EFFECTS OF PROBLEM SPECIFICITY, PROBLEM SEVERITY, AND INTEGRATIVE COMPLEXITY ON MARITAL SATISFACTION

By

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EFFECTS OF PROBLEM SPECIFICITY, PROBLEM SEVERITY, AND INTEGRATIVE COMPLEXITY ON MARITAL SATISFACTION

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The current study attempts to evaluate what problems do newlywed couples (defined as couples in the first four years of marriage) report most frequently and how couples construct their thoughts about these problems. In addition, the study explores how the severity of these problems and the integrative complexity of spouses’ thoughts about their problems influence the reoccurrence of such problems and spouses’ marital satisfaction. Integrative complexity is characterized by the ability to differentiate multiple aspects or perspectives of a marital problem and to integrate these aspects into a contextual understanding of the problem and moving toward resolution.

Participants were 82 newlywed couples recruited from the community surrounding a large southeastern university and followed over the course of four years. Couples were asked to complete an assessment measuring marital satisfaction, to write a description of a marital problem, and to rate the problem severity. Descriptions of marital problems were coded for integrative complexity by trained coders. Descriptive statistics,
correlations, and t-tests were conducted to evaluate the relationships between the variables.

The results show that the most frequently occurring problem of newlywed couples related to the amount of time spent together. The specific marital problem reported by spouses showed a tendency to vary based on level of marital satisfaction. Furthermore, spouses’ problems displayed a tendency to persist throughout the first few years of marriage. The data suggest that problem severity negatively correlates with marital satisfaction across newlywed marriage, but that it is not correlated with reoccurrence of a marital problem. In general, spouses displayed differentiation but not integration. Integrative complexity was found to correlate with marital satisfaction between the second and third year of marriage for both spouses; it was negatively correlated with problem reoccurrence for wives.

The results are discussed in the context of the current understanding of marital satisfaction. The current findings suggest that the complexity of thoughts about one’s marriage do have an impact on marital satisfaction, perhaps during important transitional periods in the marriage. Further research may reveal greater effects of complexity on marital satisfaction, particularly during transitions such as pregnancy. In addition, the data suggest that marital satisfaction relies on more than complex constructions of marital problems and that interventions designed for couples may need to become more integrated.
No relationship is problem-free. Even the most satisfying and happy marriages generally experience difficulties at some point. For example, couples may disagree regarding the amount of time they spend together, how to raise children, or how to handle family finances. Marital conflict can occur when tension is produced by factors that are external to couples (e.g., the behavior of another family member), or when spouses perceive inequity in their relationship (e.g., one partner spends more time raising the couple’s children) (Young & Long, 1998). Some couples encounter a variety of problems throughout their marriages; others perpetually confront the same problem during the course of their marriages. Although all couples face difficulties and conflict during their marriages, many couples are very effective at dealing with their problems, yet other couples constantly struggle to manage marital distress. According to Wall & Nolan (1987), conflict situations develop when varying degrees of autonomy and interdependence are needed in order for couples to cooperate and come to mutually satisfying decisions. Consequently, the means employed by couples to handle conflict and the ways that spouses interact with each other have a direct impact upon the satisfaction and stability of their marriages (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995, for a review). Numerous studies suggest that couples exhibiting a greater ability to manage their problems generally experience greater marital satisfaction and increased marital stability than those who lack such ability (Gottman, 1999; Jacobson and Christensen, 1996b; Ting-Toomey, 1983). Furthermore, the relationship between couples’ problem-solving
efficacy and marital satisfaction has profound implications for the mental health of spouses and their children (Coie et al., 1993). Developing effective interventions to assist couples to successfully resolve their differences and maintain satisfying relationships is, therefore, of paramount importance to researchers and clinicians.

What distinguishes successful problem-solving from ineffective problem-solving?

Problem solving has been the crux of marital and family therapy. Jacobson and Margolin (1979) suggest that, rather than being problem-free, satisfying relationships do have problems, but their members have more feasible problem-solving skills than their peers in dissatisfying relationships. Satir (1983) wrote that couples “need to learn how to assert their thoughts, wishes, feelings and knowledge without destroying, invading or obliterating the other [partner], and while still coming out with a fitting joint outcome” (p. 16). According to Jacobson and Christensen (1996b):

Success at solving problems means success in bringing about change. A relationship problem usually involves the desire for some kind of change on the part of at least one partner. The couple that can successfully make changes when they are called for is likely to maintain a flexible, satisfying relationship over a long period of time. (p. 181)

Clinical researchers as well have attempted to examine effective problem-solving skills (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Theories of effective marital problem solving have been influenced in large part by negotiation theory. The goal of negotiation is to reach a convergence wherever differences in interests or goals exist (Scanzoni & Godwin, 1990; Scanzoni & Polonko, 1980). From this perspective, effective problem solving for couples requires that each partner perceives equality in a decision-making process, acknowledging the importance of each partner’s point of view. Researchers and clinicians appear to agree that effective problem resolution among couples is a process of determining each person’s point of view, and somehow coming to a mutually acceptable
decision regarding the conflict of each spouse’s opinions and interests. In fact, marital
counseling is typically designed to assist couples to understand the perspective of each
spouse and to negotiate their differences (Freedman & Combs, 2002; Jacobson &
Margolin, 1979; Weiss, Birchler, & Vincent, 1974; Wile, 2002).

While some couples are able to solve their problems on their own, others seek
professional assistance to help them cope with their problems, turning to psychologists,
mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists, and clergy for help. One might
assume that couples receiving therapy would generally show an increased ability to deal
with marital problems and experience more satisfying, longer lasting relationships.
However, this is not always the case. Cookerly (1980) found that five years after
receiving therapy, 43.6% of couples had separated or divorced. Gottman (1999)
estimates that 30-50% of couples relapse one year after receiving therapy. Over the past
30 years, behavioral interventions have dominated couples therapy. In the 1970s, the
work of Stuart (1969) and Patterson and Weiss (Weiss, Hops, and Patterson, 1973) led a
zeitgeist of interest in using behavioral principles in couples counseling, conceptualizing
marital problems as the result of poor social and communication skills. However,
research suggests that simply improving couples’ social and problem-solving skills (e.g.,
communication styles) is inadequate at improving marital satisfaction (Jacobson, 1984;
Jacobson, Schmalling, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1987) as it simply resolves surface issues
rather than addressing the core problems that couples face. Heyman (2001) notes that
presenting problems such as poor communication skills do not reveal the actual issues
that couples are negotiating. For example, stating that “’the husband is unhappy because
he doesn’t communicate well’ is about as useful a conceptualization [of a marital
problem] as ‘the patient died because his heart stopped beating’” (Heyman, 2001, p. 6). Such writing supports the notion that couples that are effective at managing their problems may not simply have a better array of problem-solving skills; couples who successfully navigate their differences – with or without the assistance of a mental health professional – may differ markedly from “problem-stuck” couples in aspects other than their ability to use conflict resolution skills.

