours a week, and (3) couples had to be able to drive to the research center, ensuring that they were relatively healthy and high functioning.

On average, husbands were approximately 71 years old ( $SD = 7.4$ ) and wives were approximately 70 years old ( $SD = 7.0$ ). Fifty-one (80%) of couples were in their first marriage and couples had been married for 42 years, on average ( $SD = 15$ ). The couples had an average of 2.6 children ( $SD = 1.3$ ; range = 0-6). Husbands and wives were almost exclusively European American ( $n = 60$  and  $n = 61$ , respectively) and highly educated. In terms of husbands' education, 21 had some college or less and 43 had completed college or post-graduate degrees. For wives, 7 had some college or less and 57 had completed college or post-graduate degrees. The average income for couples was \$85,875 ( $SD = \$64,074$ ) and they had an average total wealth of \$1,082,547 ( $SD = \$1,277,611$ ), including couple assets such as property, pensions, and IRAs. Forty-seven couples (73%) were fully retired and 17 couples were partially retired, with one spouse still working for pay. Complete data was available for 62 of the 64 couples. For two couples, the video footage of the narrative task was not available based on recording error.

## **Procedure**

Couples participated in an onsite visit at a research laboratory for around 2-3 hours. During that time, marital communication was observed as couples participated in a relationship narrative task, a baseline picture-viewing task, a problem solving task, a compassionate love task, and a support task. The relationship narrative task is the focus of the current study and was the first task that couples completed during their visits. This task and the instructions given were based largely procedures used in Holmberg and colleagues (2004) Early Years of Marriage (EYM) Project. Couples were asked to share the history of their marriage, from how they met, to present day, to their hopes for the future. A printed storyline sheet was provided for couples to roughly follow, which asked them to describe how they met, how they became a couple, their wedding, the newlywed and middle years of their marriage, what life was like at the time, and what they thought life would be like in the future (see Appendix E). The interviewer then asked the couples to tell their stories however they wanted to, as long as both spouses participated in some of the narrative telling. At the end of the visit, couples were provided with questionnaires that asked more detailed questions about their individual and marital lives. Upon returning the questionnaires, couples were given \$75 in compensation for their participation.

## **Measures**

**Marital satisfaction.** Participants' marital satisfaction was measured using the Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire for Older Persons (Haynes et al., 1992). This measure was designed to be particularly appropriate for older adults and was predictive of the occurrence of couples' positive or negative behaviors during problem-solving discussions. The questionnaire consisted of 24 questions that assess various dimensions of marital satisfaction including specific topics of marital satisfaction (e.g., shared interests, disagreements, sexual relations) as well as questions

that assess developmental aspects of relationships in older adulthood (e.g., spouse's physical health). Questions were rated on scales of one to four, one to five, or one to six, with one being the most dissatisfied or negative responses (e.g., "0-25%" pleasant attention, very dissatisfied with marriage right now) and the highest rating denoting the most satisfied or positive responses (76-100% pleasant attention, very satisfied with marriage right now). Reliability for this measure was (husbands:  $\alpha=.93$ ; wives:  $\alpha=.93$ ).

**Couples' narratives—individual codes.** Video recordings of each couples' narrative were collected and later coded on individual and couple dimensions of communication. Individual and couple codes were adapted from the Interactional Dimensions Coding System (ICDS), a global coding system based on family communication behaviors, to better capture couples' behaviors in a narrative task (Kline et al., 2004). Two coders jointly observed and discussed video data to solidify code descriptions and then separately coded a set of videos to obtain reliability. For the individual codes, coders assigned scores ranging from 1-7 for positive affect and communication skills based on husbands' and wives' interactions with their spouses during the narrative task. First, positive affect was observed, which referred to an individual's expression of positivity towards or in response to the other partners' behavior. A score of 1 ("very low") indicated no positive affect, smiling or laughter, and a lack of enjoyment from the interaction. A "*moderate*" score of 4 indicated low level enjoyment or positive affect, although these displays were not intense or prolonged. A score of 7 ("very high") demonstrated consistent and continuous enjoyment throughout the interaction, visible through smiling, laughing, tears of joy or signs of affection. Interrater reliability for individual positive affect was  $r = .74, p < .001$  for wife positive affect, and  $r = .77, p < .001$  for husband positive affect.

Second, coders observed communication skills, which assessed the individual's ability to convey thoughts, feelings, and opinions in a clear constructive manner. Dimensions of communication skills including ability to understand partner's point of view, clarity of speech, eye contact, and body orientation were included in this assessment. A score of 1 (*"very low"*) indicated no ability or effort to communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions. A *"moderate"* score of 4 meant the individual's expression is clear but not fully developed, with basic communication skills (e.g., some eye contact). A score of 7 (*"very high"*) indicated a superior ability to communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions, with very clear and articulate expression throughout the interaction. Interrater reliability for communication skills was  $r = .72$ ,  $p < .001$  for wife communication skills, and  $r = .73$ ,  $p < .001$  for husband communication skills.

**Couples' narratives—couple codes.** For couple codes, coders observed balance/reciprocity, which assessed the relative contributions of each partner to the interaction. Included were dimensions such as control, turn-taking, and equity of contribution to the narrative. A score of 1 (*"very low"*) indicated interaction characterized by dominance of one partner over the other. A *"moderate"* score of 4 meant that spouses were fairly consistent in including one another through solicitation of opinions and response, however one partner was primarily responsible for the progression of the narrative. A score of 7 (*"very high"*) indicated a couple was almost in complete synchrony, in which turn-taking was smooth and both partners contributed equally to the interaction. Interrater reliability for couple balance/reciprocity was  $r = .72$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Second, engagement noted the degree to which coders observed interpersonal involvement and the persistence of partner-directed behaviors. Included were dimensions such as visual regard, maintenance attempts, and spouses' connectedness during the interaction. A score

of 1 (“*very low*”) indicated indifference, ignoring, flat affect, and minimal engagement. A “*moderate*” score of 4 referred to contact between spouses that was consistently on and off or fairly persistent with a large lull, as if the couple seemed to be going through the motions of completing the task. A score of 7 (“*very high*”) indicated a couple had extensive visual regard and shared the narrative as if the experimenter was not in the room. Interrater reliability for couple engagement was  $r = .65, p < .001$ .

