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

Eli J. Finkel

Northwestern University

Erica B. Slotter

Villanova University

Laura B. Luchies

Redeemer University College

Gregory M. Walton and James J. Gross

Stanford University

IN PRESS, PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

Date: November 26, 2012

# **Abstract**

Marital quality is a major contributor to happiness and health. Unfortunately, marital quality normatively declines over time. We tested whether a novel 21-minute 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 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, theorybased, social-psychological interventions to preserve the quality of intimate relationships over time.

**Abstract Word Count = 142** 

# A Brief Intervention to Promote Conflict Reappraisal

# **Preserves Marital Quality Over Time**

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, compared to only 10% who are "pretty happy" in their marriage. Among coronary artery bypass graft patients, those who were high in marital satisfaction one year following the surgery were 3.2 times more likely to be alive 15 years after the surgery than were those who were low in marital satisfaction, an effect that could not be explained by demographic, behavioral, or baseline health measures (King & Reis, 2012; also see Coyne et al., 2001).

Given the intrinsic importance of martial 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 appears to suggest 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 Jacob responds to Nicole'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, & Stickle, 1998).

However, 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 multi-componential, which makes it difficult to discern which component(s) improve relationship quality.

Inspired by research demonstrating that brief, theory-based, social-psychological interventions can, by fostering thoughts and behaviors that self-reinforce over time, yield remarkably enduring improvement in people's lives (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, selfreinforcing dynamics like 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 upon 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 asked to reappraise an interpersonal conflict from a third-party perspective experienced less anger and distress than participants asked to ruminate about the conflict or 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 et al., in press), we theorized that trajectories of 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 7-wave, 2-year longitudinal study of married couples, randomly assigning half the couples to the reappraisal intervention during Year 2. Participants reported every four 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 among reappraisal participants will be mediated by declining post-intervention conflict-related distress in the reappraisal relative to the control condition.

#### Method

Participants were 120 heterosexual married couples from the Chicago metropolitan area  $(M_{Age}=40, SD=14, Range=20-79; M_{MaritalDuration}=11 \text{ years}, SD=12, Range=0.1-52).$  They learned about the study via newspaper and craigslist advertisements or via flyers distributed through a local school system (children brought the flyer home to their parents). Every 4 months for 24 months—7 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 attended a laboratory session where they completed a series of tasks (e.g., a conflict discussion, executive control tasks) that are irrelevant to the present report. At Waves 2-7, which took place entirely via Internet, participants provided a "fact-based summary

of the most significant disagreement" they had experienced with their spouse over the preceding four 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 conflictrelated 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-minute writing task at the end of Waves 4-6 (months 12, 16, and 20), 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 email 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 partner 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 four 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 four 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 H1 and H2. 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), (b) Intervention (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 for reappraisal participants):

(1) MaritalQualityMeasure<sub>it</sub>= $\pi_{0i}+\pi_{1i}(Time)+\pi_{2i}(Intervention_{it})+\pi_{3i}(TimeSinceIntervention_{it})+\varepsilon_{it}$ .

We expected to find negative effects of Time (H1: marital quality deteriorates over time,  $\pi_{1i}$ ) and positive effects for Time-Since-Intervention (H2: the negative effect of Time is smaller for reappraisal than for control participants after the intervention begins,  $\pi_{3i}$ ).

As predicted, participants exhibited robust declines in overall marital quality (H1),  $\pi_1$ =-.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 (H2),  $\pi_{3i}$ =.05, t(122)=3.19, p=.001 (Figure 1). Indeed, for interventioncondition participants, the downward trend was entirely eliminated, p=.842. The same pattern

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This effect was not moderated by race, gender, age, income, marital duration, number of children, or age of children, ps>.225.

emerged for all six subcomponents of marital quality (Table 1), and, taken together, 13 of the 14 tests of H1 and H2 reached statistical significance, all ps<.05.<sup>2</sup>

Next, we tested whether the positive post-intervention slope for marital quality could be explained by a reduction in conflict-related distress among participants in the reappraisal condition. First, we regressed the post-intervention slope of conflict-related distress<sup>3</sup> (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 post-intervention reductions over time in conflict-related distress, B=-.23, t(116)=-2.85, p=.006. Second, we regressed the post-intervention slope of marital quality (the hypothesized dependent variable) onto both the post-intervention slope of conflict-related distress and the experimental manipulation. As predicted, the post-intervention slope of conflict-related distress was negatively associated with the post-intervention slope of marital quality, B=-.87. t(117)=-1.91, p=.057. Third, following Preacher and Hayes' (2008) recommendations, we employed bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples, using the bias corrected and accelerated approach, to assess whether the post-intervention slope of conflict-related distress statistically mediated the effect of the reappraisal intervention on the post-intervention slope of marital quality. As predicted, the 95% confidence interval (.012-.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 (H3). (Testing for mediation the other

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The only effect that did not reach statistical significance (p < .05, two-tailed) was the postintervention slope effect  $(\pi_{3i})$  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 it.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> 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.

