

A Brief Intervention to Promote Conflict Reappraisal Preserves Marital Quality Over Time

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Abstract

Marital quality is a major contributor to happiness and health. Unfortunately, marital quality normatively declines over time. We tested whether a novel 21-min intervention designed to foster the reappraisal of marital conflicts could preserve marital quality in a sample of 120 couples enrolled in an intensive 2-year study. Half of the couples were randomly assigned to receive the reappraisal intervention in Year 2 (following no intervention in Year 1); half were not. Both groups exhibited declines in marital quality over Year 1. This decline continued in Year 2 among couples in the control condition, but it was eliminated among couples in the reappraisal condition. This effect of the reappraisal intervention on marital quality over time was mediated through reductions in conflict-related distress over time. This study illustrates the potential of brief, theory-based, social-psychological interventions to preserve the quality of intimate relationships over time.

Keywords

emotional reappraisal, marriage, relationship quality, emotion regulation, social-psychological intervention

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Of the social factors linked to mental and physical health, marital quality is among the most important (Myers, 2000; Parker-Pope, 2010). For example, 57% of people who are “very happy” in their marriage are also very happy in general, whereas only 10% who are “pretty happy” in their marriage are very happy in general. Among patients who have had a coronary artery bypass graft, those who were high rather than low in marital satisfaction 1 year following the surgery were 3.2 times more likely to be alive 15 years after the surgery, an effect that could not be explained by demographic, behavioral, or baseline health measures (King & Reis, 2012; also see Coyne, Rohrbaugh, Shoham, Sonnega, & Nicklas, 2001).

Given the intrinsic importance of marital relationships for many people and the robust associations of marital quality with mental and physical health, it is disconcerting that marital quality normatively declines over time (Glenn, 1998; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Indeed, although cross-sectional research suggests that trajectories of marital quality normatively become positive following an initial decline (e.g., Glenn, 1990; Spanier

& Lewis, 1980), the best evidence—from longitudinal studies—suggests that the normative downward trajectory does not reverse at any stage of marital longevity, instead remaining unambiguously negative throughout most stages of the marriage (Glenn, 1998; VanLaningham et al., 2001).

Scholars have identified a broad range of factors that predict poor marital quality. Among relational processes, arguably the most robust predictor is *negative-affect reciprocity*—a chain of retaliatory negativity between spouses during marital conflict, such as when a husband responds to his wife’s criticism of his parenting with an angry denial or an insulting evaluation of her integrity (Gottman, 1998). Scholars have developed interventions to interrupt such chains of negativity before they become all-consuming (e.g., Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, &

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Stickle, 1998). Although such interventions can sometimes help spouses learn to manage their emotions more constructively, they also tend to require considerable investment of time and money. In addition, they are uniformly multicomponential, which makes it difficult to discern which component (or components) improves relationship quality.

Inspired by research demonstrating that brief, theory-based, social-psychological interventions can yield remarkably enduring improvements in people's lives by fostering thoughts and behaviors that self-reinforce over time (Yeager & Walton, 2011), we developed an intervention to test whether reappraising conflict can preserve marital quality over an extended period of time (at least in a nonclinical sample). Given that relationship quality is strongly influenced by recursive, self-reinforcing dynamics, such as negative-affect reciprocity, it represents an especially promising target for a brief social-psychological intervention. In addition, because this intervention focused precisely on a theory-specified process, it required minimal investment of time or other resources.

Our intervention capitalized on the power of *emotional reappraisal*—reinterpreting the meaning of emotion-eliciting situations (Gross, 2002)—to help people manage negative emotions constructively. It was adapted from a laboratory experiment in which participants who were asked to reappraise an interpersonal conflict from a third-party perspective experienced less anger and distress than participants who were asked to ruminate about the conflict or who were given no instructions (Ray, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2008; also see Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005). Given the default tendency to view interpersonal conflict from a first-person perspective (Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Robinson & Swanson, 1993; Verduyn, Van Mechelen, Kross, Chezzi, & Van Bever, 2012), we theorized that conflict-related anger and distress should dissipate more rapidly among people who are trained to engage in third-party perspective taking than among people who are not, and that this dissipation should, in turn, preserve relationship quality over time.

