

# **Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Interpersonal Processes**

*Edited by*

**Garth J. O. Fletcher and Margaret S. Clark**



**Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology:  
Interpersonal Processes**

## **Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology**

Series editors: Miles Hewstone and Marilyn Brewer

Each of the four volumes of this authoritative handbook draws together 20–30 newly commissioned chapters to provide a comprehensive overview of specific topics in the field of social psychology. Designed to have considerable depth as well as breadth, each of the volumes encompasses theory and research at the intraindividual, interpersonal, intergroup, and group levels. Editors have been chosen for their expertise and knowledge of the subject, making *The Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology* an invaluable companion for any serious social psychology scholar.

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## *Series Editors' Foreword*

The idea for a new international handbook series for social psychology was conceived in July 1996 during the triannual meeting of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology in the idyllic setting of Gmunden, Austria. Over a glass of wine and pleasant breezes from the Traunsee, Alison Mudditt (then Psychology Editor for Blackwell Publishers) engaged the two of us in a “hypothetical” discussion of what a multi-volume handbook of social psychology at the start of the twenty-first century might look like. By the second glass of wine we were hooked, and the project that has culminated in the publication of this four-volume *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology* was commissioned.

The EAESP meeting provided a fitting setting for the origin of a project that was intended to be an international collaborative effort. The idea was to produce a set of volumes that would provide a rich picture of social psychology at the start of the new millennium – a cross-section of the field that would be both comprehensive and forward-looking. In conceiving an organizational framework for such a venture, we sought to go beyond a simple topical structure for the content of the volumes in order to reflect more closely the complex pattern of cross-cutting theoretical perspectives and research agendas that comprise social psychology as a dynamic enterprise. Rather than lengthy review papers covering a large domain of social psychological research, we felt that a larger number of shorter and more focused chapters would better reflect the diversity and the synergies representative of the field at this time.

The idea we developed was to represent the discipline in a kind of matrix structure, crossing levels of analysis with topics, processes, and functions that recur at all of these levels in social psychological theory and research. Taking inspiration from Willem Doise's 1986 book (*Levels of Explanation in Social Psychology*), four levels of analysis – intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup – provided the basis for organizing the *Handbook* series into four volumes. The content of each volume would be selected on the basis of cross-cutting themes represented by basic processes of social cognition, attribution, social motivation, affect and emotion, social influence, social comparison, self and identity,

as they operate at each level. In addition, each volume would include methodological issues and areas of applied or policy-relevant work related to social psychological research at that level of analysis.

Armed with this rough organizational framework as our vision for the series, our role was to commission editors for the individual volumes who would take on the challenging task of turning this vision into reality. The plan was to recruit two experts for each volume, who would bring different but complementary perspectives and experience to the subject matter to work together to plan, commission, and edit 20–30 papers that would be representative of current and exciting work within their broad domain. Once selected, co-editors were encouraged to use the matrix framework as a heuristic device to plan the coverage of their volume, but were free to select from and embellish upon that structure to fit their own vision of the field and its current directions.

We have been extremely fortunate in having persuaded eight exceptionally qualified and dedicated scholars of social psychology to join us in this enterprise and take on the real work of making this *Handbook* happen. Once they came on board, our role became an easy one: just relax and observe as the project was brought to fruition in capable hands. We are deeply indebted and grateful to Abraham Tesser and Norbert Schwarz, Garth Fletcher and Margaret Clark, Michael Hogg and Scott Tindale, Rupert Brown and Samuel Gaertner for their creative leadership in producing the four volumes of this series. Through their efforts, a rough outline has become a richly textured portrait of social psychology at the threshold of the twenty-first century.

In addition to the efforts of our volume editors and contributors, we are grateful to the editorial staff at Blackwell Publishers who have seen this project through from its inception. The project owes a great deal to Alison Mudditt who first inspired it. When Alison went on to new ventures in the publishing world, Martin Davies took over as our capable and dedicated Commissioning Editor who provided guidance and oversight throughout the operational phases. Our thanks to everyone who has been a part of this exciting collaborative venture.

Miles Hewstone  
Marilynn Brewer

## *Preface*

The term “handbook” tends to conjure up a vision of long and sometimes tedious reviews of the literature, which long-suffering graduate students are forced to read. None of that here. Instead, the diversity and breadth of social psychology (in the interpersonal domain) is represented in a smorgasbord of short focused chapters. We believe this approach has worked well, and the volume accurately represents contemporary social psychological theorizing and research at the cusp – and what an invigorating cusp it is.

This particular volume of the *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology* follows, at least roughly, the kind of framework suggested and described by the series editors (Miles Hewstone and Marilynn Brewer). The chapters, in order, deal with the role of social cognition in interpersonal settings (5 chapters), social motivation (4 chapters), affect and emotion (4 chapters), social influence and comparison (2 chapters), the self (4 chapters), methods and data analysis (1 chapter), and, finally, applications of the field to real-world issues and domains (2 chapters).