Finally, fun/enjoyment noted the degree to which the couple demonstrated enjoyment of the interaction and joint activity. Ratings focused on whether couples were having a fun interaction together as indicated by the tone of their interaction (i.e., neutral, enthusiastic) and affective signs (e.g. sighing, boredom). A score of 1 (“*very low*”) evidenced no fun or enjoyment of their interaction, although interaction may not have occurred. A “*moderate*” score of 4 indicated that the couple did not mind being together and may have enjoyed it times, though they did not find it really enjoyable. A score of 7 (“*very high*”) revealed a pair that had fun in their enjoyment through marked exuberance or delight, with mutual intense smiling and/or laughing having occurred. Interrater reliability for couple fun/enjoyment was  $r = .63, p < .001$ .

### **Plan of Analysis**

To ensure that the data are normally distributed, we conducted preliminary analyses to obtain descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness statistics, and correlations. We then conducted paired t-tests to examine whether there are gender differences between husbands and wives’ interactional behaviors and reports of marital satisfaction. To test the proposed hypotheses, we used hierarchical linear regression models to reveal the unique contributions of one’s own observed communication behaviors, those of one’s spouse’s, and dyadic behaviors during a relationship narrative task to each spouse’s reports of marital

satisfaction. In Model 1, we included couples' marital duration and duration of couples' narratives as controls to ensure conservative estimates of these associations. In Model 2, we added one's own communication behaviors (husbands' behaviors for husbands' marital satisfaction; wives' behaviors for wives' marital satisfaction). In Model 3, we included spouses' communication behaviors to determine if these explained unique variance in one's own marital satisfaction reports (wives' behaviors for husbands' marital satisfaction; husbands' behaviors for wives' marital satisfaction). Finally, in Model 4, we added the dyadic dimensions of couple communication (engagement, balance/reciprocity, fun/enjoyment) to determine if they explained unique variance in marital satisfaction above and beyond individual and spousal communication behaviors.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics were examined for all of the study variables of interest, including the mean, range, standard deviation, and skewness statistics (see Table 1). On average, couples completed the relationship narrative task in 31 minutes ( $SD = 13.66$ ). Spouses showed moderate to moderately high levels of both positive affect and communication skills. For example, on a 1 to 7 Likert scale for the positive affect score, husbands had a mean of 5.06 and wives had a mean of 4.65. For couple measures, couples displayed moderate to moderately high levels of engagement, balance/reciprocity, and enjoyment/fun. Husbands and wives also reported being highly satisfied with their marriages in general, with husbands reporting 117.55 and wives reporting 116.36 out of a possible range of 24-139. Skewness statistics were acceptable for almost all variables, such that all study variables were normally distributed in this sample with the exception of husband and wife marital satisfaction and marital duration. The negative skewness statistic for husbands (-3.22) and wives (-1.26) indicates that the majority of scores for self-reported marital satisfaction were near the highly satisfied end of the scale, which is consistent with many studies of marital satisfaction (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Paired *t*-tests were examined to determine whether there were significant differences between husbands and wives in their use of positive affect, communication skills, and reports of marital satisfaction. Results indicated that husbands ( $M = 4.40$ ;  $SD = .90$ ) and wives ( $M = 4.65$ ;  $SD = .88$ ) significantly differed on positive affect, as wives were significantly more positively

affective than husbands,  $t(62) = -2.22$ ,  $p < .05$ . There were no significant differences, however, between husbands and wives for communication skills and marital satisfaction.

Correlations were then examined to explore the link between narrative task behaviors and marital satisfaction (see Table 1). First, within spouse correlations were examined and revealed that spouse's individual codes positive affect and communication skills were significantly positively correlated for both husbands and wives. Husband positive affect was significantly correlated with couple engagement and fun/enjoyment, and husband communications skills were significantly correlated with couple engagement, balance/reciprocity, and fun/enjoyment. Wife positive affect was significantly positively correlated with couple engagement, balance/reciprocity, and fun/enjoyment. Wife communication skills were also significantly positively correlated with couple engagement, balance/reciprocity, and fun/enjoyment.

Within spouse correlations further revealed that all narrative task behaviors for husbands and wives were significantly correlated with their marital satisfaction. Husband positive affect and communication skills were both positively significantly correlated with husband marital satisfaction. Couple engagement, balance/reciprocity, and fun/enjoyment were also significantly correlated with husband marital satisfaction. Wife positive affect and communications skills were positively significantly correlated with their own marital satisfaction. Couple engagement, balance/reciprocity, and fun/enjoyment were also significantly positively correlated with wife marital satisfaction. Between-spouse correlations revealed that individual husband and wife variables were significantly positively correlated.

Finally, correlations revealed no evidence linking the control variables of marital duration or narrative duration to any of the study variables, with the exception of couple engagement. Couples who were married longer tended to be significantly less engaged than those who were

married for shorter durations. Although the control variables were not strongly associated with the narrative behaviors, we retained these theoretically-relevant variables in the regression analyses to ensure a conservative estimate of the links between narrative behaviors and marital satisfaction.