How, then, can marriage counseling assist troubled couples to resolve their problems more effectively? More importantly though, what distinguishes these couples from the ones who are able to effectively handle their conflict? Markman (1992) notes that researchers are divided on this question. Some theorists (e.g., Christensen & Shenk, 1991) have emphasized the role of the observable differences (the “presenting problem” to many marriage therapists) that exist among distressed versus non-distressed couples (e.g., differences in communication styles, parenting styles, religious beliefs, or spending habits), claiming that these differences are inherently stressful for couples. For example, a couple might present to therapy with the husband stating, “I want to have sex and she doesn’t” or the wife stating, “He doesn’t talk to me as much as I would like him to.” Although specific presenting issues may be more difficult for couples to resolve, some researchers (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Fincham & Beach, 1999b; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992) believe that the way spouses conceptualize those differences is the problem. That is, particular ways of thinking may promote the ability to better cope with problems, while other ways limit such abilities. When presented with a particular problem, some couples may be able to think about that problem in a manner that fosters coping and effective problem solving. Specifically, some partners may be able to
incorporate multiple perspectives of a problem into their conceptualization of that problem which may, in turn, lead to more effective problem resolution.

Although a rather substantial body of research exploring cognition in marriage has developed in recent years, the majority of marital studies historically have been aimed at investigating behaviors exhibited by partners. Fincham, Bradbury, and Scott (1990) noted that a need exists to expand the scope of research concerning marital cognition. Of particular importance is the way couples think about their problems as they enter into marriage and transition through the critical first years of marriage. Presumably, couples enter their marriages satisfied and reporting few problems; the problems they might have are theoretically less severe than in latter years of the relationship. As couples transition into their marriages, marital satisfaction tends to decline and stabilize; however, many couples experience more profound and constant decreases in satisfaction, often resulting in separation and divorce. The way couples organize their thoughts about marital problems may have an impact upon coping, which would likely result in decreased marital satisfaction and eventual dissolution. Distressed spouses, then, may vary from non-distressed spouses in the way they think about their marital problems. Furthermore, couples with partners who think significantly differently about their problems may display lower marital satisfaction than couples with spouses who think similarly. The remainder of this portion of the study addresses three factors that might be crucial in understanding marital satisfaction and dissolution – problem specificity, problem severity, and integrative complexity (i.e., the way spouses structure their thoughts about marital problems) – and presents an overview of the current study.
Specificity, Severity, and Duration of Marital Problems

Numerous couples face similar problems, and some couples manage those difficulties quite effectively and maintain stable, satisfying relationships. However, many couples do not cope with those problems as successfully and experience unhappy marriages, many of which dissolve. Are certain marital problems more difficult for couples to cope with? Some studies indicate that this may be true to some degree. In an analysis of coping efforts and marital satisfaction, Bowman (1990) found that the marital problems participants identified most often were money, communication, and children. Gruver and Labadie (1975) reported that married college students cited sex, communication, and time together as the greatest sources of conflict (see also Knox et al., 1997; and Zusman & Knox, 1998). Husbands’ dissatisfaction with sex has also been shown to be predictive of seeking marital therapy (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003). A survey by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (2001) cited poor communication, finances, infidelity, substance abuse, physical/emotional/sexual abuse, and poor conflict resolution skills as the most common reasons for separation and divorce. A study by The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (Johnson et al., 2003) found that Oklahomans cited a lack of commitment (85%), excessive conflict/arguing (61%), infidelity (58%), financial problems (41%), domestic violence (30%), family problems (29%) and religious differences (21%) as some of the most common reasons given for divorce.

Based on some of these findings, certain problems may indeed be more difficult for couples to cope with than others, specifically issues related to communication, finances, and domestic violence. Increasing the difficulty of these problems for couples is the degree of severity of their problems. One might imagine that couples that consider
their problems to be least severe would be able to cope with them more easily than
couples who believe their problems are extremely severe. When couples believe that
their problems are severe they may perceive fewer ways of coping with those problems.
Any clinician who has worked in a crisis setting knows the difficulty that clients who are
experiencing immediate and severe problems have trying to see ways out of their
situation. Further complicating conflict management for couples is the tendency for
marital problems to persist for many years. Couples who have been mired in a problem
for several years would presumably experience greater difficulty resolving that problem
(otherwise, would it really be a problem?). One such problem, for example, is that of
domestic violence. Jacobson and Gottman (1998) reported that of the couples they
studied, only 7% of violent husbands stopped their violent behavior altogether.
Furthermore, Gottman (1999) found that in a longitudinal study of couples 69% of the
participants experienced such “perpetual problems” (p. 56), that is, areas of disagreement
that lasted for several years. A potentially more severe problem experienced over a
period of many years might foster decreased marital satisfaction.

The current study asks what marital problems do newlywed couples report most
often and which of those are associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction. The
study also examines how often marital problems persist over the first four years of
marriage as well as how spouses differ in their assessment of problem severity.
Furthermore, the study proposes the following hypotheses concerning the effect of
problem specificity and severity upon marital satisfaction: 1) no difference in problem
severity exists based upon gender; 2) higher problem severity scores at particular points
(i.e., each wave of the study) in the marriage correlate with lower marital satisfaction
scores at that time; and 3) the severity of a problem at the onset of marriage (Time 1) positively correlates with the frequency of its reoccurrence as a problem during the first four years of marriage.

**Integrative Complexity**

Although some problems may be more common among divorced (and presumably dissatisfied) couples (e.g., finances, communication, and domestic violence), many satisfied and stably married couples encounter the same problems. The ability to manage a problem, then, is not simply a function of the specific problem a couple faces. As suggested earlier, some couples may approach their difficulties with more effective ways of thinking about them. The ways couples think about their problems is likely to affect their assessment of their marital problems and the methods they employ to deal with them.

Although the majority of marital research conducted during the 1960s and 1970s was focused upon behavior and marital interaction, during the past two decades a large number of studies have examined the role of cognition upon marital satisfaction. In a seminal paper on cognition and marital satisfaction, Notarius et al. (1989) found that distressed wives were those who displayed negative evaluations of their husbands’ verbal messages, suggesting that unhappily married wives may perceive their marriages differently than satisfied wives. Whisman and Delinsky (2002) found that spouses who recall more negative aspects (measured in terms of the number of negative descriptors used to describe their partner) of their partner exhibit lower marital satisfaction than spouses who recall more positive aspects. Neff and Karney (2002) reported that satisfied spouses tend to describe their partners’ positive traits more globally and their negative traits more specifically, suggesting that cognitive processes play an important role in
marital satisfaction. The most interesting research conducted upon the role of cognition in marriage has occurred in the area of attributions (Baucom, Sayers, & Duhe, 1989; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992; Hakstian et al, 1986; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000). Fincham (1985) found that distressed spouses tended to attribute responsibility for their problems to their partners and their relationships. In addition, distressed spouses believed that the cause of those problems was representative of their spouses’ negativity toward them. However, although research into the role of cognition in marriage grows, “there is [still] a clear need to expand the scope of cognitions studied in marriage” (Fincham, Bradbury, & Scott, 1990, p.132).