These *Blackwell Handbook* volumes represent snapshots of a dynamic and broad field. The picture revealed by this volume on interpersonal processes is no exception. Many themes are apparent, but we will mention just a few that we were struck by. First, there is a groundswell of interest in the social psychology of intimate sexual relationships, from dealing with processes of initial mate selection to investigating how dyadic relationships develop, flourish, and dissolve. Second, an increasingly common theoretical tack adopted is to focus on the goals and functions of lay judgments, beliefs, and behavior. Third, the role of affect and emotions has moved further towards center stage, and treatments of it can be found in many chapters. Fourth, evolutionary psychology is increasingly (but not uncritically) exerting a profound impact on social psychology. Fifth, the study of social cognition remains a pivotal focus in social psychology – it is everywhere in these chapters. Sixth, the breadth and scope of research methods (and associated data analyses) found in these chapters suggests that social psychology has moved on from its obsession with laboratory experiments using stripped-down stimuli and the use of ANOVA designs – not that

there is anything wrong with such methods, of course, except when their use is mandated as the only way of practicing “good science.” Social psychology has become ecumenical in its research methods, and is in the vanguard of using powerful new statistical and causal modeling methods such as Structural Equation Modeling.

In short, the picture of social psychology revealed by this volume is an exciting and dynamic one, with social psychologists both drawing from and contributing to other related domains of scientific inquiry. We heartily thank the authors who contributed to the volume (with remarkably little arm-twisting involved), the series editors (Miles Hewstone and Marilynn Brewer) and Martin Davies and the staff at Blackwell. This volume was a remarkable pleasure to edit.

*Garth Fletcher*  
*Margaret Clark*  
October 1999



# PART I

## *Cognition/Attribution*

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# Chapter One

## *Attributions in Close Relationships: From Balkanization to Integration*

**Frank D. Fincham**

Following Kelley's (1967) and Jones and Davis's (1965) important elaboration and systematization of Heider's (1958) seminal ideas about the perceived causes of behavior, attribution research replaced dissonance as the major research topic in social psychology, accounting for 11 percent of all published social-psychological research during the 1970s (Pleban & Richardson, 1979). Although the focus of attention shifted to social cognition in the 1980s, the number of articles indexed with the term attribution as a descriptor continued to rise, tripling in number between 1974 and 1984 (Smith, 1994). The publication rate has not abated in the 1990s although it appears to have plateaued at approximately 300 articles per annum (1990–8; mean = 322.8, range = 291–366).

What the numbers do not reveal, however, is a shift in the nature of research on attribution that might account for the continued prodigious output. One shift has been increasing attention to Heider's broad concern with how a perceiver links observables to underlying stable or dispositional properties ("invariances") of the world to give meaning to phenomenal experience. From this perspective, attribution is synonymous with perception and comprehension of the environment, and draws on a variety of domains (e.g., text comprehension, world knowledge) that might help elucidate the perceiver's causal construction of events. This emphasis fits well with social cognition research that also assumes continuity between inferences made about the social and nonsocial environment, and it places

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attribution in a broader framework of research on how people construct mental models of the world.

The second shift has concerned the narrower and more traditional focus on linking a person's behavior to underlying properties of the person (e.g., traits, motives). Basic attribution research on this topic, stimulated by the classic attribution statements of Kelley (1967) and Jones and Davis (1965), began to wane in the 1980s. However, the application of an attributional framework in emerging areas of inquiry such as close relationships, and to numerous applied problems (e.g., depression), maintained a steady output of research on this topic (see Hewstone & Fincham, 1996; Weiner, 1995).

The continued vitality of attribution research has, however, brought with it increased balkanization of the literature. The lack of interplay between the two new lines of attribution research just mentioned is striking. But even more striking is the relative isolation of research within closely related areas of inquiry. For example, the impact of attributions on individual and relational outcomes has been investigated but the literatures relating to each type of outcome remain distinct.

Like the broader literature on attribution, research on attributions in close relationships has continued to flourish. Although initially focused on marital relationships, the research has broadened to embrace other relationships. But this growth has again brought with it balkanization as there is limited cross-fertilization of attributional research on different topics within the same relationship (e.g., marital violence, distressed marriages) and across research on different types of relationships (e.g., marital, parent-child and peer/friendship relationships).

It is just over 20 years since the inception of marital attribution research in social (Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976) and clinical (Wright & Fichten, 1976) psychology. As the field entered its adolescence, concerns were expressed about its "lack of focus and direction" (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers & Sher, 1989, p. 31). With the onset of adulthood, it behooves us to take stock of its development. In what ways have earlier expectations for the field come to fruition? Conversely, what promises remain unfulfilled and how might they now be realized? At a minimum, we need to recognize the price of balkanization and explore how integration among various domains of attribution research, and how links with a broader psychological literature, might enhance the study of attributions in marriage.

The chapter begins with a brief historical introduction to the study of attributions in marriage. It then evaluates the current state of the art in marital attribution research, paying particular attention to developments in the past decade. This serves as a springboard for examining the marital literature in relation to the two shifts in attribution research that have balkanized the literature. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main points.

## Historical Context

A vast body of research on attributions for behavior existed at the time researchers turned to study attribution in close relationships. However, they did not build on this research.

Why? One reason is that basic attribution research concerned attributions made about a stranger or hypothetical other on the basis of highly restricted information and for the purpose of complying with experimenter instructions. These characteristics cast doubt on the relevance of such research for understanding attributions in relationships. Empirical findings supported this doubt. For example, Knight and Vallacher (1981) showed that attributors who believed that they were interacting with another person showed the opposite pattern of attributions for that person's positive (situationally attributed) versus negative (disposition attributed) behavior compared to attributors who only expected to interact with the person at a later time. Detached observers did not make different attributions for these two forms of behavior. In a similar vein, persons tend to make stronger internal attributions for positive behavior performed by a friend or a spouse than for an acquaintance (Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976).