### **Narrative Behaviors and Marital Satisfaction**

Hierarchical linear regression analyses were then conducted to examine the unique contributions of study control variables, observed individual behaviors, and observed dyadic behaviors to marital satisfaction. First, Model 1 included both marital duration and narrative duration as control variables in predicting marital satisfaction. Second, to test whether husbands' and wives' own behaviors explained significant differences in marital satisfaction, Model 2 included the two individual behaviors observed during the narrative task (i.e., positive affect, communication skills). Third, Model 3 added their spouse's individual behaviors (i.e., positive affect, communication skills) to see whether partner behaviors predicted marital satisfaction. Finally, Model 4 included husbands' and wives' own behaviors, their partners' behaviors, and the couple behaviors observed during the narrative task (i.e., engagement, balance/reciprocity, fun/enjoyment) to predict marital satisfaction.

For husbands, Model 1 revealed no significant results for the control variables predicting marital satisfaction and the  $R^2$  statistic was not significant (see Table 2). However, there was a significant change from Model 1 to Model 2. Including husband positive affect and communication skills in Model 2 accounted for a significant amount of variance in husband marital satisfaction, but only communication skills emerged as a significant predictor of marital satisfaction ( $\beta = .39, p < .01$ ). In Model 3, wives' positive affect ( $\beta = .33, p < .05$ ) emerged as a significant predictor of husbands' marital satisfaction in addition to his own communication

skills ( $\beta = .41, p < .01$ ) and the addition of wives' variables to the model resulted in a marginally significant change in the amount of variance explained ( $F = 2.45, p < .10$ ). Finally, including all observed behaviors in Model 4 (i.e., individual, partner, and couple) accounted for a significant amount of variance in husband marital satisfaction, though there was not a significant change in the amount of variance explained by the addition of these variables. Both greater husband communication ( $\beta = .40, p < .01$ ) and greater wife positive affect ( $\beta = .53, p < .05$ ) during the narrative task were significantly related to greater husband marital satisfaction. Therefore, husbands who were observed to be more expressive communicators, and those who had wives who showed more positivity, reported more marital satisfaction.

For wives, Model 1 and Model 2 revealed no significant results for the control and wife individual variables (i.e., positive affect, communication skills) and the  $R^2$  statistics were not significant (see Table 3). There was no significant change in variance from Model 1 to Model 2; however, there was a significant change in variance from Model 2 to Model 3. Including husband variables in Model 3, accounted for a significant amount of variance in wife marital satisfaction, with husbands' communication skills emerging as a significant predictor of wives' marital satisfaction ( $\beta = .46, p < .01$ ). Including all observed variables (i.e., individual, partner, and couple) accounted for a significant amount of variance in Model 4, though there was not a significant change in the amount of variance explained by the addition of these variables. Again, only husbands' communication skills ( $\beta = .39, p < .01$ ) were significantly related to wives' marital satisfaction. Therefore, wives who had husbands who were observed to be more expressive communicators reported more marital satisfaction.

## Discussion

Given that spouses' interactions are strongly associated with the quality of their relationships (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), we observed older adult couples as they interacted during a relationship narrative task to examine how certain communication behaviors (e.g., positive affect, communication skills) were linked to spouses' marital satisfaction. By asking couples to share their own relationship histories, the current study was able to capture interactions that may more closely approximate the interactions they have during their daily lives (Driver & Gottman, 2004), in contrast to more traditional observational tasks in which certain behaviors are primed. Results of the current study revealed that the more skilled husbands were observed to be in communicating during the narrative task, the more that both husbands and wives reported being satisfied in their marriages. Further, the more positive wives were seen to be (e.g., smiling, laughing, affectionate) during the task, the more satisfaction husbands derived from their marriages. Wives' satisfaction, however, was most strongly associated with their husbands' communication skills and did not appear to be influenced by any of their own behaviors. These findings suggest that both researchers and practitioners may need to consider the intersection of gender and developmental status when evaluating the role of communication in later-life marriages.

### **The Role of Husbands Communication in Marital Satisfaction**

The current study found that the ways husbands communicate during a narrative task are vital to understanding both husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction in older adulthood. Our finding is consistent with work from Burleson and Denton (1997), which found that dimensions

of husbands' self-reported communication skills were predictive of their own marital satisfaction among nondistressed couples in the first decade of marriage. Further, Rauer and Volling's (2005) investigation of emotional expressivity in the marital relationship revealed that husbands' positive emotional expressivity was related to their own reports of marital functioning in middle age (e.g., marital love, maintenance). Thus, it appears that husbands' ability to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and opinions continues to play a large role in their marital satisfaction even in older adulthood. Thought of as a persistent pattern of communicating that is often related to emotion (Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke, & Fox, 1995), husbands' emotional expressivity may signify a secure attachment to their wives (Bowlby, 1989). Older husbands may feel as though it is less of a risk to express their emotions and have more experience doing so than those who are relatively new to marriage. Considering our finding, it would make sense that husbands who have honed this skill would also experience higher levels of marital satisfaction (Carstensen, 1995).

Not only were husbands with more effective communication skills more maritally satisfied, but their wives also appeared to be happier than wives whose husbands were less verbally skilled. As the sample in our current study was generally highly maritally satisfied, it could be that the many stressful life events that couples encounter throughout the course of a long marriage transforms the ways in which husbands and wives communicate (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997). For example, husbands predisposed to positive communication may be better able to adapt to stressors when they arise, resulting in more positive marital outcomes. Alternately, husbands' communication skills could have improved in response to having to adapt to a number of different stressors both within and outside the marriage. It does appear that husbands' communication efforts may become more central to wives' marital satisfaction in the

later years, which is in contrast to the assumption that wives are more responsible than husbands to maintain communication in intimate relationships (Cancian & Gordon, 1988). The emphasis on husbands' communication in our findings could represent a successful and normative adaptation to marital stress, as couples in our sample were both long-lasting and generally highly maritally satisfied. It could also be the case that these couples experienced less marital stress over the years and were more easily able to access positive communication, though the content of couples' narratives indicate that most couples encountered marital stressors at some point in their marriages (e.g., financial difficulties, substance abuse problems, death of loved ones).