We conducted a seven-wave, 2-year longitudinal study of married couples, randomly assigning half the couples to the reappraisal intervention during Year 2. Participants reported every 4 months on their marital quality and on the most significant conflict they had experienced in their marriage during that time interval. These procedures allowed us to test three hypotheses:

1. Marital quality will decline over time.
2. This downward trend will be reduced, perhaps even eliminated, among participants who experienced the reappraisal intervention in Year 2.
3. This reduction of the downward trend in marital quality will be mediated by declining postintervention conflict-related distress in the reappraisal condition relative to the control condition.

Method

Participants were 120 heterosexual married couples from the Chicago metropolitan area (mean age of individual participants = 40 years, $SD = 14$, range = 20–79; mean duration of the marriage = 11 years, $SD = 12$, range = 0.1–52). They learned about the study via newspaper and Craigslist.org advertisements or via flyers distributed through a local school system (children brought the flyer home to their parents). Every 4 months for 24 months—seven waves in total—they reported their relationship satisfaction, love, intimacy, trust, passion, and commitment (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; see Table 1 for scale information). These six marital-quality measures are distinct but converge on the higher-order construct of subjective marital quality (Fletcher et al., 2000), which we calculated by standardizing each scale and averaging them into a composite.

At Wave 1, participants completed an Internet-based questionnaire, which contained the marital-quality assessment, and then they attended a laboratory session in which they completed a series of tasks (e.g., a conflict discussion, executive-control tasks) that are irrelevant to

Table 1. The Six Marital-Quality Components Used in the Present Study

Outcome variable	Sample item	Cronbach's α
Satisfaction	"I feel satisfied with our relationship."	.96
Love	"How much do you love your partner?"	.92
Intimacy	"How intimate is your relationship?"	.91
Trust	"How much do you trust your partner?"	.90
Passion	"How passionate is your relationship?"	.94
Commitment	"I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner."	.92

Note: Satisfaction and commitment were measured on scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) using the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Love, intimacy, trust, and passion were measured on scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) using the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). These six marital-quality components were standardized and then averaged to calculate the measure of overall marital quality.

the present article. At Waves 2 through 7, which took place entirely via the Internet, participants provided a “fact-based summary of the most significant disagreement” they had experienced with their spouse over the preceding 4 months, “focusing on behavior, not on thoughts or feelings.” After providing this description, they reported, on scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), their level of conflict-related distress (e.g., “I am angry at my partner for his/her behavior during this conflict”; $\alpha = .72$).

All participants underwent identical procedures during the first 12 months. Then, by random assignment, half of the couples engaged in an additional 7-min writing task at the end of Waves 4 through 6 (Months 12, 16, and 20, respectively), during which they reappraised the conflict they had just written about. In addition, at Months 14, 18, and 22, we sent participants in the reappraisal condition an e-mail reminding them of the reappraisal task; we e-mailed participants in the control condition at the same times, but just as a friendly check-in. During the reappraisal writing task, participants responded to three prompts:

1. “Think about the specific disagreement that you just wrote about having with your partner. Think about this disagreement with your partner from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved; a person who sees things from a neutral point of view. How might this person think about the disagreement? How might he or she find the good that could come from it?”
2. “Some people find it helpful to take this third-party perspective during their interactions with their romantic partner. However, almost everybody finds it challenging to take this third-party perspective at all times. In your relationship with your partner, what obstacles do you face in trying to take this third-party perspective, especially when you’re having a disagreement with your partner?”
3. “Despite the obstacles to taking a third-party perspective, people can be successful in doing so. Over the next 4 months, please try your best to take this third-party perspective during interactions with your partner, especially during disagreements. How might you be most successful in taking this perspective in your interactions with your partner over the next 4 months? How might taking this perspective help you make the best of disagreements in your relationship?”