Interestingly, the discontinuity between the basic attribution research and research that emerged on attributions in close relationships extended to theory. Thus, for example, a seminal volume on close relationships published in the early 1980s (Kelley et al., 1983) makes no reference to Jones and Davis (1965) or to Kelley (1967). Reference to these works is also absent in recent, comprehensive overviews of the field (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Hinde, 1997). This disjuncture is particularly surprising as both fields have an influential common ancestor in Hal Kelley.

What then were the historical antecedents of attributional research in marriage? Two general roots can be traced. In social psychology Kelley was struck by the frequency with which intimates mentioned stable, general properties of the partner (usually dispositions) when describing relationship problems (see Kelley, 1979). This led to the investigation of attributional conflict or disagreement between a person and their partner about the cause of the person's behavior (Orvis et al., 1976; Passer, Kelley, & Michela, 1978; see also Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978)<sup>1</sup>. A major finding to emerge from this research was that actors preferred explanations for their negative behavior that reflected a positive attitude to the partner, whereas partners preferred explanations that reflected the actor's negative attitudes and/or traits. The characterization of attributions along an evaluative dimension suggested that satisfaction experienced by the partners may covary with attributions, a possibility which turned out to be the wellspring of marital attribution research in clinical psychology.

The origins of marital attribution research in clinical psychology did not, however, build on Kelley's work, even though Kelley had focused on marital conflict (see Braiker & Kelley, 1979), a topic that was central to clinical research (marital dysfunction was seen to result from a couple's ineffective response to conflict, Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Instead, the attribution perspective was brought to bear on the dominant pursuit of the time, the attempt to understand what differentiates distressed from nondistressed spouses so as to better understand the determinants of marital satisfaction and thereby improve marital therapy. Accordingly, the focus of most studies tended to be some variant of the hypothesis that attributions are associated with marital satisfaction. Interestingly, this hypothesis was later shown to be consistent with Heider's (1958, pp. 207, 258) observations linking the liking of a person to the attributions made for his/her behavior (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

Interest in the attribution-satisfaction association was facilitated by two factors. At the

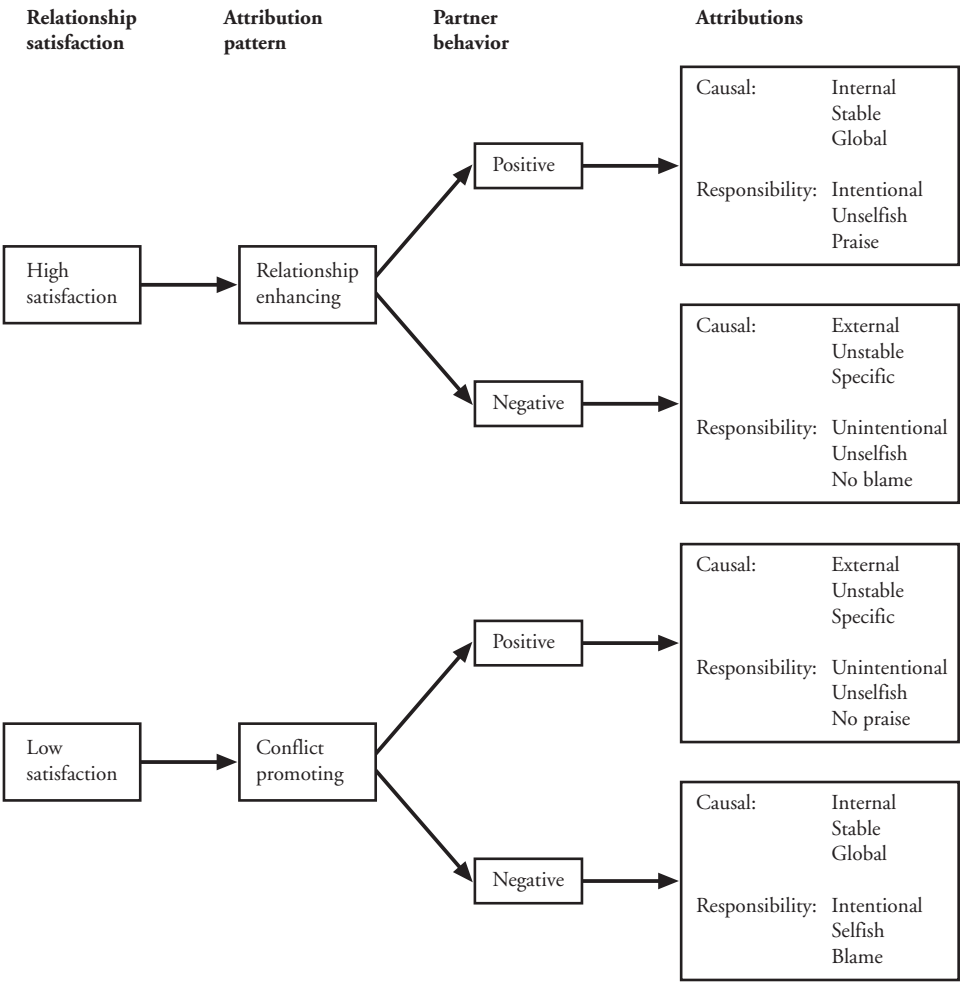
global level, it was stimulated by dissatisfaction with the limits of a behavioral account of marriage and a subsequent shift in research emphasis from the study of observed behavior to examination of intraindividual factors (cognition, emotions) that might enrich understanding of overt behavior. At a more specific level, excitement was generated by the implicit causal assumption that attributions for marital events (e.g., spouse arrives home late from work) can promote marital satisfaction (e.g., “s/he is working hard to make us financially secure”) or distress (e.g., “s/he only cares about work and not about me,” see Bagarozzi & Giddings, 1983).