The verbal expressivity of wives, however, had no bearing on either spouse's satisfaction. This result differs from previous work that indicates greater positive emotional expressivity for women is associated with higher levels of their self-reported marital satisfaction (Halberstadt et al., 1995). Husbands have been shown to become more similar to wives in levels of emotional expressivity as they age (Carstensen et al., 1995), which would seem to suggest that both husbands' and wives' communication skills should have emerged as significant predictors.

Given the importance of husbands' communication to both spouses' marital functioning in older adulthood, it may be that there are different communication patterns among older couples that deserve careful consideration in marital therapy. The holistic nature of coding in this study allowed us to account for a number of observable communication behaviors including spouses' ability to clearly and constructively convey thoughts and feelings, express emotion about themselves or their partners, and demonstrate positive verbal (e.g., stuttering, sentence structure) and non-verbal skills (e.g., eye contact, expressive face). However, it is possible that there are certain dimensions of communication that are more or less important to spouses' marital satisfaction. Nonetheless, it appears that clinicians should focus on husbands'

communication behaviors to provide invaluable information as to which type of communication intervention would best enhance the couples' marital satisfaction. For example, husbands' poor communication skills may require only behavioral skills training focused on improving verbal (e.g., expressivity) and non-verbal (e.g., eye contact, tone of voice) dimensions of their communication. Alternately, husbands whose poor communication skills were seen to be part of a negative couple interactional pattern, however, may require more intensive emotion-focused marital therapy to improve marital satisfaction (Burleson & Denton, 1997).

### **What Do Wives Contribute?**

Though wives' communication skills did not account for any differences in their own or their husbands' marital satisfaction, wives who were more positive throughout the narrative task had husbands who were more maritally satisfied. Interestingly, positivity on either the part of wives or husbands was not associated with their own marital satisfaction. This is unexpected given that spouses' use of affect appears to be closely linked not only with their marital satisfaction but also predictive of whether or not they will divorce later on (Gottman, 1999). Further, it is surprising that wives' use of positive behaviors (e.g., laughing, smiling, showing affection) would be important to their husbands but husbands' positivity would not in turn influence their wives' marital satisfaction. These findings suggest that there remain important gender differences in the ways spouses communicate in older adulthood. Though both spouses may become more positive and show more affection to their partners in older adulthood (Carstensen et al., 1995), wives may continue to express more positivity and be more affectionate than their husbands, which in turn appear to have significant bearing on husbands' satisfaction.

### **A Developmental Explanation**

The developmental changes that occur in older adulthood have been shown to have effects on both how spouses interact with one another and how happily married spouses are in older adulthood (Carstensen, Graff, Levenson, & Gottman, 1996). Previous research has indicated that there are elements of marriage that both change and remain constant as spouses enter older adulthood (Carstensen et al., 1995). The importance of husband communication to marital satisfaction in the findings could reveal a developmental change for older couples and perhaps lends support to the speculation that gender differences appear to lessen in later life (Hyde & Phllis, 1979). However, our findings also suggest that older wives in our study may in fact continue to display more emotion overall throughout the lifespan, as older wives expressed significantly more positive affect than husbands. Thus, it may be that there are certain qualities of spouses' interactions that retain the same importance throughout development and others that begin to look different in older adulthood and affect relationship satisfaction in different ways. Longitudinal data would help to uncover how husbands' communication skills and wives' positive affect develop and how these changes may result in more or less marital satisfaction over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Though we anticipated that couples' joint behaviors during the narrative discussion would provide us with information about their happiness together (e.g., engagement, balance/reciprocity, fun/enjoyment), the dyadic codes were not found to be predictive of marital satisfaction for couples in our study. There could be a developmental explanation for these nonfindings, as couples in later life may have developed ways of interacting together that contribute to their marital happiness in unexpected ways. For example, one spouse's dominance over the other in their contribution to the narrative may not be representative of disequilibrium but instead of the balance that the couple had established over the years. This suggests that there

may be important differences not only within couples (i.e., between spouses), but also between couples (i.e., different couple types) that may be linked to spouses' reports of marital satisfaction. Future studies should consider the use of a typology approach to explore whether differences in couples' dyadic behaviors are meaningfully associated with their marital happiness, as person-oriented approaches have been found to detect differences in behaviors even amongst samples of highly satisfied couples (Rauer & Volling, 2013).

Additionally, there may be cohort effects operating whereby our results are unique to a population of older adults born in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This cohort may place different values on emotional expression in older adulthood that are observable in both communication and affect than will the future cohort of baby boomers (Sullivan, 2006). For instance, the context of gender for the generation older husbands in our sample (e.g., as primary wage-earners, military servicemen) may cause them to be less emotionally expressive than younger couples observed in a similar task (Pavalko & Elder, 1990). Additionally, this sample could have different expectations for their marriages than future cohorts that influence their ratings of marital satisfaction (Bookwala, 2012). For example, older couples' more traditional views of marriage may have helped them to remain committed even in the face of marital difficulties over the years and thus reflect more positively on their marriages (Iveniuk, Waite, Laumann, McClintock, & Tiedt, 2014).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The results of the current study can be interpreted with confidence based on several methodological strengths. First, the use of a relationship narrative task was novel and allowed us to observe couple interactions in a context without any agenda beyond engaging the couple. Given that almost all of what is known about the interactional patterns of couples is derived from

conflict or support tasks (Melby et al., 1995), the focus on couples' memories of their marriages through the years provided a unique context in which to study behavioral interactions. This study also informs the use of relationship narratives as an intervention in marital therapy, reinforcing Jacobson and Christensen's (1996) recommendation to ask unhappy couples how they met to elicit enjoyment of recounting the better times.

