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THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN THE LINK BETWEEN RELATIONSHIP THINKING AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

The link between a partner's thinking about the relationship and relationship satisfaction has been shown to be stronger for women than men. The main goal of this study was to examine the extent to which one's identity (rather than biological sex) moderates that link. In a survey of 238 couples (90 unmarried and 148 married), results indicated that, for unmarried couples, a general relational identity, or the tendency to see oneself in relation to others in general, moderated the association between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction. For married couples, a couple identity, or the tendency to see oneself as part of the specific relationship, moderated this association. These results were generally the same for both men and women, indicating that one's identity may be more important than biological sex in determining concurrent associations between relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction. However, longitudinal findings suggest that long-term outcomes of positive relationship thinking may be stronger for women than men. Results are discussed in terms of the development and importance of a specific couple identity in committed relationships.

KEY WORDS • cognition • marital status • relationship satisfaction • self

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Satisfaction with personal relationships has been at the forefront of relationship research (e.g., Glenn, 1990; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) since Terman's investigations of marital happiness in 1938 (cited in Bradbury, Campbell, & Fincham, 1995). In an attempt to determine what predicts satisfaction with a relationship, a growing body of research has been investigating the link between relationship satisfaction and relationship cognition. For example, researchers have examined partners' perceptions of similarity (e.g., Levinger & Breedlove, 1966; Monsour, 1994; Murstein & Williams, 1985) how well partners understand one another (e.g., Ickes, 1997; Kenny, 1994), perceptions of spousal support (e.g., Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Cutrona, 1996; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994), relationship beliefs (e.g., Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1996; Knee, 1998), attributions (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), and partners thinking about and focusing attention on the relationship (Acitelli, 1988, 1992, 1993; Burnett, 1987; Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Wilson, 1995; Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, & Heron, 1987; Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Martin, 1991).

Focusing attention on the relationship, or thinking and talking about the relationship, has been called *relationship awareness* (Acitelli, 1988, 1992). Both longitudinal and cross-sectional research on relationship awareness has demonstrated that, under some circumstances, the tendency to think and talk in relational terms predicts relationship satisfaction (Acitelli, 1992; Acitelli, Veroff, & Hassan, under review; Cate et al., 1995). However, much of the research on relationship awareness has examined *talking* about the relationship and its link to marital happiness. The present study examines *thinking positively* about the relationship (or positive affect thinking, Cate et al., 1995) as a predictor of relationship satisfaction.

Investigating relationship thinking (both positive and negative) in dating relationships, Cate et al. (1995) found that such thinking is related to important individual and relationship outcomes (e.g., private self-consciousness, relationship satisfaction) before marriage. Envisioning extensions of their research, the investigators deemed it essential to study relationship thinking in married couples. Even though they suspected the processes would be the same, Cate et al. (1995) surmised that the impact of relationship thinking could be different among married couples. This article addresses that recommendation by using a sample consisting of both unmarried and married couples. More importantly, Cate and colleagues also recommended that the mechanisms by which (i.e., for whom and under what conditions) relationship thinking affects relationship satisfaction be investigated. Even though their research assumed a 'direct tie' between relationship thinking and satisfaction, they concluded that such mechanisms 'are important to the extent that people have motivations, goals, needs, etc., to be involved in relationships' (Cate et al., 1995, p. 93). In support of these recommendations, a primary goal of this study was to identify factors that might underlie the positive link between thinking positively about the relationship and feeling more satisfied with it.

Sex differences in relationship awareness and identity

Previous research in recent decades has found that women in Western European and North American cultures tend to focus more attention on relationships than men (e.g., Acitelli, 1992; Burnett, 1987; Cate et al., 1995). Studies also indicate that women engage more in thinking positively about relationships than men (Cate et al., 1995). However, the literature goes beyond sex differences in thinking about relationships to suggest differences in orientations toward relationships (Peplau & Gordon, 1985). Thus, there are studies revealing not only mean differences between males and females, but also differences between sexes in the associations of relationship-oriented behaviors, perceptions, and thoughts with relationship satisfaction. For example, a study of perceptions of conflict (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993) showed that husbands' marital satisfaction was best predicted by husbands' and wives' separate reports of their own behaviors during conflict. In contrast, wives' marital satisfaction was best predicted by the *congruence* of the spouses' reports. That is, how the separate reports compared or were related to each other was more important to wives' satisfaction, while the separate, individual reports of conflict behaviors were more predictive of husbands' marital satisfaction.