An area of marital cognition that has received minimal research interest over the past twenty years has been that of cognitive structure. Many couples may share similarities in the content of their thoughts, but may vary in the way they organize those thoughts. Content can be described as what someone thinks, and structure, on the other hand, is how someone thinks or organizes her or his thoughts. Cognitions that are similar in content may not necessarily be similar in structure and organization (Schroeder, 1971). For example, satisfied couples may report more positive thoughts about their partners and their marriages, while dissatisfied couples may report more negative thoughts. However, some satisfied couples might support their positive assessment of their marriage with relatively simple beliefs and perceptions, whereas dissatisfied couples may support a negative evaluation of their marriage with an extremely complex set of beliefs and perceptions (or vice-versa).

Fincham, Bradbury, and Scott (1990) have acknowledged that research into cognitive structure in marriage is needed stating, “although the study of cognitive
structure in marriage represents a step in the right direction [regarding marital cognitive research], our review shows that research on this topic is quite limited” (p. 133). Some theorists posit that partners may differ in the way that they organize and structure their thoughts concerning marital distress, and these differences influence couples’ problem-solving abilities and evaluation of marital satisfaction (Denton, Burleson, & Sprenkle, 1995; Tyndall & Lichtenberg, 1985). One means of assessing cognitive structure among couples is to examine archival data or verbal communication for levels of integrative complexity (Tetlock & Suedfeld, 1988). The concept of integrative complexity was largely influenced by George Kelly’s (1955) personal construct theory, specifically his organization corollary that states, “each person characteristically evolves, for his convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs” (p. 56). Integrative complexity was first described as a fixed personality trait referred to as conceptual complexity (Schroder, Driver, & Streuffert, 1967). However, as study into complexity evolved, researchers acknowledged that the complexity of cognitions was more than a dispositional trait, influenced largely by situational variables (for a review of integrative complexity see Tetlock & Suedfeld, 1988).

Integrative complexity assesses two structural variables: differentiation and integration. Differentiation refers to the number of aspects to a problem that are viewed when evaluating it. For example, a spouse who displays a high degree of differentiation would be able to view the multiple aspects of her or his marital problems. A highly differentiated approach to a marital problem would identify the numerous influences upon the problem as well as the resulting effects of the problem. Integration refers to the
degree and number of connections established among the differentiated aspects of a problem. Differentiation is therefore a requirement for integration. Integration, in terms of marital problems, would be exhibited by incorporating the multiple levels of a problem into a contextual understanding of the problem and movement toward problem resolution. The concept of integrative complexity in marriage is similar to the concept of cybernetics proposed by Bateson et al., (1956) and systems theory (see Becvar & Becvar, 2000, for a review) that have served as the foundation of marriage and family therapy.

Using Jacobson and Christensen’s (1996) previously cited definition of effective problem-coping, successful conflict management involves flexibility, suggesting that some couples are more adaptable than others. Individuals exhibiting higher integrative complexity would theoretically be expected to see their problems from multiple perspectives (including those of their spouses) and integrating those perspectives into a systemic understanding of the problem, presumably utilizing this knowledge to develop ways of managing their problem. A spouse who conceptualizes a marital problem from one point of view would likely see fewer ways to cope with the problem than a spouse who views it from several different perspectives. Spouses displaying lower levels of integrative complexity concerning their marital problems would be expected to experience greater difficulty managing them than spouses showing higher degrees of complexity. Couples with a limited range of problem-coping abilities would likely express increased marital dissatisfaction than couples displaying a variety of coping skills. Integrative complexity, therefore, should presumably be correlated with marital satisfaction and stability. In addition, more severe and perpetual marital problems might foster decreased complexity due to the increased psychological stress of these problems.
Furthermore, spousal differences in integrative complexity – that is, spousal variations in cognitive structuring of a problem -- may contribute to marital satisfaction (see Crouse, Karlins, & Schroder, 1968).

Research into integrative complexity has primarily involved assessing the structure of statements and historical documents made by politicians and prominent figures, such as political speeches, governmental policy, and correspondence. A few studies have attempted to examine conceptual complexity within the context of interpersonal relationships. Neimeyer and Neimeyer (1981) found that interpersonal dyads that are similar in complexity exhibit greater mutual attraction than those that differ in thought structure. Conceptual complexity in marriage has been studied by Crouse, Karlins, & Schroeder (1968) who found that couples who were both high in complexity exhibited greater marital happiness than couples who were both low in complexity. However, these studies examined cognitive complexity as a fixed trait rather than a state-dependent variable.

Currently, very little research has been conducted into the integrative complexity of spouses over time, particularly in regard to specific marital problems. Furthermore, no known studies have examined integrative complexity in the first few years of marriage when couples’ differences are often most salient. As a result, the current study is primarily exploratory in nature and attempts to assess the effect of problem-specific integrative complexity upon marital satisfaction among newlywed couples across time. The study posits the following questions: 1) How do spouses describe their problems?; 2) how integratively complex are spouses?; and 3) do spouses think more complexly about particular problems than others? The current study also examines how newlywed
husbands and wives differ in their degree of integrative complexity, and if integrative complexity regarding a specific marital problem at the beginning of a marriage is predictive of the frequency of that problem reoccurring. The following hypotheses have been made concerning integrative complexity: 1) based upon studies suggesting that certain marital problems are more difficult for couples to cope with, differences in integrative complexity exist based upon the type of marital problem identified; 2) no difference in integrative complexity exists based upon time; 3) no difference in integrative complexity exists based upon gender; 4) increased problem severity correlates with lower integrative complexity; 5) greater integrative complexity correlates with greater marital satisfaction.

**Overview of the Current Study**

In order to conduct a study of the effects of problem specificity, problem severity and integrative complexity upon marital satisfaction couples would have to be assessed on multiple levels. First, couples would need to indicate the problematic issues in their marriages. Second, couples would also need to rank the severity of those problems. Third, couples would need to make verbal or written statements concerning their problems in order to be evaluated for degrees of integrative complexity. Finally, couples would need to be assessed at various points during the first four years of marriage. The current study recruited a sample of newlyweds and assessed them at eight points in time over four years (i.e., every six months). At each time spouses were asked to rate their overall level of marital satisfaction, to rank the severity of specific marital problems, and to write a description of a particular marital problem. Written descriptions were coded for integrative complexity by a team of trained research assistants.
Participants

Couples were recruited from a university community in the southeastern United States using two methods. First, advertisements were placed in local newspapers, bridal shops, and bridal registries offering up to $300 to “newlyweds interested in participating in a longitudinal study of marriage.” Second, marriage licenses filed in the surrounding county from May 1998 through July 1998 were reviewed for eligibility in the study. Couples meeting criteria for participation based upon information obtained from the marriage licenses were mailed letters of invitation. All responding couples were screened via telephone for the following criteria: (a) the marriage was the first for both spouses, (b) the couple had married within the past three months, (c) neither spouse had children, (d) wives were between the ages of 18 and 36 (to permit for the possibility of conceiving a child during the study), (e) both spouses spoke English fluently and had completed no less than 10 years of education (to ensure understanding of the questionnaires used in the study), and (f) the couple had no immediate plans to relocate. The first 82 couples that met the criteria for participation and arrived for their scheduled appointment made up the sample population.