Second, following the suggestion of Holmberg and colleagues (2004) to study narratives during developmental periods in couples' lives beyond the beginning stages of marriage, data from this study were gathered from a sample of older couples in long-lasting marriages. As almost all of the current literature on relationship narratives is focused on couples early or in the middle of marriage (Holmberg et al.), this sample is especially significant as it is one of the first that has looked at the ways married couples share their marital histories after spending decades of life together.

Third, our ability to observe couple interactions in a dyadic context is another strength of the study. The observation of both spouse's own behaviors and couple's shared behaviors allowed us to identify which dimensions were the most salient for each spouses' marital satisfaction. In line with Gottman's (1993) suggestion, the observable behaviors we witnessed may be indicative of more long-standing interactional patterns between older spouses. The observational nature of this study allowed us to capture the important differences in findings for husbands and wives, which is vital to clinicians as they attempt to enhance spouses' marital satisfaction through their interactional and communication patterns.

Despite these strengths, there are limitations to interpreting the results of the current study. First, participants in this task were highly educated, financially well off, and happily married older adults. Future studies would benefit from the use of relationship narratives in a

sample of clinical populations of distressed older couples as these couples may reflect on their relationships in different ways. More economically disadvantaged couples may have developed differing patterns of communication throughout the course of marriage due to a number of different stressors (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For example, long-lasting couples that have experienced economic hardships (e.g., job loss, receiving public assistance) may have adapted by avoiding rather than expressing their emotions regarding the stressor. It may also be that the high levels of educational attainment of husbands in our sample amplified the importance of husbands' communication skills and this result may not be replicated in less-educated samples (Burleson & Denton, 1997).

A further limitation of this study is that despite the strength of focus on interactional behaviors, we were unable to capture the extent to which these behaviors were driven by the content of the story. It is likely that the diverse content reported in couples' stories influenced the affective tone of their interactions, as couples shared in their narratives a number of difficulties from substance abuse problems to the death of a child. Though not the focus of the current study, the thematic content of couples' relationship histories has often received greater emphasis in the analysis of relationship narratives than the method of delivery of this content (Holmberg et al., 2004). Future work should include coding of both behavioral and thematic qualities to uncover the extent to which the links of couples' behaviors and marital satisfaction are affected by the nature of their stories.

Finally, the findings of this study are limited in that the data are cross-sectional and we cannot isolate the direction of the relationship between narrative task and marital satisfaction. It is just as likely that husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction predicts the ways in which they communicate with one another, especially during a relationship narrative task. For instance,

positive feelings about one's marriage may actually elicit certain types of behaviors in an interactional task, especially in a narrative task that asks spouses to reflect on the entire course of their relationship. As Levenson and colleagues (1993) found that older couples derived more pleasure than middle-aged couples when discussing certain topics (e.g., children and grandchildren, spending time together, dreams for the future), it could be that completing a narrative task actually positively influences marital satisfaction over time. Therefore, future studies should include longitudinal data to better understand the direction of the relationship between narrative behaviors and marital satisfaction.

## **Conclusion**

Given that most couples enjoy discussing the happier times in the beginning of their courtships, Jacobson and Christensen (1996) recommend gathering a couples' relationship history to allow distressed couples the opportunity to positively interact with one another apart from the problems they are facing. The findings of the current study lend support to the use of this intervention, as older couples' interactions during a relationship narrative task were strongly linked to both spouses' marital satisfaction. Specifically, we found that husbands' communication and wives' positive affect appear to uniquely influence older spouses' marital satisfaction. Thus, we propose that clinicians can utilize a narrative task with older couples to identify possible strengths in the ways husbands and wives interact with one another. This will help clinicians to decide on the types of interventions that would be the most useful in developing spouses' behavioral strengths to positively affect their marital satisfaction (Gurman, 2011). Further investigation is needed to more clearly understand how more distressed spouses may communicate differently with one another during a narrative task to better inform specific clinical interventions. As older spouses appear to perform best when working together (Peter-

Wright & Martin, 2010), we suggest researchers to continue to explore how the ways couples reflect together upon their married lives are meaningful to their marital satisfaction in the later years.

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## Appendix A – Tables and Figures

Table 1.

*Correlations and Distributional and Scale Properties of Independent and Dependent Variables (N = 62 Couples)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Marital duration	--	.21	-.13	-.08	-.29*	-.10	-.20	-.11
2. Narrative duration	.21	--	-.09	.12	.09	-.07	-.00	-.09
3. Positive affect	-.23	-.07	<u>.53**</u>	<u>.48**</u>	<u>.43**</u>	.09	.72**	.38**
4. Communication skills	.08	.07	<u>.45**</u>	<u>.42**</u>	<u>.53**</u>	.37**	.50**	.46**
5. Engagement	-.29*	.09	<u>.68**</u>	<u>.47**</u>	--	.48**	.69**	.37**
6. Balance/reciprocity	-.10	-.07	<u>.35**</u>	<u>.33*</u>	<u>.48**</u>	--	.28*	.28*
7. Enjoyment/fun	-.20	-.00	<u>.82**</u>	<u>.38**</u>	<u>.69**</u>	.28*	--	.34**
8. Marital satisfaction	-.01	.06	.27*	.29*	.39**	.27**	.44**	<u>.57**</u>
<i>M (SD) Husband Measures</i>			4.40 (.90)	5.06 (.79)				116.36 (18.07)
<i>M (SD) Wife Measures</i>			4.65 (.88)	5.02 (.87)				117.55 (14.57)
<i>M (SD) Couple Measures</i>	42.40 (14.97)	31.13 (13.66)			5.27 (.87)	4.58 (.95)	4.66 (1.01)	

*Note.* Correlations noted above the diagonal are for husbands and those noted below the diagonal are for wives. Correlations across spouses are underscored and in the diagonal. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 2.