Results

For each person i , we ran seven multilevel, discontinuous growth-curve analyses (Singer & Willett, 2003) to test Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. These analyses

predicted, in turn, overall marital quality and each of the six marital-quality subcomponents from (a) time (assessment time, t , coded 0–6 for Waves 1–7, respectively), (b) condition (control = 0, reappraisal = 1), and (c) time since intervention (change in slope as a function of the intervention, coded 0 for all waves for control participants and coded 0 for Waves 1–4 and 1–3 for Waves 5–7, respectively, for reappraisal participants). Our statistical model was as follows:

$$\text{marital quality measure}_{it} = \pi_{0i} + \pi_{1i}(\text{time}) + \pi_{2i}(\text{condition}_{it}) + \pi_{3i}(\text{time since intervention}_{it}) + \varepsilon_{it}. \quad (1)$$

We expected to find negative effects of time (Hypothesis 1: marital quality deteriorates over time, π_{1i}) and positive effects for time since intervention (Hypothesis 2: the negative effect of time is smaller for reappraisal than for control participants after the intervention begins, π_{3i}).

As predicted, participants tended to exhibit robust declines in overall marital quality (Hypothesis 1), $\pi_{1i} = -0.06$, $t(122) = -10.04$, $p < .001$, but after the intervention began, participants in the reappraisal condition were protected from this downward trend—that is, the Year 2 marital-quality slopes differed across the two conditions (Hypothesis 2), $\pi_{3i} = 0.05$, $t(122) = 3.19$, $p = .001$ (Fig. 1).¹ Indeed, for reappraisal participants, the downward trend was entirely eliminated, $p = .842$. The same pattern emerged for all six subcomponents of marital quality (Table 2), and, taken together, 13 of the 14 tests of Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 reached statistical significance, all $ps < .05$.²

Next, we tested whether the positive postintervention slope for marital quality could be explained by a reduction in conflict-related distress among participants in the reappraisal condition. First, we regressed the postintervention slope of conflict-related distress³ (the hypothesized mediator) onto the experimental manipulation (the independent variable). As predicted, relative to participants in the control condition, participants in the reappraisal condition exhibited significant postintervention reductions over time in conflict-related distress, $b = -0.23$, $t(116) = -2.85$, $p = .006$. Second, we regressed the postintervention slope of marital quality (the hypothesized dependent variable) onto both the postintervention slope of conflict-related distress and the experimental manipulation. As predicted, the postintervention slope of conflict-related distress was negatively associated with the postintervention slope of marital quality, $b = -0.87$, $t(117) = -1.91$, $p = .057$.

Third, following Preacher and Hayes’s (2008) recommendations, we employed bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples, using the bias-corrected and accelerated approach, to assess whether the postintervention slope of conflict-related distress statistically mediated the

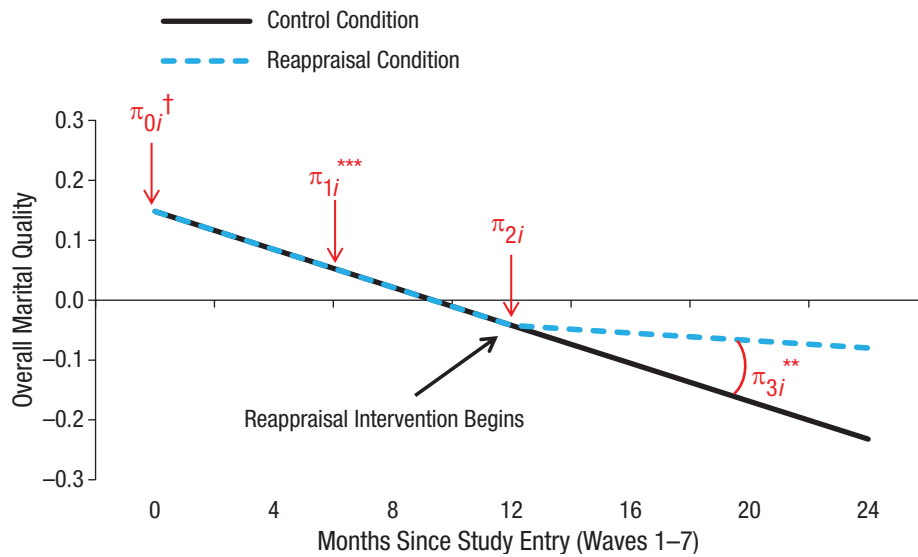


Fig. 1. Overall marital-quality score as a function of wave and condition. The asterisks and the dagger indicate significant differences between conditions ($†p < .10$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$). The overall intercept term—the model-implied mean of overall marital quality at study entry across the entire sample—is represented by π_{0i} . The overall slope term—the model-implied slope of overall marital quality over time across the entire sample—is represented by π_{1i} . The (negligible and nonsignificant) immediate increment in overall marital quality resulting from involvement in the reappraisal intervention is represented by π_{2i} . The increment in the slope in overall marital quality over time resulting from involvement in the reappraisal intervention is represented by π_{3i} .