The mean age of husbands was 25.2 years old, with men ranging from 18 to 35 (SD = 3.3). The wives ranged from 19 to 36 years old, and the mean age was 23.7 years old (SD = 2.8). Eighty-four percent of the husbands and 90% of the wives were Caucasian. Forty percent of the husbands and 39% of the wives were employed full time; at least half
of the population was full-time students (husbands = 54%, wives = 50%). Forty-seven percent of the husbands and 48% of the wives reported being Protestant, 16% of both husbands and wives were Catholic, and 14% of husbands and 15% of wives indicated their religious affiliation as “other.” The average annual income of husbands and wives combined was less than $20,000.

**Procedure**

The current study analyzes data that come from eight waves of data received during four years of a longitudinal study of newlywed couples. Couples were assessed every six months over the first four years of their marriages. Participants were mailed packets of self-report measures – three of which are used in the current study – every six months. Couples were asked to complete the self-report measures and to return the packets to the research team at no cost to them.

**Measures**

**Marital Satisfaction**

Several commonly used marital satisfaction inventories (e.g., Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Spanier, 1976) assess both spouses’ evaluations of specific areas of marital conflict and their appraisals of the relationship in general. To avoid confounding these two aspects, marital satisfaction was measured with an instrument that assesses only global evaluations of marriage. Spouses were asked to complete a 15-item version of the Semantic Differential (SMD; Osgood, Succi, & Tannenbaum, 1957). The measure asks spouses to rate their current feelings about their marriage on 7-point Likert-type scales between two opposite descriptors (e.g., “Bad-Good,” “Satisfied-Dissatisfied,” “Unpleasant-Pleasant”). Scores could range from 15 to 105. The internal consistency of
the SMD was high for both spouses (Cronbach’s alpha = .91 for husbands and .93 for wives).

**Marital Problems and Problem Severity**

Spouses completed a version of the Relationship Problem Inventory (RPI; Knox, 1970) in order to identify specific marital problems. The RPI is a list of 19 topics of potential marital disagreement (e.g., communication, finances, family). The measure asks spouses to rate the extent to which each topic is an area of conflict on a scale ranging from 1 (i.e., “not a problem”) to 11 (i.e., “major problem”). The RPI has shown adequate reliability in previous studies, and has been used to elicit problems in research on marital interaction (e.g., Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977).

**Integrative Complexity**

In order to assess for integrative complexity, spouses were asked to write a description of a specific marital problem. Previous research suggests that written material tends be higher in complexity than verbal material (Suedfeld, Tetlock, & Streufert, 1992). As a result, the current study assesses spouses written descriptions under the assumption that higher complexity scores will also result in a greater range of possible scores. Furthermore, spouses written descriptions may more accurately reflect their degree of complexity regarding specific marital problems because they have more time to think about the problem and are not confronted with the stress of having to defend their position to another person. Spouses were asked to write a short paragraph describing one of the problems on the RPI. The page following the RPI contained specific instructions for writing the description of the problem:
Choose one of the issues on the previous page that you rated as being an area of difficulty or disagreement for you in your marriage. Please describe the problem in more detail in the lines provided below. What is the issue? How could it be resolved?

The written descriptions were coded for integrative complexity by two undergraduate students and one graduate student (intraclass correlation coefficients over eight waves of the study ranged from .66 to .87 for husbands and .65 to .76 for wives; percent agreement ranged from 89% to 94% for husbands and from 82% to 91% for wives) using the criteria outlined in the Conceptual/Integrative Complexity Scoring Manual (Baker-Brown, et al, 1992). The scoring system was originally developed in order to code the structure of individual ideas. The current study applies the coding system to descriptions of marital problems. Consequently, the system as it is used in this study differs from its use in prior studies. Whereas previous studies have used the coding system to assess the complexity of individual units of thought, the current study uses the system to measure the overall complexity of entire global descriptions of marital problems.

The scoring system rates the degree of differentiation and integration exhibited in verbal and written material on a scale of 1 to 7, with a score of one indicating no differentiation, and a score of 7 representing differentiation and full integration. Using this system, a problem description receives a score of 1 when only one view of a problem is presented and no differentiation is displayed. For example:

My husband is a real slob. He never cleans up after himself and is completely disorganized. His clothes sit on the bedroom floor for weeks before he puts them away – if he puts them away! No matter how many times I ask him he will not clean up after himself.
A score of 3 is representative of differentiation without integration. Such a description generally acknowledges at least two perspectives of a problem but does not draw any connections between those perspectives. For example:

I value cleanliness and organization and I try to keep my house in good condition. My husband does not enjoy cleaning and organizing as much as I do. I clean our house nearly everyday, and my husband prefers to clean every few weeks. I like to have things put away and out of sight, whereas my husband is not bothered when things are not put away. We just have different opinions about cleanliness.

A score of 5 is indicative of differentiation with some degree of integration. Multiple perspectives are acknowledged and some relationship between those perspectives is outlined:

My husband and I have different opinions about household cleanliness and organization. I like the house cleaned daily; he prefers to clean every other week or so. We are attempting to resolve this difference by developing a cleaning schedule that works for both of us.

Scores of 7 indicate high differentiation and high integration. The relationship between multiple views of a problem is recognized and the nature of that relationship is clearly stated. For example:

Our difference of opinions regarding cleanliness and organization seems to stem from our upbringing. My husband’s family was more laid-back and easy going, while my family was more demanding and structured. If we are to move forward as a couple, we will both need to adjust our expectations and work toward a mutually satisfying level of cleanliness.

Scores of 2, 4, and 6 represent transition points between these levels of complexity.
CHAPTER 3
RESULTS

Specificity, Severity, and Duration of Marital Problems

Problem Frequency and Duration

Over the eight waves of the study the most frequently reported marital problem for the entire sample was “amount of time spent together.” For both husbands and wives, “amount of time spent together” was the most frequently reported marital problem at 5 of the 8 waves of the study. Husbands also cited “communication” (Time 5), “career decisions” (Times 3 and 8), and “in-laws, parents, relatives” (Times 7) as the most frequent marital problems. Wives reported that “communication” (Time 1), “in-laws, parents, relatives” (Time 4), and “money management” (Time 6) were also the most common problems at particular points in their marriage. At the onset of marriage (Time 1), “communication” was the most frequent marital problem reported by husbands and wives \( f = .21, N = 77 \) (husbands); \( f = .21, N = 78 \) (wives), followed by “time spent together” \( f = .18 \) for husbands and “household management” \( f = .19 \) for wives. Four years later (Time 8), husbands most frequently reported “career decisions” and “time spent together” \( f = .15, N = 47 \); wives most frequently reported “time spent together” \( f = .15, N = 53 \) and “household management” \( f = .13 \).