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-minute 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 conflictrelated 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 over time in marital quality (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 vis-à-vis 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—which instructed participants to think about the conflict from the perspective of a third party individual 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 upon the provision of that

adaptive framework or whether the adoption of a neutral third-party perspective is sufficient, on its own, to vield 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, 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 conflictrelated distress yielded a concomitant reduction in negative affect reciprocity, definitive conclusions along those lines await research employing micro-level 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 fruitfully 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 four

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 taught us something important that we did not know previously: 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 minutes a year reappraising conflict appears to yield a spectacular return on investment.

## References

- Baucom, D. H., Shoham, V., Mueser, K. T., Daiuto, A. D., & Stickle, T. R. (1998). Empirically supported couple and family interventions for marital distress and adult mental health problems. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66, 53-88.
- Coyne, J. C., Rohrbaugh, M. J., Shoham, V., Sonnega, J. S., & Nicklas, J. M. (2001). Prognostic importance of marital quality for survival of congestive heart failure. American Journal of Cardiology, 88, 526-529.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., Simpson, J. A., & Thomas, G. (2000). The measurement of perceived relationship quality components: A confirmatory factor analytic approach. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 26, 340-354.
- Glenn, N. D. (1998). The course of marital success and failure in five American 10-year marriage cohorts. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 60, 569-576.
- Gottman, J. M. (1998). Psychology and the study of marital processes. *Annual Review of* Psychology, 49, 169-197.
- Gross, J. J. (2002). Emotion regulation: Affective, cognitive, and social consequences. Psychophysiology, 39, 281-291.
- King, K. B., & Reis, H. T. (2012). Marriage and long-term survival after coronary artery bypass grafting. *Health Psychology*, 31, 55-62.
- Kross, E., Ayduk, O., & Mischel, W. (2005). When asking "why" does not hurt: Distinguishing rumination from reflective processing of negative emotion. Psychological Science, 16, 709-715.
- Kross, E., & Ayduk, O. (2011). Making meaning out of negative experiencing by self-distancing. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 20, 187-191.
- Kross, E., & Grossman, I. (2012). Boosting wisdom: Distance from the self enhances wise reasoning, attitudes, and behavior. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 141, 43-48.

- Libby, L. K., & Eibach, R. P. (2011). Visual perspective in mental imagery: A representational tool that functions in judgment, emotion, and self-insight. In M. P. Zanna and J. M. Olson (Eds.), Advances in Experimental Social Psychology (Vol. 44, pp. 185-245). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Myers, D. G. (2000). The funds, friends, and faith of happy people. American Psychologist, 55, 56-67.
- Nigro, G., & Neisser, U. (1983). Point of view in personal memories. Cognitive Psychology, 15, 467-482.
- Parker-Pope, T. (2010). For better: The science of a good marriage. New York, NY: Dutton.
- Pennebaker, J. W., Booth, R. J., & Francis, M. E. (2007). Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC2007): A computer-based text analysis program [Computer software]. Austin, TX: LIWC.net.
- Ray, R. D., Wilhelm, F. H., Gross, J. J. (2008). All in the mind's eye? Anger rumination and reappraisal. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 94, 133-145.
- Robinson, J. A., & Swanson, K. L. (1993). Field and observer modes of remembering. *Memory*, 1, 169-184.
- Rusbult, C. E., Martz, J. M., & Agnew, C. R. (1998). The investment model scale: Measuring commitment level, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size. Personal Relationships, 5, 357-387.
- VanLaningham, J., Johnson, D. R., & Amato, P. (2001). Marital happiness, marital duration, and the U-shaped curve: Evidence from a five-wave panel study. Social Forces, 78, 1313-1341.
- Verduyn, P., Van Mechelen, I., Kross, E., Chezzi, C., & Van Bever F. (in press). The relationship between self-distancing and the duration of negative and positive emotional experiences in daily life. *Emotion*.

Yeager, D. S., & Walton, G. (2011). Social-psychological interventions in education: They're not magic. Review of Educational Research, 81, 267-301.

Table 1. Multilevel discontinuous growth curve models predicting each of the six subcomponents of marital quality and the measure of overall marital quality.