Similarly, studies of social support in marriage (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Julien & Markman, 1991) have demonstrated that spousal supportiveness contributes more to women's marital satisfaction than it does to men's. Even more relevant to the current study is the finding that the extent to which husbands talk about the relationship in an open-ended interview is associated with wives' marital happiness, while such talk from either spouse has no link to husbands' happiness (Acitelli, 1992). These studies from different theoretical contexts point to a similar conclusion — relationship-oriented phenomena are more strongly related to relationship happiness for women than for men. Although all of these studies demonstrate direct links between relationship-oriented phenomena and relationship satisfaction, none of them demonstrates the explicit link between positive thoughts and relationship outcomes nor have they empirically investigated mechanisms that underlie, condition, or explain such links.

As such, we propose that sex differences are not the main factors to be examined in accounting for differences in the link between relational thinking and relationship satisfaction. We also propose that the sex differences are not primarily caused by biological sex but, more likely, are moderated by the way men and women view themselves (Acitelli & Young, 1996; Cross & Madson, 1997a, b). Literature from both psychology and sociology has conceptualized the self as multi-faceted, consisting of structures known by terms such as self-schemas (Markus, 1977) or salient identities (Stryker, 1987). Regardless of the label, these 'knowledge structures represent what an individual thinks about, cares about, and spends time and energy on. They form the core of the self-concept, or what an individual has come to regard as essential about him- or herself' (Herzog, Franks, Markus, & Holmberg, 1998, p. 179). These core facets or knowledge structures of the self will be a prime focus of this article and, for consistency, will be referred

to as identities. Some theorists (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997a, b; Jordan & Surrey, 1986; Markus & Oyserman, 1989) propose that a woman's identity is more relational than a man's identity. That is, instead of describing themselves with terms that indicate a relative independence from others (e.g., decisive, enterprising), the identities of women (compared with men) are more likely to implicate others with whom they have relationships (e.g., describing themselves as a mother or sister). Several developmental theories reveal the manner in which girls and boys tend to develop interdependent (or connected) and independent (or separate) identities, respectively (for reviews, see Acitelli & Young, 1996; Chodorow, 1978; Cross & Madson, 1997a, b; Miller, 1986).

Although a thorough theoretical discussion of the development of gender-identity is beyond the scope of this article and these sex differences are still a matter of some debate, we will briefly summarize Chodorow's (1978) and Miller's (1986) theories. According to Chodorow, girls tend to develop their gender-identities within the context of the relationship with their primary caregivers who are usually the same sex as themselves. Thus, girls tend to develop and define their identities in terms of the attachments they form with others. On the other hand, to develop the male gender-identity, boys must disengage from their primary caregivers (who are traditionally the opposite sex from themselves) and identify with fathers who usually have less contact with their sons than their mothers do. Thus, boys develop a greater sense of separateness or independence from others, according to Chodorow (1978). This theory has been criticized for ignoring social structures in that it may hold only for white, middle-class nuclear families, and not cultures where parenthood is more equally shared or for children raised by men (Anderson, 1993). Whereas Miller (1986) concurs that women and men develop interdependent and separate identities, respectively, she emphasizes the larger societal context in which women are powerless and must be more attentive and responsive to dominant others. Women thus develop more relational identities and more interdependence with others than men (who are presumably more dominant) do.

Empirical studies of development throughout the lifespan in North America generally support the notion that female identities are more connected to, and male identities are more separate from others. For example, McGuire and McGuire (1988) presented open-ended questions designed to elicit self-descriptions to 560 children ranging in age from 7 to 17. They found that girls were more likely than boys to include others in their descriptions of themselves, suggesting that, in contrast to boys, girls view themselves in relation to others and see the boundaries between self and others as more fluid. Douvan and Adelson (1966) found a similar pattern in a study that involved interviews with over 3000 adolescents. Findings indicated that girls' identity development depends on issues of friendship, dating, and popularity, whereas boys' identity development depends on issues of achievement, autonomy, and development of occupational plans. Thus, girls' identities evolve from close involvements with others, whereas boys' identities evolve from differentiating oneself from others. Other work

has supported these differing identities or self-concepts in adults (e.g., Baucom, Notarius, Burnett, & Haefner, 1990; Lang-Takac & Osterweil, 1992; Markus, Crane, Burnstein, & Saladi, 1982). We also expected to find these differences in men's and women's identities in the present study.

From this perspective, most studies of femininity and masculinity can be considered studies of interdependent and independent identities, as can studies of agency and communion (Bakan, 1966; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). For example, the feminine subscale of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974) includes descriptors such as affectionate, understanding, and sensitive to the needs of others, whereas the masculine subscale consists of descriptors such as assertive, independent, and ambitious. Thus, these two categories correspond well with the idea of interdependence (or connectedness) and independence (or separateness), respectively. (See Ballard-Reisch & Elton, 1992 for a detailed discussion of this point.)