The problems spouses identified at Time 1 also displayed a tendency to persist as a problem during their participation in the study. For husbands, the mean frequency of reoccurrence for all problems was .41; for wives, mean frequency of reoccurrence was .36. Due to the withdrawal of couples from the study, frequencies were calculated for the
the reoccurrence of a marital problem reported at time one by dividing the number of times the problem was reported by a spouse by the total number of reports by that spouse. For each of the 19 marital problems identified on the RPI, means were calculated for their reoccurrence within the sample. The most frequently reoccurring marital problems for husbands were “money management” ($M_f = .65, N = 9$), “household management” ($M_f = .51, N = 6$), and “jealousy” ($M_f = .48, N = 3$). The least frequently reoccurring problems for husbands were “making decisions,” “solving problems,” “independence” ($M_f = .13, N = 1$), “children” ($M_f = .20, N = 1$), and “showing affection” ($M_f = .28, N = 3$). For wives, the most frequently reoccurring problems were “showing affection” ($M_f = .667, N = 1$), “drugs and alcohol” ($M_f = .50, N = 1$), and “communication” ($M_f = .45, N = 16$). The least frequently reoccurring problems for wives were “trust” ($M_f = .15, N = 1$), “independence” ($M_f = .17, N = 2$), and “religion” ($M_f = .17, N = 1$). However, many of these problems were only reported by a few spouses. Regarding the most frequently reported problems of husbands at the onset of marriage -- “communication” and “time together” – the mean frequency of reoccurrence for “communication” was .41 ($N = 16$) and .41 for “time spent together” ($N = 14$). The mean frequencies of reoccurrence for “communication” and “household management” -- the most commonly cited problems for wives at the start of their marriages -- were .21 ($N = 16$) and .19 ($N = 15$), respectively.

**Problem Severity and Specific Marital Problems**

Over the eight waves of the study the average problem severity for wives ranged from 4.37 (SD = 2.95, $N = 49$) at Time 6 to 5.33 (SD = 3.12, $N = 46$) at Time 7. Mean problem severity for wives decreased from 5.05 (SD = 2.82, $N = 78$) at Time 1 to 4.68 (SD = 3.12, $N = 53$) at Time 8. For husbands, mean problem severity ranged from 4.70
Mean problem severity increased from 5.481 (SD = 3.09, N = 77) at Time 1 to 5.70 (SD = 2.87, N = 47) at Time 8. Problem severity was significantly different between wives and husbands at Time 8 \([t(98) = 1.71, p = .045]\) only.

Mean severity scores were calculated for each of the 19 problems on the RPI at Times 1 and 8 (see Table 1). At Time 1, “unrealistic expectations,” (M = 9, N = 2), “children” (M = 8, N =1) and “jealousy” (M = 8, N = 3), and “showing affection” (M = 7.33, N = 3) were the most severe problems for husbands; “career decisions” (M = 10, N = 1), “drugs and alcohol” (M = 9, N = 1), and “in-laws, parents, relatives” (M = 7.44, N = 9) were the most severe problems for wives. “Amount of time spent together” (M = 3.71, N = 14) and “independence” (M = 4, N = 1) were rated the least severe problems of husbands at Time 1, while “jealousy” (M = 1.50, N = 2) and “religion” (M = 2, N = 1) were rated the least severe for wives. At Time 8, “making decisions,” “drugs and alcohol”(M = 10, N = 1, respectively), “money management” (M = 6.75, N = 4), and “in-laws, parents, relatives” (M = 6.50, N = 6) were the most severe problems for husbands; “unrealistic expectations” (M = 4, N = 1), “children” (M = 4.20, N = 4), and “household management” (M = 4.25, N =4) were reported to be the least severe. Wives reported “trust,” “independence” (M = 10, N = 1, respectively), “making decisions” (M = 8.67, N =3), and “in-laws, parents, relatives” (M = 6.25, N = 4) as the most severe marital problems at Time 8, while they reported “solving problems” (M = 1, N =1), “recreation and leisure time” (M = 1.50, N = 4), and “friends” (M = 2, N =1) as the least severe.

**Problem Severity and Marital Satisfaction**

Mean marital satisfaction scores were calculated for both spouses. Wives’ mean satisfaction scores ranged between 89.19 [SD = 19.58, N = 62; (Time 7)] to 97.68 [SD =
Wives marital satisfaction scores were significantly different between Times 1 and 8 [t(100) = 2.27, p = .01]. Marital satisfaction decreased for wives from 97.683 (SD = 10.661, N = 82) at the beginning of marriage to 92.08 (SD = 17.47, N = 65) four years later. Husbands’ mean satisfaction scores ranged from 91.15 [SD = 16.89, N = 60 (Time 7)] to 96.28 [SD = 8.83, N = 81 (Time 1)]. Marital satisfaction scores for husbands were also significantly different between Time 1 and Time 8 [t(112) - = 1.66, p = .03]. Marital satisfaction decreased for husbands from 96.28 (SD = 8.83, N = 81) at Time 1 to 92.76 (SD = 12.70, N = 66) at Time 8. Marital satisfaction scores were not significantly different between spouses at any wave of the study.

Spouses were categorized into three levels of satisfaction at Times 1 and 8 to determine what marital problems were reported most frequently based upon their level of satisfaction. Due to the skewed distribution of SMD scores (i.e., the majority of scores at both times were above 80 in a possible range from 15 to 105), Low Satisfaction for the study was determined to be any score below 90, Mid-level Satisfaction was considered to be any score from 90 to 99, and High Satisfaction was determined to consist of scores greater than 100. At Time 1, Low Satisfaction husbands (N = 15) reported “communication” most frequently; Low Satisfaction wives (N = 10) also reported “communication” most frequently. High Satisfaction husbands (N = 35) reported “in-laws, parents, relatives” most frequently, while High Satisfaction wives (N = 49) reported “household management.” At Time 8, Low Satisfaction husbands (N = 10) reported “sex” most frequently and Low Satisfaction wives (N =15) reported “amount of time spent together” most frequently. High Satisfaction husbands (N = 13) reported
“children” and “money management” most frequently, while High Satisfaction wives (N = 28) reported “household management.”

In order to determine the relationship between marital problem severity and marital satisfaction Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated. At all eight waves of the study, marital problem severity was significantly (all $p < .05$) and negatively correlated with marital satisfaction for both wives and husbands (see Table ). For wives, Pearson correlations ranged between -.36 (Time 1) and -.711 (Time 3). For husbands, correlations ranged between -.38 (Time 1) and -.59 (Time 3). Additionally, correlations between problem severity and marital satisfaction increased from Time 1 to Time 8 for both spouses. For wives, the correlation increased from -.36 at Time 1 to -.44 at Time 8; for husbands, the correlation increased from -.38 at Time 1 to -.53 at Time 8. Additionally, problem severity at the beginning of marriage was not significantly correlated with the frequency of reoccurrence of the problem [$r = .11, p > .05$ (wives); $r = .02, p > .05$ (husbands)].