Although originating in social and clinical psychology, the applied concerns of clinical researchers soon dominated the marital attribution literature. Before turning to this literature, it is worth noting some legacies of these historical origins as they inform the evaluation offered in the next section of the chapter.

First, marital researchers drew upon causal attribution dimensions in clinical psychology (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale’s, 1978, attributional analysis of learned helplessness) rather than in social psychology (e.g., Weiner, Russel, & Lerman’s, 1978, attributional analysis of emotion). This affected both the types of attributions initially investigated (causal attributions) as well as the manner in which they were investigated (in most research spouses rated causal dimensions). Ironically, however, it was not recognized that the locus, stability, and globality dimensions in the attributional reformulation of learned helplessness theory can be directly linked to Kelley’s (1967) criteria of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness.

Second, the evaluative implications of attributions in relationships were underscored by clinical observations that couples “typically view therapy as a way to demonstrate . . . that they are blameless and the other is at fault” (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). This led to the suggestion that issues of responsibility and blame are particularly germane in relationships (Fincham, 1983). Whereas causal attributions concern who or what produced an event, responsibility entails assessment of who is accountable for the event once a cause is known. Blame, in turn, entails an assessment of responsibility (see Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Shaver, 1985). As a consequence, responsibility attribution dimensions (e.g., intent, motivation) and blame attributions, in addition to causal attributions, became the subject of study in the marital literature. Figure 1.1 illustrates schematically the attribution hypothesis investigated in the marital literature showing that the pattern of attributions expected varies as a function of the valence of the event and the marital satisfaction of the attributer.

Third, the fact that attribution theory is one element of Heider’s (1958) attempt to systematize common sense (“naïve psychology”), means that, as intuitive or lay psychologists, everyone has access to the ideas informing attribution theory. As a result, one can “set up studies without being very explicit about the attribution process” (Kelley in Harvey, Ickes, & Kidd, 1978, p. 375). This is particularly evident in marital attribution research. It manifested itself most obviously in the need to uncover unarticulated assumptions and build basic theory (Thompson & Snyder, 1986) and in measurement where dependent measures sometimes had nothing to do with attributions (e.g., estimates of behavioral frequency for assessment of causal stability, Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985, p. 1402). The upshot is remarkable variety in work that appears under the attribution rubric in the marital literature.



**Figure 1.1** The attribution hypothesis in research on close relationships

**Attributions and Marriage: A Synopsis and Critique**

The purpose of the present section is threefold. The first goal is to identify themes in marital attribution research that might reveal underlying coherence in the literature. The second is to provide a synopsis of the literature. As several earlier reviews are available (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Baucom, 1987; Harvey, 1987; Thompson & Snyder, 1986), the focus is on research that has appeared in the last decade. This leads naturally to the

third goal, to evaluate progress by identifying both actualized and forgone opportunities as well as new lines of inquiry suggested by extant research. This, in turn, sets the stage for the next section of the chapter in which links are drawn with research outside of the marital area.

### *Taking stock*

*The attribution–satisfaction association.* Early on Thompson and Snyder (1986, p. 136) concluded that “research has supported a strong association between attributional processes and relationship satisfaction.” Although perhaps premature, this conclusion was prescient. By the turn of the decade there were 23 relevant studies and across attributional dimensions an average of 80 percent of them supported the attribution hypothesis (Fincham, Bradbury, & Scott, 1990). Support for the attribution hypothesis has continued to accrue in the past decade and no data have emerged to contradict the hypothesis.

This is not to suggest that results obtained across measures and methodologies are identical. For example, Sabourin, Lussier, & Wright (1991), in a successful cross-cultural replication of the attribution hypothesis, found that attributions for marital difficulties and for hypothetical partner behaviors were only moderately correlated, with the former more often accounting for unique variance in satisfaction. They called for a standardized attribution measure to facilitate greater comparison of findings across studies, and the measurement of attributions is a topic that has received increased attention (see the section, “Delineating the domain of attributions,” below). Although the relations among attributions obtained using different methodologies (e.g., thought listing, couple conversations, questionnaires) remain unknown, the association with satisfaction is robust. Indeed, the evidence for an association between attribution and marital satisfaction is overwhelming, making it possibly the most robust, replicable phenomenon in the study of marriage.

*Threats to the validity of the attribution–satisfaction association.* Concern about the validity of the attribution–satisfaction association has long been evident. Early work ruled out possible methodological artifacts (e.g., independent assessment of attributions and satisfaction, common method variance) and examined depression as a theoretically relevant variable that might account for the association (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). As the number of potentially relevant third variables can never be exhausted, it is not surprising to find continued work on this front throughout the 1990s.

Senchak and Leonard (1993) showed that demographic variables and anger did not account for the association and provided further evidence to show that the association was independent of depressive symptoms. They extended prior findings by demonstrating that with affect (anger and depression) of both self *and* partner controlled, attributions accounted for unique variance in satisfaction. In a similar vein, attributions for partner behavior have not been associated with the status of spouses as clinically depressed versus nondepressed (Bauserman, Arias, & Craighead, 1995; Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996). It also appears that negative affectivity more generally (as indexed by neuroticism and depressive mood) does not account for the attribution–satisfaction relation; the association has emerged after controlling for the negative affectivity of both spouses and is independent of

measurement error (Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994). Finally, the demonstration that the attribution–satisfaction association is independent of depression is consistent with findings obtained using dating couples (Fletcher, Fitness & Blampied, 1990).