It is important to note that women do not always have a feminine sex-role identity, and men do not always have a masculine sex-role identity. Baucom and Voirin (unpublished raw data cited in Baucom et al., 1990) conducted a study of the way partners make attributions for their spouses' negative behaviors. The researchers found that, when attempting to search for causes of a spouse's negative behavior, masculine spouses focused on the individual, whereas feminine spouses focused more on the relationship (or on how partners relate to each other), regardless of the sex of the spouses. Being male or female did not determine whether a person adopted a relationship or individual focus, but rather the extent to which the person viewed herself or himself in relational terms. In fact, Ballard-Reisch and Elton's (1992) research supports the argument that the characteristics measured by the BSRI (Bem, 1974) have more to do with personality than traditional masculine or feminine sex-roles. Thus, instead of using the gendered terms feminine and masculine, it makes more sense to describe the identities typically associated with gender as connected and separate, or as relational and independent. This terminology has the added benefit of avoiding the value-laden or stereotyped connotations often associated with the labels of masculine woman and feminine man.

Relationship thinking, identity, and satisfaction

We argue that the degree to which one's identity is relational (or the strength of one's *relational identity*) is a factor associated with whether engaging in positive relational thinking is beneficial to one's intimate relationship. As noted previously, relationship thinking to some extent determines relationship satisfaction. We expect the association between positive relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction to vary depending on the extent to which a person's identity is relational. Having an identity that is highly relational involves regarding this aspect of oneself as essential to the self, something that the individual cares about and spends time thinking about (Herzog et al., 1998). Indeed, research demonstrating that women's identities are more relational than men's has also shown that 'for women, self-esteem is associated in some significant part with connect-

ing to or interdependence with others' (Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992, p. 399). If relationships are a central part of one's identity, then thinking about them may be tied to a person's values and associated with something very positive and important to the person. Thus, having a relational identity may entail assigning a high value to thinking positively about the relationship (i.e., the belief that thinking positively about a relationship is good for the relationship). For people with a strong relational identity, there should be a strong positive association between positive relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction. Such thinking should affect them more, making them feel better about the relationship. For those with weaker relational identities, thinking positively about the relationship should have little effect on their satisfaction with it because they are not as invested in their relationships as important aspects of their lives. Note that it is also our contention that this association should hold for those with strong relational identities regardless of biological sex.

Thus far, we have described the relational orientation as an aspect of the identity tied to relationships with others in general, not in reference to a specific relationship. That thinking positive thoughts about one's relationships should go hand in hand with relationship satisfaction for those whose relational identities are strong makes sense if relationships are an important part of a person's life. But whether such thinking should be moderated by a relational identity across all types of relationships is not so clear. Thinking the same thoughts about different types of relationships or about relationships that vary in duration may not have similar effects or correlates. For example, as partners become closer, or more committed, or even get married, a *couple identity* may evolve over time to reflect their developing relationship. Thus, these more established couples may have identities that are focused more specifically on the particular relationship and have greater relevance to partners' thoughts and feelings about the relationship than would an identity based on an orientation to others in general. In general, the unmarried couples in our sample have been couples for less time than the married couples. We surmise, then, that for these relationships of shorter duration, what partners bring to the relationship (their relational identity), as opposed to what they have developed in it, may have greater relevance to how they think and feel about their relationship. Therefore, the general relational identity may have more salience for unmarried couples, whose relationships are less ostensibly defined and may be of shorter duration, because their couple identities may be perceived as less permanent and less integrated into the self than those of married couples whose relationships are publicly solidified by a legal commitment.

There is evidence (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991) that with increased closeness comes more inclusion of the partner in one's self-concept. Thus, one's self-concept seems to change with increased closeness and interdependence. Such evidence prompts questions about whether the relational identity is too general a facet of a person's self-concept to moderate satisfaction with a specific type of relationship such as marriage. A measure of the degree to which persons see themselves, not in terms of a general

connectedness to others, but in terms of being a part of the specific relationship might better moderate the link between relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction for married couples. Thus, spouses or partners in close relationships may have identities that include both a general orientation toward others (or relational identity), and a more specific orientation to their particular relationship (or couple identity). In the same way that people place varying emphasis on involvement with others and define themselves in terms of relationships with others, they may identify to different degrees with being part of an intimate dyad, and may feel a greater or lesser union (or sense of 'we-ness') with their spouses.