**Integrative Complexity**

Descriptive statistics were calculated at each of the six waves of the study for the integrative complexity of husbands’ and wives’ statements concerning their marital problems at those times. Husbands’ mean complexity scores ranged from 3.10 (SD = .99) at Time 1 to 3.24 (SD = 1.08) at Time 5. Wives’ mean complexity scores ranged from 2.8 (SD = 1.02) at Time 3 to 3.13 (SD = .99) Time 7; at only 2 points in the study (i.e., Times 7 and 8) were wives’ mean scores 3.00 or above. Spouses’ mean complexity scores were significantly different at two waves, Time 2 [$t(137) = 1.80, p = .04$] and Time 5 [$t(101) = 2.02, p = .02$]. Husbands’ and wives’ complexity scores were not significantly different based upon time.
Integrative Complexity, Problem Specificity and Problem Reoccurrence

Mean integrative complexity scores were calculated at Times 1 and 8 for each of the 19 marital problems identified on the RPI (see Table 1). At Time 1, the most complexly thought about marital problems for husbands were “children” (M = 4, N = 1), “sex” (M = 4, N = 1), and “showing affection” (M = 3.67, N = 3). For wives, the most complexly-regarded marital problems were “solving problems” (M = 4.5, N = 2), “money management” (M = 3.75, N = 4), and “amount of time spent together” (M = 3.5, N = 8). The least complexly-regarded marital problems of husbands were “jealousy” (M = 1.67, N = 3), “making decisions,” and “independence” (M = 2, N = 1, respectively). The least complexly thought about problems of wives were “showing affection” (M = 1, N = 1), “religion,” “making decisions,” “trust,” and “drugs and alcohol” (M = 2, N = 1, respectively).

At Time 8, the most complexly-regarded marital problems of wives were “showing affection” (M = 4, N = 1), “unrealistic expectations” (M = 4, N = 1), “money management” (M = 4, N = 3), and “solving problems” (M = 4, N = 1). Husbands’ most complexly-regarded problems were “religion” (M = 4, N = 2), “unrealistic expectations” (M = 4, N = 1), and “sex” (M = 3.75, N = 4). Wives thought least complexly about “trust,” “independence,” and “drugs and alcohol” (M = 2, N = 1, respectively). Husbands’ least complexly-regarded problems were “money management” (M = 2.29, N = 7) and “in-laws, parents, relatives” (M = 2.67, N = 6).

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated for the relationship between integrative complexity regarding a marital problem at Time 1 and the frequency of reoccurrence of the problem. The integrative complexity of wives at Time 1 was significantly correlated with the frequency of problem reoccurrence (r = -.26,
husbands’ integrative complexity at Time 1 was not significantly correlated with the frequency of problem reoccurrence ($r = 0.06, p > 0.05$).

**Integrative Complexity and Problem Severity**

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated for the relationship between integrative complexity and problem severity at all eight waves of the study for husbands and wives. Husbands’ complexity scores were significantly correlated (all p-values < 0.05) with problem severity scores at three waves: Time 5 ($r = -0.36$), Time 7 ($r = -0.25$), and Time 8 ($r = -0.32$). Wives’ complexity scores were significantly correlated at Time 2 ($r = -0.25, p < 0.05$), Time 3 ($r = -0.24, p < 0.05$), and Time 5 ($r = -0.20, p < 0.05$).

**Integrative Complexity and Marital Satisfaction**

Pearson r correlations were conducted to evaluate the relationship between spouses’ integrative complexity and marital satisfaction scores at all eight points in the study. Wives’ complexity scores were significantly correlated with marital satisfaction at three points: Time 3 ($r = 0.32, p < 0.05$), Time 5 ($r = 0.38, p < 0.05$), and Time 6 ($r = 0.38, p < 0.05$). Husbands’ integrative complexity was also significantly correlated with marital satisfaction at three times in the study: Time 4 ($r = 0.49, p < 0.05$), Time 5 ($r = 0.50, p < 0.05$), and Time 6 ($r = 0.46, p < 0.05$).
Table 1 Spouse Mean Problem Severity, Complexity, and Satisfaction by Marital Problem Topic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Husband Time 1</th>
<th>Husband Time 8</th>
<th>Wife Time 1</th>
<th>Wife Time 8</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>SEV</td>
<td>CMPLX</td>
<td>SMD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>77</td>
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<td>Religion</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-laws, parents, relatives</td>
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<td>5.25</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.44</td>
<td>97.67</td>
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<td>Household Mgmt</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>101</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>89</td>
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<td>Jealousy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solving Problems</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs &amp; Alcohol</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Decisions</td>
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<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>99.43</td>
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</table>

Note: Blank cells indicate that no data was available for analysis.
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

Limitations

The findings of the present study should be regarded with consideration as several limitations restrict their generalizability. First, the relatively small size of the sample (due in large part to divorce and/or withdrawal from the study) may have affected the breadth of information collected from couples. When examining the distribution of the marital satisfaction scores, a positively-skewed distribution is obvious as scores tend to fall within the upper limits of the possible range. Very few satisfaction scores were within the lower limits of the range. Consequently, the majority of couples in the study reported reasonably high levels of marital satisfaction, restricting the range of scores and possibly depressing correlations. However, as the couples were newlywed, higher marital satisfaction would be expected. Furthermore, the small sample size may have restricted the selection of particular marital problems as some topics were underrepresented at each of the points of the study. For example, the topics of “making decisions,” “friends,” “solving problems,” “trust,” “independence,” and “drugs and alcohol” were rarely selected as marital problems at all waves of the study. The underrepresentation of these problems reduces the significance of their effects. A larger sample size might have contributed to stronger effect sizes and a greater variety of reported marital problems.

Second, comparing integrative complexity scores between spouses may not be the most effective evaluation of differences in the way they structure their
thoughts. Integrative complexity is conceptually viewed as flexible and state-dependent. Many of the couples in the study reported differences in the marital problems they chose to describe. As a result, comparisons were conducted on spouses who reported the same problem as well as those who reported different problems. Comparing the integrative complexity of statements concerning different marital topics may pose a significant threat to the generalizability of such comparisons. Comparisons of integrative complexity regarding unlike topics may be akin to those of apples and oranges. Evaluations of such complexity may reveal greater effects if spouses were required to report on the same marital problems. However, evidence also exists suggesting that integrative complexity may be a relatively stable personality attribute (Tetlock, Peterson, & Berry, 1993). Due to the variety of problems reported by spouses, integrative complexity may be the best assessment of cognitive structure. Additionally, integrative complexity allows for a social-cognitive evaluation of thought structure rather than relying on outdated cognitive-only assessments such as measures of attribution (Fincham & Beach, 1999b).

Findings

Problem Severity and Specificity

The present study assessed what marital problems newlywed couples report most frequently and which of those problems are associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction. The most frequently reported marital problem for both husbands and wives over the eight waves of the study was “amount of time spent together.” Other frequently reported problems for both spouses were “communication” and “in-laws, parents, relatives.” Such findings appear to be consistent with previous studies concerning common marital problems (e.g., Gruver & Labadie, 1975; Knox et al., 1997; and Zusman & Knox, 1998) and suggest that certain marital problems may be inevitable. In addition,
certain problems seem to be common to couples with different levels of marital satisfaction. “Communication” was the most frequently reported marital problem of the least satisfied newlywed husbands and wives at the onset of marriage, while “sex” was the most frequently reported marital problem of those husbands four years later and “amount of time spent together” was the most frequently reported marital problem of the least satisfied wives four years later. The most satisfied husbands reported “amount of time spent together” (Time 1) and “children” and “money management” (Time 8) most frequently, while the most satisfied wives reported “household management” most frequently at both times.