effect of the reappraisal intervention on the postintervention slope of marital quality. The resulting 95% confidence interval [0.012, 0.568] did not contain 0, which is consistent with our hypothesis that a crucial reason why the reappraisal intervention preserved marital quality over time is that it reduced conflict-related distress over time (Hypothesis 3). (Testing for mediation in the other direction, with relationship quality as the mediator and conflict-related distress as the dependent measure, revealed a nonsignificant effect.)

Discussion

This study demonstrated that a 21-min writing intervention in which participants reappraised conflict in their marriage protected them against declines in marital quality over time. It also provided evidence that this effect was driven, at least in part, by a reduction in conflict-related distress over time among participants in the intervention condition.

At a practical level, these findings provide a promising target for clinical or even (given the Internet-based delivery) large-scale epidemiological interventions oriented toward counteracting the normative downward trend in marital quality over time (Glenn, 1998; VanLaningham et al., 2001). At a methodological level, these findings add to the growing body of research demonstrating the power of brief, theory-based, social-psychological interventions

to promote achievement, health, and well-being (Yeager & Walton, 2011). At a theoretical level, these findings provide especially compelling evidence for the power of adopting a third-party perspective to reduce anger related to relationship conflicts (see Kross et al., 2005; Ray et al., 2008). The positive effect of our reappraisal intervention on marital quality over time was mediated by reduced conflict-related anger and distress over time; however, future research is necessary to discern precisely how the intervention exerted these distress-reducing effects. Our manipulation—in which participants were instructed to think about the conflict from the perspective of a third party who adopts a neutral point of view and wants the best for all involved—presumably inculcated not only a self-distanced psychological perspective (Kross et al., 2005) and third-party visual perspective (Libby & Eibach, 2011), but also the “adaptive framework” (see Libby & Eibach, 2011, p. 234) of wanting the best for all involved. Future research is required to determine whether the efficacy of the reappraisal intervention depends on obtaining that adaptive framework or whether adopting a neutral third-party perspective is sufficient, on its own, to yield salutary effects on relationship quality. Such research could fruitfully investigate the role of a range of cognitive and psychological processes in linking reappraisal and conflict-related distress to marital quality, including tendencies toward cerebral rather than visceral reactions, benign rather than blameful attributions,

Table 2. Results of the Multilevel, Discontinuous Growth-Curve Models Predicting the Measures of Marital Quality

Outcome variable and parameter	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i> test	
		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>
Overall marital quality			
Overall intercept (π_{0i})	0.17	119	1.83 [†]
Overall trajectory/slope (π_{1i})	-0.06	119	-10.04***
Intervention-based increment at Wave 4 (π_{2i})	-0.02	119	-0.18
Intervention-based trajectory/slope deviation (π_{3i})	0.05	119	3.19**
Satisfaction			
Overall intercept (π_{0i})	6.00	115	42.85***
Overall trajectory/slope (π_{1i})	-0.08	115	-4.04***
Intervention-based increment at Wave 4 (π_{2i})	-0.05	115	-0.25
Intervention-based trajectory/slope deviation (π_{3i})	0.07	115	2.44*
Love			
Overall intercept (π_{0i})	6.47	115	78.98***
Overall trajectory/slope (π_{1i})	-0.10	115	-5.74***
Intervention-based increment at Wave 4 (π_{2i})	-0.07	115	-0.89
Intervention-based trajectory/slope deviation (π_{3i})	0.12	115	5.08***
Intimacy			
Overall intercept (π_{0i})	6.01	116	50.87***
Overall trajectory/slope (π_{1i})	-0.12	116	-6.62***
Intervention-based increment at Wave 4 (π_{2i})	-0.21	116	-1.27
Intervention-based trajectory/slope deviation (π_{3i})	0.15	116	5.11***
Trust			
Overall intercept (π_{0i})	6.47	117	82.75***
Overall trajectory/slope (π_{1i})	-0.07	117	-4.45***
Intervention-based increment at Wave 4 (π_{2i})	-0.17	117	-1.56
Intervention-based trajectory/slope deviation (π_{3i})	0.10	117	3.96**
Passion			
Overall intercept (π_{0i})	5.50	114	41.94***
Overall trajectory/slope (π_{1i})	-0.12	114	-6.87***
Intervention-based increment at Wave 4 (π_{2i})	-0.13	114	-0.72
Intervention-based trajectory/slope deviation (π_{3i})	0.12	114	3.66***
Commitment			
Overall intercept (π_{0i})	6.76	115	22.07***
Overall trajectory/slope (π_{1i})	-0.05	115	-4.57***
Intervention-based increment at Wave 4 (π_{2i})	-0.04	115	-0.54
Intervention-based trajectory/slope deviation (π_{3i})	0.02	115	0.76