Recent research indirectly supports the idea that couple identities become stronger with individuals' increased commitment to their relationships (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). This work has shown that with increased commitment comes an increase in *cognitive interdependence*, a concept similar to couple identity. Cognitive interdependence refers to a structuring of the mental representation of the self as part of a 'pluralistic self-and-partner collective' (Agnew et al., 1998). It is measured by greater plural pronoun usage, perceived overlap of other with self using the diagrammatic Inclusion of the Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), and the degree to which the close relationship (compared with other areas of life) is important to their lives. This research has shown that the more committed individuals become, 'the more they come to regard themselves as "blended" with the partner, as revealed in perceived overlap in mental representations of self and partner' (Agnew et al., 1998, p. 951). As the investigators' research was on college students in dating relationships and friendships of relatively short duration (median duration was 11 months and 18 months in two different samples), the authors (like Cate et al., 1995) recommended examining such variables in long-standing relationships as we do here. However, because our measure is a direct measure of different aspects of the self, and we do not employ interdependence theory constructs (cf. Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), we use the term couple identity, referring simply to the extent to which a person views oneself as part of a couple and to which it is considered an important part of the self.

If a distinct and more specific type of relational self-concept, or couple identity, is more salient to married couples, then perhaps couple identity instead of relational identity would interact with relationship thinking for married people in predicting satisfaction. However, there is little evidence that suggests exactly how and in what direction it would interact. On the one hand, having a strong couple identity may go hand in hand with thinking positively about the relationship for married couples, although it may not be a conscious process. It is possible, then, that, for those high in couple identity, thinking positively about the relationship will make no difference in their satisfaction with it because a strong couple identity is concomitant with relationship satisfaction. If so, the interaction between couple identity and relationship thinking would reveal the opposite configuration expected with the general relational identity (i.e., for married partners high in couple

identity, the association between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction should be weaker than for those low in couple identity). On the other hand, couple identity might function in the same manner for married couples as the more general relational identity is predicted to function for unmarried couples. That is, for spouses with a strong (as opposed to a weak) couple identity, there could be a strong positive association between positive relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction. Thus, the manner in which couple identity will moderate the link between relationship thinking and satisfaction will be examined in this study.

To summarize, thinking positively about one's intimate relationship is correlated with relationship satisfaction. However, the degree to which a person views oneself in general relational terms is expected to moderate this association, especially for unmarried couples. For married couples, a specific couple identity is likely to be more relevant to the way spouses assess their relationship than is a general relational identity. Thus, couple identity is expected to be a more important moderator of the link between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction for married couples.

In the current study, consistent with previous research on thinking about relationships, we propose *Hypothesis 1*: Women will report more positive thinking about their relationships than will men. *Hypothesis 2* predicts that women's self concepts will be more relational than men's (Acitelli & Young, 1996; Cross & Madson, 1997a, b; Markus & Oyserman, 1989). Further, it is expected that the extent to which a person views the self in relational terms will moderate the association between positive relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction. Thus, *Hypothesis 3a* states that the positive association between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction will be stronger among those with a stronger relational identity. However, with *Hypothesis 3b*, this association (in *3a*) is expected to be stronger for unmarried couples than it is for married couples. It is also expected that, for married couples, a couple identity more specifically tied to the marital relationship will better predict the effects of thinking about the marriage than the more global relational self-concept. Thus, *Hypothesis 4* is that couple identity will moderate the relation between positive thinking and satisfaction for participants who are married. Although we explore the idea that the association between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction will be weaker for those high in couple identity, we do not specify the direction of the interaction.

Method

Participants

The first wave of data was collected in 1993 by professional interviewers from the Survey Research Center at the Institute for Social Research. Interviewers screened 2319 households in the tri-county Detroit metropolitan area to obtain an area probability sample of 238 couples. Eligible participants were 18 years of age or older. There was no age ceiling nor any attempt to match dyadic partners for age. Population estimates from Detroit samples indicated that it would

be unlikely to find substantial numbers of partners who were widely disparate in their ages. In theoretical terms, there was no reason to limit participants' ages, and in practical terms, an age ceiling and matching would have restricted the number of eligible couples for the study, making it more costly (in time and money). To avoid the complications of studying remarriage, only partners in couples who had never been married or who were in their first marriage were eligible to participate in this study. An unmarried couple was eligible if partners were of the opposite sex, had never been married, and if they had been in the current relationship for 6 months or more. Married couples were eligible if both partners were in their first marriage and had been married 25 years or less. Overall, 70 percent of those who were eligible agreed to participate in the study. For a detailed description of the rationale for the sample design and how this sample was obtained, see Acitelli (1997).