A new third variable explanation for the attribution–satisfaction relation was raised in a study of marital violence. Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson (1993) found that while violent husbands were more likely to attribute blame, negative intent, and selfish motivation to their wives than satisfied, nonviolent men, the attributions of maritally dissatisfied, nonviolent men did not differ from either of these two groups. If replicated, this finding would show that marital attribution phenomena may be attributable to the high rates of aggression and violence found in some married couples. However, the attribution–satisfaction association has been demonstrated in a sample of nonviolent husbands and also remains significant when marital violence is partialled out of the association (Fincham, Bradbury, Arias, Byrne, & Karney, 1997).

Ruling out threats to validity does not document the importance of attributions in marriage. Although robust, the attribution–satisfaction association may be unimportant for understanding marriage. Alternatively, it may simply reflect what Weiss (1980) has labeled “sentiment override” – the hypothesis that spouses respond noncontingently to partner behavior or questions about the marriage. In other words, spouses simply respond in terms of their dominant feeling or sentiment about the marriage and this is reflected “in as many tests as one chooses to administer” (Weiss & Heyman, 1990, p. 92). Belief in this position is so strong that attempts to explain variance in marital quality using self-reports have been characterized as “invalid from a scientific standpoint” (Gottman, 1990, p. 79). A fundamental task for the field therefore has been to show that attributions increase understanding of marriage and are not simply a proxy index of marital sentiment.

*Documenting the importance of attributions in marriage.* One way to address the importance of attributions in marriage is to provide evidence for the assumption that attributions influence marital satisfaction. Such evidence raises the question of how attributions might exert any causal influence. Although any effect may be direct, it may also occur indirectly through spouse behavior. Thus, certain attributions for partner behavior (e.g., rejection of a sexual advance) may be conflict promoting (e.g., “you don’t really love me”). This highlights a second important assumption that stimulated interest in spousal attributions, the possibility that attributions may influence marital behavior. For example, attributions might explain interaction patterns (e.g., negative reciprocity) identified with marital distress. Each assumption is addressed in turn.

*Attributions and marital satisfaction: A causal association?* A possible causal association between attributions and satisfaction has been investigated primarily through longitudinal studies. Because only the variance that attributions do not share with marital quality is used to predict changes in marital quality, it is difficult to account for significant findings by arguing that attributions simply index marital quality.

Four new longitudinal studies supplement early findings showing that attributions predict later satisfaction in dating (Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, & Heron, 1987) and married couples (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987a). In established marriages (mean length = 9.4 years) causal attributions predicted satisfaction 12 months later for both husbands and wives



(Fincham & Bradbury, 1993). However, husbands' initial satisfaction also predicted change in their attributions suggesting a possible bidirectional causal relation between attributions and satisfaction. This study also ruled out depressive symptoms as a factor responsible for the longitudinal association and showed that the findings did not change when those who were chronically depressed or distressed were excluded from the sample. In a sample of newlywed husbands, conflict-promoting responsibility attributions contributed to declines in reported satisfaction 12 months later but not vice versa (Fincham, Bradbury, et al., 1997), thereby showing that the longitudinal pattern of findings extends beyond the population of established married couples.

The longitudinal association between attributions and satisfaction has also been replicated over an 18-month period and appears to be mediated by the impact of attributions on efficacy expectations which, in turn, influenced satisfaction (Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000). In this study, evidence was also obtained to support bidirectional effects in that satisfaction predicted attributions for both husbands and wives.

Finally, Karney and Bradbury (2000) provided novel data on the longitudinal relation through the application of growth curve modeling to eight waves of data collected over the first four years of marriage. They found intraindividual changes in attribution and in marital satisfaction covaried but found no evidence to suggest that either attributions or satisfaction were causally dominant. However, a different picture emerged at the between-subjects level of analysis. Controlling for within-subject covariation, initial attributions had greater effects on the trajectory of marital satisfaction than Time 1 satisfaction had on the trajectory of attributions. Specifically, more conflict-promoting attributions at Time 1 were associated with lower initial marital satisfaction, steeper declines in satisfaction, and satisfaction that covaried less with subsequent changes in attributions. Finally, wives' attributions improved prediction of marital dissolution and both husbands' and wives' changes in attributions were more strongly associated with deviations from the trajectory of marital satisfaction in marriages that dissolved.

In sum, there is a growing body of evidence consistent with the view that attributions influence marital satisfaction and increasing evidence that any causal relation between the two variables is bidirectional. Perhaps not surprisingly, attributions continue to be emphasized in newer, therapeutic interventions for couples (e.g., by offering a "formulation," an element of integrative couples therapy designed to promote non-blaming, Jacobson & Christensen, 1996, pp. 41–58). This highlights the opportunity to gain experimental evidence on the causal role of attributions but interest in such research appears to have evaporated (for an exception see Davidson & Horvath, 1997) following early demonstrations that supplementing standard therapies with an attribution intervention module did not improve therapeutic outcome (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Unfortunately, the impact of attributions on therapeutic outcome has not been directly evaluated and nor has the importance of attributional change as a precursor to progress and positive change in marital therapy (see Fincham, Bradbury, & Beach, 1990). These considerations suggest that intervention research remains a potential source of important information (see the section, "Expressed emotion," below).

*Attributions and behavior.* Despite its theoretical and applied significance, few studies have investigated the attribution–behavior link. Moreover, early attempts to do so were



quite limited (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990, p. 24). With the exception of an early experimental study in which manipulated attributions influenced subsequent observed behavior in distressed but not nondistressed spouses (Fincham & Bradbury, 1988), evidence bearing on the attribution–observed behavior relation is quite recent.