Note: The overall marital-quality measure was created by standardizing and then averaging the six marital-quality components (satisfaction, love intimacy, trust, passion, and commitment). The intervention (for the reappraisal group only) started at Wave 4. The intervention-based trajectory/slope deviation (π_{3i}) for each component represents the test of the crucial hypothesis that the intervention altered the marital-quality trajectory over time.

[†]*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

minimal rather than excessive reliving, normal rather than elevated physiological arousal, abstract rather than concrete construal, reconstrued rather than literal perspective, wise rather than unwise reasoning, and integrative/top-down rather than phenomenological/bottom-up meaning making (Kross & Ayduk, 2011; Kross et al., 2005; Kross & Grossman, 2012; Libby & Eibach, 2011).

The present study had limitations, and the prospect of addressing them yields exciting directions for future research. For example, although it seems likely that the reduction of conflict-related distress yielded a concomitant reduction in negative-affect reciprocity, definitive conclusions along those lines await research employing microlevel behavioral analysis of marital

conflict. Although the reappraisal intervention changed the trajectory of participants' marriages and thus yielded gains in marital quality that strengthened over the year-long intervention period, future research is required to discern whether the procedure can help to sustain marital well-being over the course of many years or decades. Although the intervention preserved marital quality over time, it did not increase it. Future research could explore whether the intervention can be enhanced so that it actually increases marital quality over time; such an intervention would be especially promising for already distressed couples, for whom the maintenance of current levels of marital quality might not be an adequate outcome. In addition, future research could address various issues pertaining to the dosage, timing, and implementation of the intervention. For example, might the impact of the intervention diminish over the course of years or decades? Would the intervention remain effective if it were implemented less frequently than every 4 months? Might it be stronger (or perhaps weaker) if it were implemented more frequently than that? Would it be effective if only one spouse in each couple participated?

These unanswered questions notwithstanding, the present research has revealed something new and potentially important: A brief intervention designed to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time. That this effect was not moderated by marital duration suggests that it may be every bit as effective in long-married as in newlywed couples. Given the major health and well-being correlates of marital distress—both for the spouses themselves and for their children and broader social networks—spending 21 min a year reappraising conflict appears to yield a spectacular return on investment.

Author Contributions

E. J. Finkel procured the grant funding. E. J. Finkel, G. M. Walton, and J. J. Gross designed the intervention. E. J. Finkel and E. B. Slotter developed the broader empirical protocol, and the two of them collaborated with L. B. Luchies on the data collection. E. J. Finkel and E. B. Slotter devised the data-analytic plan, which E. B. Slotter executed. E. J. Finkel wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and all authors contributed substantively to the revisions. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. This effect was not moderated by race, gender, age, income, marital duration, number of children, or age of children, $ps > .225$.

2. The only effect that did not reach statistical significance ($p < .05$, two-tailed) was the postintervention slope effect (π_{3t}) for commitment. If this anomalous finding proves reliable in future research, scholars could explore whether commitment's greater cognitive (vs. affective) tenor or its future (vs. present) orientation can explain this finding.

3. We created this measure by running a multilevel, discontinuous growth-curve analysis identical to that in Equation 1, except that conflict-related distress was the dependent variable.

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