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Husbands' Marital Satisfaction (N = 62)*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$
Constant	123.72	8.32	-	59.15	16.34	-	53.84	17.64	-	38.57	19.21	-
Marital duration	-.10	.16	-.08	-.01	.15	-.01	.08	.15	.06	.09	.15	.07
Narrative duration	-.10	.18	-.08	-.16	.16	-.12	-.15	.15	-.11	-.12	.16	-.09
Husband positive affect				3.92	2.60	.19	.75	2.92	.04	4.69	3.51	.23
Husband communication				9.00	2.98	.39**	9.42	3.21	.41**	9.11	3.37	.40**
Wife positive affect							6.96	3.18	.33*	11.12	4.34	.53*
Wife communication							-3.84	2.94	-.18	-3.76	2.99	-.18
Couple engagement										2.51	3.91	.12
Couple balance										1.29	2.55	.07
Couple fun/enjoyment										-8.78	4.54	-.49†
$R^2$		.01			.27**			.33**			.38**	
F for change in $R^2$		.43			9.79**			2.45†			1.42	

† $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 3.

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Wives' Marital Satisfaction (N = 62)*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$
Constant	115.74	6.77	-	83.62	14.17	-	54.02	14.09	-	56.90	15.45	-
Marital duration	-.01	.13	-.01	.02	.13	.02	.05	.12	.05	.07	.12	.07
Narrative duration	.07	.14	.06	.06	.14	.06	.12	.12	.01	-.02	.13	-.02
Husband Positive Affect							3.24	2.33	.20	1.00	2.83	.06
Husband Communication							8.52	2.56	.46**	7.31	2.71	.39**
Wife Positive Affect				3.13	2.47	.19	-.87	2.54	-.05	-5.29	3.49	-.31
Wife Communication				3.31	2.45	.19	1.57	2.34	.09	.79	2.40	.05
Couple Engagement										1.08	3.14	.06
Couple Balance										1.19	2.05	.08
Couple Fun/Enjoyment										5.61	3.65	.39
$R^2$		.06			.11			.34**			.38**	
F for change in $R^2$		.11			3.31*			9.86**			1.16	

† $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

**Appendix B - Questionnaire Measures**  
**Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire for Older Persons (Haynes et al., 1992).**

1 Very dissatisfied	2 Dissatisfied	3 Somewhat dissatisfied	4 Somewhat satisfied	5 Satisfied	6 Very satisfied
1. The amount of time my spouse and I spend in shared recreational activities.	1	2	3	4	5
2. The degree to which my spouse and I share common interests.	1	2	3	4	5
3. The day-to-day support and encouragement provided by my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5
4. My spouse's physical health.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The degree to which my spouse motivates me.	1	2	3	4	5
6. My spouse's overall personality.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The amount of consideration shown by my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5
8. The manner in which affection is expressed between my spouse and me.	1	2	3	4	5
9. How my spouse reacts when I share feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
10. The way disagreements are settled.	1	2	3	4	5
11. The number of disagreements between my spouse and me.	1	2	3	4	5
12. My spouse's philosophy of life.	1	2	3	4	5
13. My spouse's values.	1	2	3	4	5
14. My spouse's emotional health.	1	2	3	4	5
15. The frequency of sexual or other physically intimate relationships with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5
16. The quality of sexual or other physically intimate relations with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5
17. The frequency with which my spouse and I have pleasant conversations.	1	2	3	4	5
18. My overall compatibility with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5
19. How decisions are made in my marriage.	1	2	3	4	5

20. How well my spouse listens to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6

21. Of all the attention you receive from your spouse, 1 2 3 4  
what percent is pleasant or positive? 0-25% 26-50% 51-75% 76-100%

22. Overall, how satisfied are you with your marriage right now? 1 2 3 4 5 6  
Very dissatisfied      Much less satisfied      Less satisfied      Satisfied      More satisfied      Very satisfied

24. Compared to five years ago, how satisfied are you 1 2 3 4 5  
with your marriage? much less less equally more much more

## Appendix C – Story of Us Task Coding Sheets

**Coding sheets.** The following format was used to record individual and couple behavior codes observed in the relationship narrative task.

Interval Time: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Story of Us Task Coding Sheet – Husband**

**Couple ID:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Coder:** \_\_\_\_\_

1 Very Low	2 Low	3 Mod. Low	4 Moderate	5 Mod. High	6 High	7 Very High
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#### **1. Husband Positive Affect**

1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7

#### **2. Husband Communication Skills**

1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7

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#### **3. Couple Balance/ Reciprocity**

1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7

#### **4. Couple Fun/Enjoyment**

1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7

Interval Time: \_\_\_\_\_

**Story of Us Task Coding Sheet – Wife**

**Couple ID:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Coder:** \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Low	Low	Mod.	Moderate	Mod.	High	Very High

**1. Wife Positive Affect**

1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7

**2. Wife Communication Skills**

1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7

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**3. Couple Engagement**

1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7

## Appendix D – Story of Us Task Coding System

**Coding system.** The following descriptions were used to code individual and couple behaviors observed in the relationship narrative task.