Five studies report data relating attributions to behavior observed during marital interaction (Bradbury, Beach, et al., 1996; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992, Study 1 & 2; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992, Study 3; G. E. Miller & Bradbury, 1995). Across 28 tests of the attribution–behavior association found in these studies, the mean effect size was .34; the “fail safe” number or number of unretrieved null findings that would allow one to attribute this effect size to sampling bias was 1,527. This moderate effect size, however, reflects a heterogeneous set of findings ( $\chi^2(27) = 47, p < .01$ ). One clear source of heterogeneity was spouse gender which was strongly associated with effect size ( $r = .57$ ); the average effect size for men (mean  $z = .23$ ) was smaller than that for women (mean  $z = .45$ ). Although encouraging, these meta-analytic findings should be viewed with caution as they use a database that includes simple, bivariate correlations between attributions and rates of behavior. In view of earlier comments about sentiment override and the documented association between spousal satisfaction and behavior (Weiss & Heyman, 1997), it is important to show that an attribution–behavior association is independent of marital satisfaction.

With marital satisfaction partialled from the attribution–behavior relation, it has been shown that conflict-promoting responsibility attributions are related to: (1) wives’ less effective problem-solving behaviors (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992, Study 1); (2) more negative behaviors during problem-solving and support-giving tasks (G. E. Miller & Bradbury, 1995) and that this association is independent of level of depression (Bradbury, Beach, et al., 1996); (3) specific affects (whining and anger) displayed during problem solving (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992, Study 3); and (4) husbands’ and wives’ conflict-promoting attributions are related to increased rates of negative behavior during a problem-solving discussion (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992, Study 2). There is some evidence to suggest that the attribution–behavior association is moderated by marital quality in that it is stronger for distressed spouses and tends to occur more consistently for responsibility attributions (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; G. E. Miller & Bradbury, 1995).

A recent study by Fletcher and Thomas (2000) provided the first longitudinal data on the relation between attributions and observed behavior. Using a sample of couples randomly selected from the New Zealand electoral rolls, they found that both husbands’ and wives’ conflict-promoting attributions for marital problems were associated with more negative interaction behavior over a 12-month period. Interestingly, earlier behavior was not related to later attributions, a pattern of findings consistent with the view that attributions influence behavior. A second important finding from this study was that attributions mediated the relation between marital satisfaction and behavior for both husbands and wives at Time 1 and again for husbands at Time 2. These mediational effects were shown to be independent of length of marriage and the seriousness of the problems from which observational data were obtained and for which spouses made attributions.

In sum, available evidence is consistent with the view that attributions influence behavior. This conclusion, however, rests on an important assumption. Because attributions are assessed at a global level rather than for the specific behaviors in the observed interaction,

implicit is the view that these global attributions determine attributions for specific behaviors. It therefore remains to demonstrate that global attributions shape attributions for specific behaviors which, in turn, influence responses to the behavior (for a discussion of the issues in relating cognition to interactional behavior, see Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1991). Finally, the correlational nature of the data should not be overlooked.

*Delineating the domain of attributions.* Delineation of the domain to which the term attribution applies has been identified as the "single most significant barrier to progress" (Fincham, 1985, p. 205) in marital attribution research. Progress is facilitated on this task to the extent that attention is given to identifying the basic dimensions underlying causal explanations in marriage, the measurement of these dimensions, and the types of attributions important in marriage.

Sayers and Baucom (1995) have attempted to identify underlying dimensions of causal explanations for marital problems. Using explanations offered by spouses, they employed college students' perceptions of the causes for a multidimensional scaling analysis to select a subset of causes to employ in a second multidimensional scaling analysis using spouses' perceptions of the causes. The use of college students is unfortunate as it undermines the study's attempt to document dimensions that are psychologically meaningful for spouses, and the solution they report for spouses is necessarily a function of the stimuli that were selected using student perceptions. The resulting complex set of findings with different, four-dimensional solutions for husbands and for wives, nonetheless identified a dimension in both spouses' solutions (relationship schism and disharmony versus other factors [husband]/family factors [wife]) that is consistent with one of Passer et al.'s. (1978) dimensions (positive versus negative attitude towards partner). This finding again emphasizes the implicit evaluative aspect of explanation in close relationships. Sayers and Baucom (1995) concluded that attributional assessment should move beyond assessment of traditional causal dimensions, a feature that is evident in progress to develop attribution measures.

Sabourin et al.'s (1991) earlier noted call for a standardized attribution measure has met with two quite different responses. One has been to develop measures to assess specific attributional content. For example, the development of a measure of dysfunctional attributions includes a subscale that assesses the extent to which partner behavior reflects "lack of love" (Pretzer, Epstein, & Fleming, 1991). Similarly, in their attributional assessment of problems in 12 domains of relationship functioning (e.g., finances, leisure) Baucom, Epstein, et al. (1996) inquire about attributional content (e.g., boundaries: "we disagree about how much of our lives to share with each other in this area of the relationship") and underlying attribution dimensions (as well as self-reported emotional and behavioral responses). Perhaps the most obvious problem with this approach is that it gives rise to nonindependent assessment of attributions and marital satisfaction (disagreement is assessed in both measures, see Fincham & Bradbury, 1987b), making reported associations (see Baucom, Epstein et al., 1996) tautologous. Second, there is a potentially vast domain of attributionally relevant content, a problem that led early attribution researchers to derive (both empirically and rationally) underlying attribution dimensions. Finally, this approach reinforces the earlier noted balkanization of the attribution literature as it militates against developing an attributional perspective that might transcend relationship type.