Such data make drawing conclusions about the impact of problem specificity on marital satisfaction difficult. However, it appears that the least satisfied newlywed couples agree that communication is a problem at the beginning of their marriages; as these couples transition through the first few years of marriage they may begin to shift their attention to other problem areas (i.e., sex for husbands and time spent together for wives). This finding may also suggest that communication can be a serious problem for couples at the start of marriage, having an impact on their marital satisfaction. As newlywed spouses become more familiar with each other, communication problems may dissipate and other problem areas may become more salient. The most frequent problem of highly satisfied wives appears to be consistent during the first four years of marriage. This may reflect the ability of satisfied wives to accept that they and their husbands may have different opinions regarding “household management” and that these differences do not necessarily equate to an unhappy marriage. Dissatisfied spouses may more readily
identify their differences in multiple areas; consequently, these numerous difference sum to a dissatisfying marriage.

Furthermore, the current findings suggest that particular marital problems may have a tendency to persist throughout the first few years of marriage. The frequency of a problem reoccurring during the first four years of marriage for both spouses was significant and moderate. This finding is in agreement with Gottman’s (1999) assertion that most couples experience long-term, perpetual problems. The most frequently reoccurring marital problems for husbands were “money management,” household management,” and “jealousy;” the most frequently, reoccurring problems for wives were “showing affection,” “drugs and alcohol,” and “communication.” Of the most commonly cited problems at the onset of marriage, only “communication” (for wives) was among the most frequently reoccurring problems. These findings suggest that common problems at the start of a marriage (e.g., communication difficulties and family issues) may not remain prominent. Furthermore, these findings imply that perhaps most newlywed couples experience problems regarding issues such as family and the amount of time they spend together at some point in their relationship, but that these problems may not remain as severe or have a tendency to reoccur as frequently as other problems (e.g., “drugs and alcohol”). Problems related to the amount of time spent together and family may be severe at some point in a newlywed couple’s marriage, but the severity of these problems may not persist over time as the couple negotiates their differences and perhaps comes to an acceptance that these problems may continue. Although such problems may reoccur, couples may discover ways to cope with such problems that help to diminish their severity.
Regarding problem severity, husbands and wives tended to differ in the problems they rated the most severe. At the onset of marriage, husbands reported “unrealistic expectations” as the most severe marital problems; after four years of marriage, husbands reported “making decisions” and “drugs and alcohol” as the most severe problems. Wives indicated that “career decisions” were the most severe problems at the beginning of marriage, while they reported that “independence” and “drugs and alcohol” as the most severe. It appears that a problem as significant – and often very obvious – as substance abuse is readily identified by spouses at latter points in the newlywed marriage. This may be due to the ability of substance abusers to hide their problems initially from friends and family (Roberts & McCrady, 2003) as many clinicians who have worked with substance abuse clients and their families are aware. As the seriousness of the abuse worsens, spouses may tend to become more aware of the problem and confront their partners about it.

The first hypothesis of the study related to problem severity stated that no differences exist in problem severity between newlywed spouses based upon gender. The data tend to support this hypothesis. No significant differences were detected in problem severity between husbands and wives except at Time 8 (the final wave of the study). This finding may suggest that couples begin to perceive the severity of their marital problems differently as the marriage progresses. Kreider and Fields (2001) reported that the average duration of a first marriage ending in divorce is seven to eight years. Spouses who begin to disagree in their evaluations of marital problem severity may, consequently, be at higher risk of divorce. Such couples may begin to notice prominent differences in their evaluations around the midpoint (i.e., four years) of a troubled marriage.
Additionally, based on the data regarding the severity of specific problems, at-risk couples may differ in their perceptions of what is problematic. Couples who differ in their perceptions of what is a marital problem as well as their evaluations of problem severity may be at higher risk for marital dissatisfaction and dissolution. Following couples throughout a seven to eight year period may reveal how such differences might influence marital satisfaction and stability.

The second hypothesis related to problem severity stated that higher problem severity scores at specific points in the marriage (i.e., each wave of the study) correlate with lower marital satisfaction scores at those times. The data support this hypothesis. At all eight waves of the study problem severity was negatively correlated with marital satisfaction for wives and husbands. In general, wives displayed stronger correlations between problem severity and marital satisfaction. However, husbands displayed a greater overall increase in the strength of the correlation from the beginning of marriage to four years later. These findings offer evidence to suggest that the more severe a spouse believes a marital problem to be the less her or his marital satisfaction seems to be. As a marital problem worsens for spouses, they may begin to engage in behaviors that contribute to decreased marital satisfaction (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Coping with a marital problem is likely more difficult as it becomes more severe, and as a result, ineffective coping problem-solving strategies may perpetuate a sense of dissatisfaction with one’s marriage.

The third hypothesis stated that the severity of a problem at the onset of marriage positively correlates with the frequency of its reoccurrence during the first four years of marriage. The data from the current study do not support this hypothesis. A spouse’s
appraisal of problem severity at the beginning of marriage may not have a direct impact on its tendency to reoccur throughout marriage; rather, the way a spouse thinks about that problem and the manner in which that problem is managed may have more of an influence on its reoccurrence. The tendency of a problem to reoccur or continue may simply reflect basic differences in partners’ personalities and their needs that likely cannot be reconciled and will continue to persist throughout marriage (Dimidjian, Martell, & Christensen, 2002; Gottman, 1999; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996a).

**Integrative Complexity**

The current study also examined the effects of integrative complexity on the way couples describe their marital problems. The mean integrative complexity for problem descriptions for husbands and wives at all waves of the study was approximately three on a seven point scale. A score of three is representative of differentiation without integration. Thus, spouses in the current study displayed the ability see two or more perspectives of their marital problems. For example, a husband might have written:

I like to have sex more often than my wife does. I would like to have sex almost every night; she would prefer to have sex once or twice a week. I tend to be more physically affectionate, whereas she enjoys spending time talking to each other or watching TV. We have different opinions about how often to have sex.

Spouses in the study acknowledge that they may have a different point of view than that of others and accept these perspectives as valid.

The study also asked what problems spouses think most complexly about. Husbands consistently thought most complexly about “children” and “sex” at the beginning of marriage and four years later; the problems they thought least complexly about showed no pattern of consistency. Wives thought most complexly about “solving problems” at the start of marriage and four years later, while they demonstrated
consistently low complexity regarding “trust” at both points in the marriage. This data appears to support the first hypothesis regarding integrative complexity that stated differences in integrative complexity exist based upon the type of marital problem. For example, husbands may be able to think more complexly about sex, resigning themselves to the common belief that men simply want sex more than women. Although this may not be the case, research in the field of mating (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993) suggests that such beliefs may be grounded in human evolution. Husbands may acknowledge that their wives are not as “biologically motivated” to engage in sex, and therefore, may accept this difference. In a similar vein, wives showed a pattern of thinking least complexly about trust issues. From an evolutionary perspective, women may be more invested in emotional expression, and violations of trust deeply affect them, shaking their ability to think complexly about such an emotionally-charged problem. These results appear to contradict previous research by Suedfeld, Bluck, and Ballard (1994) that found that a higher degree of emotional involvement positively correlated with greater integrative complexity. Perhaps problems concerning trust in a marriage are so emotionally-loaded that complex cognitive structuring becomes difficult to achieve.