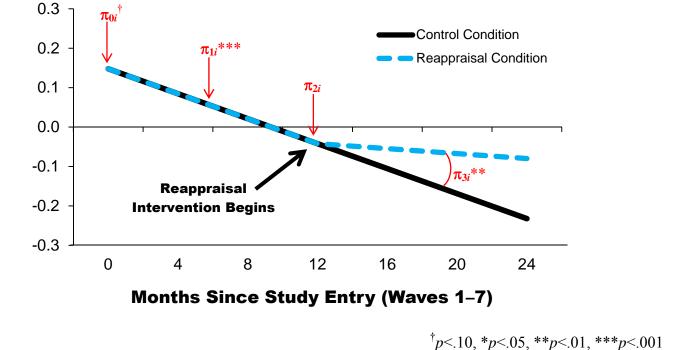
Outcome Variable	Measure and Response Scale	Sample Item (α)	Parameter	Parameter Estimate	<i>t</i> -value
Overall Marital	Mean of the standardized scores for the six outcome	For the composite measure consisting of the six standardized measures	Overall Intercept $(\pi_{0i})$ Overall Trajectory/Slope $(\pi_{1i})$ Intervention-Based Increment at Wave 4 $(\pi_{2i})$	.17 06 02	1.83 <sup>†</sup> -10.04*** -0.18
Quality	variables listed below	below, α=.93.	Intervention-Based Trajectory/Slope Deviation $(\pi_{3i})$	.05	3.19**
Satisfaction	Rusbult et al. (1998)		Overall Intercept $(\pi_{0i})$	6.00	42.85***
	· · · · ·	"I feel satisfied with our	- · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	08	-4.04***
	1 = Strongly disagree 7 = Strongly agree	relationship." (α=.96)	Intervention-Based Increment at Wave 4 $(\pi_{2i})$	05	-0.25
			Intervention-Based Trajectory/Slope Deviation $(\pi_{3i})$	.07	2.44*
Love	Fletcher et al. (2000)		Overall Intercept $(\pi_{0i})$	6.47	78.98***
	,	"How much do you love your partner?" (α=.92)	Overall Trajectory/Slope $(\pi_{1i})$	10	-5.74***
	1 = Not at all 7 = Extremely		Intervention-Based Increment at Wave 4 $(\pi_{2i})$	07	-0.89
			Intervention-Based Trajectory/Slope Deviation $(\pi_{3i})$	.12	5.08***
Intimacy	Fletcher et al. (2000)	"How intimate is your relationship?" ( $\alpha$ =.91)	Overall Intercept $(\pi_{0i})$	6.01	50.87***
	,		Overall Trajectory/Slope $(\pi_{1i})$	12	-6.62***
	1 = Not at all 7 = Extremely		Intervention-Based Increment at Wave 4 $(\pi_{2i})$	21	-1.27
			Intervention-Based Trajectory/Slope Deviation $(\pi_{3i})$	.15	5.11***
Trust	Fletcher et al. (2000)		Overall Intercept $(\pi_{0i})$	6.47	82.75***
	` ′	"How much do you trust your partner?" (α=.90)	Overall Trajectory/Slope $(\pi_{1i})$	07	-4.45***
	1 = Not at all 7 = Extremely		Intervention-Based Increment at Wave 4 $(\pi_{2i})$	17	-1.56
			Intervention-Based Trajectory/Slope Deviation $(\pi_{3i})$	.10	3.96**
Passion	Fletcher et al. (2000)	"How passionate is your	Overall Intercept $(\pi_{0i})$	5.50	41.94***
	, ,		Overall Trajectory/Slope $(\pi_{1i})$	12	-6.87***
	1 = Not at all	relationship?" (α=.94)	Intervention-Based Increment at Wave 4 $(\pi_{2i})$	13	-0.72
	7 = Extremely		Intervention-Based Trajectory/Slope Deviation $(\pi_{3i})$	.12	3.66***
Commitment	Rusbult et al. (1998)	44T 24 14	Overall Intercept $(\pi_{0i})$	6.76	22.07***
	, ,	"I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner." ( $\alpha$ =.92)	Overall Trajectory/Slope $(\pi_{1i})$	05	-4.57***
	1 = Strongly disagree 7 = Strongly agree		Intervention-Based Increment at Wave 4 $(\pi_{2i})$	04	-0.54
			Intervention-Based Trajectory/Slope Deviation $(\pi_{3i})$	.02	0.76

†*p*<.10, \**p*<.05, \*\**p*<.01, \*\*\**p*<.001

*Note*. The Greek parameter labels (e.g.,  $\pi_{0i}$ ) align with those in Equation 1 and with the labels in Figure 1. The key outcome reported in the main text is the measure of overall marital quality, which appears in the top row of this table.

Figure 1. Overall marital quality trajectories for participants in each of the intervention conditions.

**Overall Marital Quality** 



*Note*. The Greek parameter labels align with those in Equation 1 and with the labels in Table 1:

- $\pi_{0i}$  represents the overall intercept term—the model-implied mean of overall marital quality at study entry across the entire sample.
- $\pi_{1i}$  represents the overall slope term—the model-implied slope of overall marital quality over time across the entire sample.
- $\pi_{2i}$  represents the (negligible and nonsignificant) immediate increment in overall marital quality resulting from involvement in the reappraisal intervention.
- $\pi_{3i}$  represents the increment in the slope in overall marital quality over time resulting from involvement in the reappraisal intervention.