In contrast, the second response to the need for a broadly accepted, standard measure

has been limited to assessment of attribution dimensions. However, it has also addressed the issue of attribution type by building on distinctions among causal, responsibility, and blame attributions documented in basic research. In fact, the presupposition or entailment model in which a blame attribution presupposes a judgment of responsibility, which, in turn, rests upon the determination of causality, was strongly supported among 206 cohabiting couples when they made judgments about relationship conflict (Lussier, Sabourin, & Wright, 1993). Unfortunately this study used single item measures of each attribution type. The use of multiple item measures has revealed that partners do not distinguish readily between responsibility and blame (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Although it is possible to imagine circumstances under which such distinctions may be made, only the distinction between causal (locus, stability, and globality) and responsibility dimensions (intent, motivation, blame) are incorporated in the measure resulting from this line of research – the *Relationship Attribution Measure* (RAM; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Advantages of this measure include its demonstrated relation to satisfaction and observed behavior, its brevity, its simplicity for respondents, the provision of indices for different types of attributions, and the potential to modify the scale in order to obtain analogous measures across relationship types (cf. *Children's Relationship Attribution Measure*, Fincham, Beach, Arias, & Brody, 1998). Although cause and responsibility attributions yielded by this measure are highly correlated ( $r = .7-.8$ ), recent research confirms that a two-factor measurement model provides a significantly better fit to the data than a single-factor model (Davey, Fincham, Beach, & Brody, 1999).

In sum, there has been some progress in delineating the domain of attributions in marital research. However, this progress is largely a function of the attempt to develop measures and has been isolated from developments in a broader literature on attributions, leaving unresolved the importance of earlier, identified distinctions (e.g., interpersonal attributions, dyadic attributions, see Newman, 1981).

*Some other developments.* The foregoing themes capture much of the recent activity in the marital attribution literature. However, without mentioning two further themes the picture painted of developments over the past decade would be incomplete.

The first theme can be characterized in terms of the domain specificity of attributional phenomena. In marriage research it is manifest by the emergence of a quasi-independent literature on attributions for marital violence (for a review see Eckhardt & Dye, 2000). Thus, for example, attributions for violent versus nonviolent partner behavior appear to differ (Holtzworth-Munroe, Jacobson, Fehrenbach & Fruzzetti, 1992), hostile attributions are evoked more readily in specific content domains (jealousy, spousal rejection, and potential public embarrassment) among violent men (Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993), and are more likely to be spontaneously verbalized in this group (Eckhardt, Barbour, & Davison, 1998). Although the focus has been primarily on violent men, causal and responsibility attributions also correlate with wife-to-husband aggression (Byrne & Arias, 1997), mediate the relation between increased violence and wives' intentions to leave the relationship (Pape & Arias, 2000), and responsibility attributions moderate the association between husband violence and wives' marital dissatisfaction (Katz, Arias, Beach, & Brody, 1995). Explicit recognition of possible domain specificity in relationship attribution phenomena is important. A move from content free to content specific inference rules

would link marital attribution research to the broader cognitive literature in which specific knowledge of the world is central to understanding cognitive functioning.

A second theme, particularly evident in the early 1990s, was the development of general theoretical frameworks. These not only focused on the study of attribution/cognition in marriage (e.g., Epstein & Baucom, 1993; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991) but also integrated such study into a broader organizational framework for researching close relationships (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1991). In these frameworks explicit links were drawn to broader literatures, particularly the social cognition literature, and we return to them in the section, "Social cognition," below.

### *Critique*

The themes reviewed have already been critiqued and the present section therefore highlights some of the opportunities forgone in the marital attribution literature. In doing so, however, it is important to acknowledge the potential realized during the field's adolescence: confirmation of a robust attribution–satisfaction association, demonstration that this phenomenon is not an artifact, accumulation of systematic evidence that speaks to two central causal hypotheses, progress in identifying the types and underlying dimensions of attributions and how to measure them, careful theoretical specification of the role of attributions in understanding marriage, and attempts to locate marital attributional phenomena in broader, more comprehensive frameworks. Notwithstanding these achievements, a number of important topics received little or no attention in the 1990s.

Revisiting the beginnings of attributional research in close relationships is instructive. Orvis et al. (1976) studied attributions not as private events but as public behaviors. The implications are profound but remain relatively unexplored (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990, p. 26–28). Three of these are highlighted. First, attributional understanding in relationships can result from dyadic interaction. However, we know relatively little about how spouses negotiate particular explanations to achieve a shared understanding of relationship events, yet such negotiated understanding is central to some accounts of marriage (see Berger & Kellner, 1970). Here a broader literature on accounts and their communication in relationships is relevant (e.g., Fincham 1992; Weber, Harvey, & Orbuch, 1992) but has not been tapped in marital attribution research possibly because the narratives studied in the accounts literature transcend the level of analysis found in attribution research.

Second, the identification of attributions as public events raises the question of their relation to attributions as private events. Early on, the relation between these two types of events was identified as an important issue (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1988) along with the need to study public attributions (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1988) but neither have received attention in the marital attribution literature in the past decade.