### 1. Individual Positive Affect

This scale looks at the individual's expression of positive affect towards and in response to the other partner's behaviors or the relationship narrative. Dimensions include laughing, smiling, vocalizations, and signs of affection (e.g., pats, kisses) and tears of joy or gratitude. Remember to consider the frequency and the intensity of the affect. Interest is NOT coded here, but rather we are looking for an overall affective state. Be sure to be able to infer that the person would easily say, "I was feeling good about \_\_\_\_\_. Two scores are given; one for the wife and one for the husband.

1. Very low: The individual expresses no positive affect towards/in response to the other partner or in the narrative. He/she does not smile or laugh and does not seem to enjoy the task.

2. Low: The individual displays minimal positive affect (perhaps 1 or 2 brief displays). For example, he/she may smile briefly in response to a task related behavior but the affect lacks intensity and frequency.

3. Moderately low: There may be some sign of positive affect, perhaps an occasional smile and laugh throughout the narrative, although the individual would not be described as affectively expressive. For the most part however, the individual's attitude towards the other would not be described as positive, but rather as affectively cool.

4. Moderate: The individual expresses low-level enjoyment or positive affect towards the other, including possible signs of affection, although these displays are not intense or prolonged. There are frequent and somewhat prolonged lapses in the individual's positive expressions. Affect is roughly 25%-50% positive throughout.

5. Moderately high: Frequent displays of positive affect are evident. There are several incidences of laughing, smiling, or pleasure. The individual seems to be enjoying the interaction and appears comfortable expressing enjoyment to the other partner. There are brief lulls (rather than prolonged lapses) in positive affect. For example, lulls might occur when the other partner speaks or when recounting serious content. Affect is about 50% to 75% positive throughout.

6. High: Extensive positive affect is shown that is both frequent and has intensity that a 5 lacks. The individual really enjoys the interaction and expresses it through frequent laughs, affection, etc. There may be a few brief lulls where no or minimal positive affect is shown, but smiling and laughter quickly resumes. Affect is about 75%-95% positive throughout.

7. Very high: Positive affect is consistently and continuously demonstrated and is both frequent and intense. The individual is thoroughly enjoying expressed through laughter, tears of joy, or signs of affection throughout the entire interaction. There are no noticeable delays or lapses in positive affect. Affect is clearly 95%-100% positive throughout.

## **2. Individual Communication Skills**

Communication skills refer to an individual's ability to convey thoughts, feelings and opinions in a clear, constructive manner. Consider the individual's level of expression about partner, self, or others, as well as ability to understand and summarize partner's point of view. Also consider the individual's stuttering, mumbling, clarity of speech (both in sentence structure and quality of voice), and "ums" and "uhs". Look for good eye contact (either with spouse or experimenter), expressive face, and body orientation toward partner and/or experimenter while speaking. Notice relaxed arms and hand movements to accompany and enhance statements.

**1. Very Low:** Individual displays almost no ability or effort to communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Expression is lacking in clarity with little to no evidence of nonverbal and speech quality skills (i.e. stuttering, mostly "ums" and "uhs", no eye contact). Frequently does not understand partner's view.

**2. Low:** Individual displays minimal ability or effort to communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Expression is still lacking in clarity, but individual exhibits some infrequent and/or weak nonverbal and speech quality skills (ie. poor eye contact). Negative speech quality skills are evident throughout.

**3. Moderately Low:** Individual displays effort to communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions lacking in a 2. Expression is clear, but may be very limited. Or expression is ambiguous due to mixed positive and negative speech quality skills. Individual may not understand partner's view at times.

**4. Moderate:** Individual is able to express the general meaning of his or her thoughts, feelings, and opinions most of the time with little ambiguity. Expression is clear, but not fully developed. Individual exhibits basic nonverbal and some speech quality skills (i.e., some eye contact), although infrequent negative speech quality skills might also be present (i.e., occasional noticeable stuttering). A few instances of understanding or summarizing partner's view are evident.

**5. Moderately High:** Individual is able to clearly relay thoughts, feelings, and opinions appropriately throughout the interaction. Expression is clear and frequent, but may not be concise, or is concise but lacking the skill of a 6. Effective nonverbal and speech quality skills are evident throughout (ie. good eye contact, body orientation), with minimal negative speech quality skills. Displays occasional instances of understanding and summarizing partner's view.

**6. High:** Individual is able to appropriately convey his or her thoughts, feelings, and opinions almost all the time with very little ambiguity. Expression is well-articulated with significant use of nonverbal skills and good speech quality (ie. good eye contact, expressive face, body orientation). Often understands and summarizes partner's view.

**7. Very High:** Individual displays superior ability to communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Expression is very clear and articulate throughout the entire interaction, with excellent nonverbal and speech quality skills throughout entire interaction (i.e., constant eye contact, expressive face, body orientation). Always appropriately understands and summarizes partner's view.

### **3. Couple Balance/Reciprocity**

This scale assesses the relative contributions of each partner to the interaction. Included are dimensions such as control, turn-taking, and equity.

**1. Very low:** This couple's interaction is characterized by the dominance of one partner over the other. Each partner's contribution to the interaction is by no means equal and one partner is likely to control the interaction while rarely considering the other's perspective. One member may be so passive that she/he relinquishes power to the other. The couple appears to be in disequilibrium.

**2. Low:** Turn-taking is minimal and although there may be one brief attempt to include both spouses in the interaction, it is primarily one-sided.