The data also suggest that integrative complexity has an effect on problem reoccurrence for wives. The integrative complexity of a marital problem at the beginning of marriage was negatively and modestly correlated with the frequency of problem reoccurrence for wives. Wives who display lower levels of complexity at the start of a marriage may be at higher risk to experience “perpetual problems” (Gottman, 1999). As the data consistently reveals, if these perpetual problems are of high severity, low complexity wives may experience lower levels of marital satisfaction.
The second hypothesis concerning integrative complexity was supported by the data. No differences were detected in integrative complexity based on time. This may reflect the tendency of integrative complexity to remain relatively stable, despite being a context-specific attribute (Tetlock, Peterson, & Berry, 1993). The third hypothesis regarding integrative complexity—no difference in integrative complexity exists based on gender—was not completely supported. The data reveal significant differences in integrative complexity between husbands and wives at Times 2 and 5. These times correspond with points at six months and two years into a marriage. Perhaps at these periods, problem severity may be greater and have an impact on the complexity of spouses, with one spouse displaying a significant decrease in complexity at these times.

The data regarding the effects of problem severity on integrative complexity (Hypothesis 4) lend some support to such speculation. Although the data do not consistently support the fourth hypothesis, significant negative and modest correlations were found between problem severity and integrative complexity for husbands (Times 5, 7, and 8) and wives (Times 2, 3, 5). At Time 2, wives’ integrative complexity may decline as a result of increased problem severity, accounting for the differences in complexity between spouses at those times. In addition, the data suggest that problem severity has a greater impact on the integrative complexity of husbands at the latter stages of newlywed marriage (i.e., the first four years of marriage), while such effects are more profound for wives at the earlier stages of newlywed marriage.

However, these findings mean little to the continued satisfaction of newlywed couples. What effect does integrative complexity have on marital satisfaction? The fifth hypothesis concerning integrative complexity stated that greater integrative complexity
correlates with greater marital satisfaction. The data do no support this assertion at all waves of the study. Integrative complexity does positively and significantly correlate with marital satisfaction at Times 4-6 for husbands and at Times 3, 5, and 6 for wives. The data from these waves appear to be complement the findings by Murray and Holmes (1999) that suggest that partners in satisfied and stable relationships develop integrative cognitive representations of their partners. The results from the current study imply that higher integrative complexity is an important factor in determining increased marital satisfaction in the middle phases (approximately one to three years) of newlywed marriage. This may represent a time when newlywed couples are making significant life transitions, such as having children. Pancer et al. (2000) found that couples demonstrated higher integrative complexity after the birth of a child and those parents who displayed higher levels of complexity reported greater marital satisfaction after the birth of a child than those displaying lower complexity. The findings of Pancer et al., and the current results suggest that complexity may play a crucial role in transitioning through stages of marital development, such as parenthood.

**Conclusions and Implications**

The data reveals that problem severity is positively correlated with marital satisfaction, as any marital counselor can attest to. Couples rarely present to therapy if their problems are not severe and meriting counseling from their perspectives. Foremost, the goal of counseling with couples should be a reduction in problem severity. If couples do not experience such a decrease in severity, couples likely will not see any reason to continue with counseling and their marital satisfaction may be at risk for further decline, possibly resulting in divorce. The problems of newlywed spouses in the current study showed a tendency to persist throughout the first few marriages. Couples must, therefore,
find ways to cope with those problems (e.g., “communication” and “amount of time spent together”) or risk declines in marital satisfaction.

Many marital interventions are designed from a behavioral perspective and attempt to teach couples effective communication skills (see Gottman, 1999). However, as Gottman and Jacobson and Christensen (1996a) point out, improved communication skills can only go so far to help couples. As these researchers assert and as the current data suggests, many couples experience on-going and perpetual problems, such as a lack of time together or differences regarding money management or household duties. Although helping couples to improve their communication may be helpful, they may never be able to negotiate an understanding or resolution. Perhaps what is needed in couples therapy is restructuring the way spouses perceive their problems.

The findings of the current study suggest that this may be useful in early stages of marriage, particularly between the second and third years of marriage – often when couples are facing significant transitions in their lives, such as relocation or child-rearing. Further research must be conducted to determine the effect of integrative complexity on marital satisfaction during these transitional periods. Recent outcome research on marital therapy indicates that cognitive change in spouses may be effective in instilling relationship change and, consequently, marital satisfaction. In a qualitative study with 24 couples therapy clients, Christensen et al. (1998) reported that one of the most significant factors in the process of change was a modification in their understanding of their relationship. Friedlander and Heatherington (1998) have also demonstrated promise with an instrument designed to evaluate changes in clients’ cognitive representations of family problems. Constructivist approaches to counseling such as narrative therapy (Freedman
& Combs, 2002; White & Epston, 1990) and constructivist family therapy (see Neimeyer, 1993) have become widely used with families over the past decade. However, as the data from the present study indicate, complexity of cognitive structure may not always play a crucial role in marital satisfaction, and attempting to restructure clients’ cognitions may not always be plausible. Some clients may find constructivist interventions helpful, while others balk at them. Furthermore, the current sample of newlyweds displayed a tendency toward differentiation; attempting to help differentiated couples further differentiate likely would prove fruitless. Such couples may need greater assistance integrating their constructions of their problems into meaningful resolutions. In addition, many couples may benefit from greater emotional connectedness and may not benefit from such cognitive interventions. Forgiveness as part of couples counseling shows promise in helping couples work through emotional conflicts, particularly violations of trust, and develop greater connectedness (Barnett & Youngberg, 2004). The Emotion Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) of Susan Johnson (Johnson, 2002; 2003) has demonstrated efficacy in working with couples (Shadish & Baldwin, 2003). Johnson’s approach “is a constructivist approach in that it focuses on the ongoing construction of present [emotional] experiences…and a systemic approach in that it focuses on the construction of patterns of interaction with emotional others” (Johnson, 2002, p. 221). This approach integrates behavior, cognition, and affect in a manner that fosters increased connectedness, enabling couples with the understanding necessary to work through their problems.

The promise of EFT illustrates the need for an integrative approach to couples therapy. As the current study indicates, the complexity of spouses’ thoughts about their
problems is not consistently predictive of marital satisfaction, and thus, should not always be the focus of marriage counseling. Fincham and Beach (1999a) and Sprenkle, Blow, and Dickey (1999) suggest that the goal of marriage counseling be that of change, and point to the importance of being integrative and goal-oriented rather than technique-bound. The current study supports this claim and lends further evidence to the complexity of marital satisfaction. Until recently, marital satisfaction has been studied as a variable dependent on one or two variables. Research in the area of marital satisfaction and marital therapy modalities would benefit from taking an integrative perspective, incorporating factors such as integrative complexity within a larger and more systemic framework.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christopher Adams received Master of Arts in Education and Specialist in Education degrees in counselor education from the University of Florida in May of 2004. While at the University of Florida, he specialized in marriage and family counseling. He attended the first two years of college at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst, and he received a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Florida in 2000. Christopher is currently applying to doctoral programs in counseling psychology and hoping for admission in the fall of 2004.