Third, Orvis et al.'s (1976) work focused on self–partner discrepancies in attribution. Despite early evidence suggesting that discrepancies in attributions for self and partner behavior might advance understanding of the attribution–satisfaction association (e.g., Kyle & Falbo, 1985), self–partner attribution differences have not gained attention over the 1990s. Consideration of the relation between self and partner attributions highlights a further gap that is endemic to close relationships research, the need to study phenomena at

the dyadic level. Although several studies have controlled for partner influence in examining the outcomes related to a spouse's attributions (e.g., Senchak & Leonard, 1993; Karney et al., 1994), evidence has only recently emerged to demonstrate the necessity of a dyadic model in examining attribution phenomena (Davey et al., 1999). Finally, study of attributions for self-behavior alerts one to the possibility that self-processes require consideration in a complete attributional account of marriage. Indeed, Kelley (1979, p. 109) notes attributions for partner behavior have implications for the self creating interdependence at the level of inferred dispositions of partners. In any event, it is clear that relating marital attribution research to research on self-processes is long overdue.

Perhaps more important than the relative lack of attention to the above implications, is the failure to systematically explore the assumption that spouses exhibit a tendency to make particular attributions "across different situations and across time" (Metalsky & Abramson, 1981, p. 38). As Karney and Bradbury (2000) point out, the presumed causal role of attributions in maintaining marital dissatisfaction, and attention to attributions in therapy, only make sense to the extent that spouses exhibit an "attribution style." Shifting attention from mean scores to consistency in attributions gives rise to an interesting variant of the attribution hypothesis in which variability in responses on attribution dimensions and patterns of responses across attributional dimensions is related to satisfaction. Although inconsistent findings have emerged for variability in responding on attribution dimensions, there is consistent evidence relating patterns in attributions across dimensions to marital satisfaction (Baucom, Sayers, & Duhe, 1989; Horneffer & Fincham, 1995). However, Karney and Bradbury's (2000) intraindividual analysis showed that attribution responses were not constant across time; wives' attributions became more conflict-promoting over the first four years of marriage and significant interindividual variability among husbands supported a linear change model even though group mean scores did not change. These findings suggest that attributional style does not operate as a trait. However, the conceptual status of "attributional style" is far from resolved.

Finally, a general feature of the marital attribution research is worth noting because it draws attention to a domain of inquiry that has yet to be exploited. Broadly speaking, marital researchers have been concerned with the consequences of attributions and can be said to have developed an attribution based approach to study marriage. Kelley and Michela (1980) distinguish such "attributional theory" from a second genre of attribution research that focuses on the antecedents and processes that lead to attributions. Although attention to this latter type of research is not entirely absent from the marital domain, attribution antecedents and processes have not been studied systematically. However, the events studied in marital attribution research may be important. For example, the feature-positive bias in which inferences about own attitude are influenced more by reactions to stimuli than by failures to react (Fazio, Sherman, & Herr, 1982) suggests that partner behaviors that prompt a reaction may be more likely to instigate attributional processing than those that do not prompt a reaction. In a similar vein, basic attribution research showing that people are considered more responsible for commissions than omissions (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980), may have implications for the demand-withdraw pattern of interaction. Specifically, attributions for demand behaviors (commissions) may differ from those for withdrawal behaviors (omissions).

This critique, like the review preceding it, is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather it

serves as a springboard for the remainder of the chapter, which is intended as an antidote to the balkanization noted at the outset. As will soon be evident, the broader literature is relevant to many of the concerns noted in this critique and suggests several new directions for marital attribution research.

## **From Myopia to Presbyopia: Setting the Stage for an Attributional Analysis of Close Relationships**

In its youthful zest, marital attribution research has been somewhat egocentric, a characteristic that has served it well in focusing energy on establishing replicable phenomena, documenting their relevance, and so on. As it enters adulthood, however, the area has the opportunity to look further afield and fashion its identity in new ways. The purpose of this section is to draw connections with domains of inquiry that have the potential to enrich the study of attributions in marriage and contribute to an integrative, attributional account of close relationships. This will be done in relation to three domains of increasing generality, namely, relevant attribution research in family relationships, attribution research and adaptational outcomes, and research on social cognition.

### *Balkanization on the home front*

Perhaps the most obvious starting point for enriching marital research is to examine overlooked areas of attributional research involving family relationships. Two examples with quite different origins and implications for the study of marriage are examined.

*Expressed emotion.* In the late 1950s English researchers noted that the success of psychiatric patients released into the community was related to the kind of living group to which they returned, with those returning to the parental or matrimonial home faring worse than those who went to live in lodgings or with siblings (e.g., Brown, Carstairs, & Topping, 1958). Subsequent research identified the emotion expressed toward the patient by key relatives at the time of hospital admission, particularly hostility and criticism, to be a reliable predictor of the patient's relapse following hospital discharge (e.g., Vaughn & Leff, 1976; see Bebbington & Kuipers, 1994, for a review).

Attempts to understand the mechanism underlying the expressed emotion (EE)–relapse association led to an attributional analysis. Vaughn and Leff (1976) suggested that EE was associated with attributing patient behavior to personal characteristics of the patient rather than to the illness. Others went on to identify as critical the patient's perceived control over the causes of the symptoms (e.g., Hooley, 1987); undesirable patient behavior attributed to causes potentially under the patient's control were hypothesized to result in high EE whereas those attributed to the illness would lead to greater tolerance (low EE). Hooley, Richters, Weintraub, & Neale (1987) provided initial, indirect evidence consistent with this formulation in that spouses of patients with "positive" symptoms (those most easily attributed to illness, e.g., hallucinatory behaviors) were more maritally satisfied than those