**3. Moderately low:** Some turn-taking is present and each partner makes a contribution to the interaction. One partner may control the flow of the interaction, but there are a few attempts to listen to and solicit responses or opinions from the other partner.

**4. Moderate:** These spouses are fairly consistent in including the other partner, particularly through the solicitation of opinions and responses. Control of the interaction may shift periodically but one partner is responsible for the progress of the interaction.

**5. Moderately high:** Both partners appear to be initiating conversations and responses although the complexity and length of one's responses may be greater than the other. Thus, although one partner appears more dominant, there is sharing of opinions and responses.

**6. High:** Substantial balance is shown, including smooth turn-taking, sharing of control, and equal contributions to the interaction. Brief periods where one partner dominates the interaction may be present, but the balance is quickly restored.

**7. Very high:** This couple seems to be in complete synchrony. There is a readiness to share responsibility for the interaction and a willingness to listen to and include the other partner. Turn-taking is smooth and both partners contribute equally to the interaction without dominating.

#### **4. Couple Engagement/Interpersonal Involvement**

Engagement taps interpersonal involvement and the persistence of partner-directed behaviors. Engagement can be positive or negative. Joint task involvement is not required to rate the extent of social involvement although it is assumed that the task will be completed. At the highest point, one or both partners are characteristically engaged and show visual regard, initiations of conversations, conversations, and learning in, etc.. At the lowest point, both spouses must show minimal partner-related behavior. For example, spouses may show no visual regard or interest in the other partner. Highly engaged pairs may show positive camaraderie or negative conflict. Look at the initiations, maintenance attempts and visual regard of the more expressive partner. Engagement is not a negative or positive evaluation of the couple – instead, focus on the connectedness of the interaction.

**1. Very Low:** This dyad is characterized by indifference, ignoring, flat affect, and very minimal engagement. One partner may withdraw completely from the task. Interest is not directed toward the other as a social partner. There may be some overtures or brief visual regard, but joint interaction is very minimal and not persistent.

**2. Low:** Engagement is minimal and characterized by relative indifference and little attention to the other. At least one partner may show occasional visual regard, infrequent initiations and rare re-engagement.

**3. Moderately low:** Some contact which is matter-of-fact and without much interest. There are repeated signs of engagement by at least one partner. Persistent visual regard, with sporadic engagement attempts and long breaks are most likely. Or the spouses are somewhat engaged for the most part, but have frequent moments when they are actively "not there."

**4. Moderate:** These spouses are moderately engaged, and fairly persistent at expressing this. At least one partner often looks at the other and/or attempts contact by talking to the other. Contact may be consistently on and off or fairly persistent with a large lull. Or very persistent initiations are discouraged, with no immediate attempt to maintain contact. These spouses appear to be going through the motions of completing the task, although they are engaged.

**5. Moderately high:** Both partners are fairly engaged although contact and/or watching may be expressed more by one than the other. Brief disengagement may be fairly frequent or a few periods of complete separation may occur. The spouses are social partners, although to a lesser extent than higher scale points.

**6. High:** Substantial engagement is shown, including both frequent contact and watching, but less so than in 7. Brief periods of disengagement may be evident but are punctuated by occasional visual regard.

**7. Very high:** The engagement of both partners is very high, including extensive visual regard and sharing the narrative as if the experimenter is not in the room. There is an eagerness to maintain interaction even when conflict arises. Lulls in active engagement are very brief and infrequent.

## **5. Couple Fun/Enjoyment**

This scale assesses the degree to which the dyad demonstrates enjoyment of interaction and joint activity. Spouses who enjoy their interaction but do not show it affectively will not rate highly. Furthermore, positive affect not directed to the other partner is not scored. Ratings focus on tone of interaction (i.e., neutral, enthusiastic), and affective signs (e.g. sighs, indications of boredom, laughing, smiling). Individual laughter is significant but mutual fun/enjoyment merits higher ratings. While the gut reaction is not a perfect measure, the gist is that do you feel like this was a fun interaction? If yes, code towards the high end of the spectrum. If no, or if it felt forced or dull, than code towards the low end of the spectrum.

**1. Very low:** There is no evidence of pleasure. Pair never has fun or enjoys interaction, although there may be joint interaction. There is no enthusiasm in the interaction. Pair does not enjoy their negative interaction. OR positive affect is directed by one partner only and is not in response to the other partner's behavior. No visual regard during expressions of positive affect.

**2. Low:** Pair may have glimpses of enjoyment, perhaps even brief enjoyment of their negative interaction. Overall the pair is not having fun together and/or is not enthusiastic.

**3. Moderately low:** There is occasional positivity that is not strong or frequently displayed, and may be displayed by only one partner towards the other. Or pair is doing OK together but without real joy or enthusiasm for their shared interactions.

**4. Moderate:** The pair does not mind being together. It is a pleasant interaction overall for both partners, though not really enjoyable. There are likely to be contingent expressions of affect with little visual regard.

**5. Moderately high:** Overall pair is satisfied with the session /interaction. They have some enjoyment throughout without particular enthusiasm, or spirit. Mutual calm enjoyment or steady pleasure is evident, perhaps with occasional moments of higher enjoyment.

**6. High:** Interaction is enthusiastic overall but not as pronounced as in 7. Shared positive affect and enjoyment are frequently evident. The enjoyment is more energetic than a 5, although less intense than a 7.

**7. Very high:** The pair is very satisfied with the interaction and activity and shows enjoyment in their interaction with some marked exuberance or delight. Mutual smiling and/or laughter must occur to rate 7. There is consistent visual regard coupled with affective sharing.

## Appendix E – Story of Us Task Storyline

**Storyline.** The following figure shows the storyline sheet that couples were given during the directions of the relationship narrative task and could reference throughout the task.