The sample was composed of 90 unmarried couples and 148 married couples. The mean length of time in the relationship was approximately 10 years for all couples (3.3 years for unmarried couples and 13.9 years for married couples). The mean length of marriage was 11.3 years. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 59 years. Their mean age was 33. For personal income, 49.5 percent of respondents' annual personal income was below $20,000, and 50.5 percent were at or above $20,000. For household income, counting everyone living in the household, 41.8 percent of the households had annual incomes below $40,000, and 58.2 percent had incomes at or above $40,000. The mean educational level was one year of postsecondary education. Their ethnic backgrounds were 73 percent White, 21 percent Black, 2 percent Native American or Alaskan Native, 3 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1 percent Hispanic.

Procedure and measures

Standardized face-to-face interviews were conducted in the participants' homes. Both partners of each couple participated individually in 90-minute interviews, out of hearing range of one another. They were asked a number of questions about their lives together as a couple. Each member of the couple was given $30 for participating. These same couples were contacted again 1.5 to 2 years later and given almost identical interviews. Approximately 80 percent of the intact couples from the Wave 1 sample participated in Wave 2. In accordance with the *APA Publication Manual* (1994), this large scale multidisciplinary project was designed to produce multiple studies on different topics. As such, there are other studies from this project still in progress or published elsewhere. Whereas the Garrido and Acitelli (1999) study is an extension of the current one, none of the other studies has substantial overlap with this one. The present analysis utilizes responses to a portion of questions designed for the purposes of this particular study.

Relationship satisfaction was measured by adapting the 6-item measure of marital well-being developed by Crohan and Veroff (1989). The current measure was developed in collaboration with Joseph Veroff. Because there were both unmarried and married respondents in our study, the word 'relationship' was substituted for the word 'marriage' in all items. Responses ranged from 1 to 4. These items were: 1. Taking things together, how would you describe your relationship — would you say your relationship is *very happy*, *a little happier than average*, *just about average*, or *not too happy*? 2. When you think about your relationship — what each of you puts into it and gets out of it — how happy do you feel? Would you say *very happy*, *fairly happy*, *not too*

happy, or *not at all happy*? 3. How certain would you say you are that the two of you will be together five years from now? (Responses as above, *very certain* to *not at all certain*.) 4. How stable do you feel your relationship is? (*Very stable* to *not at all stable*.) 5. In the last few months how often have you considered leaving your (wife/husband/partner)? (*Often*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, or *never*.) 6. All in all, how satisfied are you with your relationship? (*Very satisfied* to *very dissatisfied*.) The items assess global satisfaction with the relationship rather than specific domains of the marriage (e.g., communication, conflict), often found in popular marital adjustment scales (e.g., Spanier, 1976). Therefore, this measure avoids confounding independent variables that might be used to predict relationship satisfaction (see Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Glenn, 1990; and Johnson, Amoloza, & Booth, 1992 for detailed discussions of this point).

However, considering face validity (an inspection of the items at face value), one might surmise that there are really two constructs being tapped by this measure — a happiness or satisfaction construct and a stability construct. Yet this 6-item measure was derived from previous factor analyses (Crohan & Veroff, 1989) including several other items tapping into different dimensions of marital well-being (e.g., competence, control) on a sample of 373 newlywed couples. It was also demonstrated to be internally consistent (husbands' α = .83, wives' α = .85) and to have considerable construct validity (Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). The authors were intrigued that these six items formed one factor, so they replicated the Crohan and Veroff study with these couples in their 7th year of marriage and found the same result (i.e., these six items formed one factor; Joseph Veroff, personal communication). Alphas for the present sample were .87 and .90 for men and women, respectively. Even so, we re-did the analyses using only the three items tapping into happiness/satisfaction, and the results were virtually identical, so our results from the original 6-item measure created for this study are presented here.

Relational identity and couple identity. Although the larger project measured various domains of identity, only the assessments of relational and couple identities were relevant for the purposes of this study. This measure was designed to tap into concepts that would identify the extent to which participants viewed themselves as connected or interdependent with others and the importance they attached to this view. To assess *relational identity*, participants were asked how well each of these terms (embedded in a list of other terms) — friendly, caring about others, friend, and son/daughter — describe the way they think about themselves on a 1 (*not at all well*) to 5 (*extremely well*) scale. Then, after completing this list of self-descriptors, they were given the same list again and asked to rate how *important* these items were to the way they saw themselves on a 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*) scale. These items were averaged to form a relational identity score. Similarly, to assess *couple identity*, respondents indicated the extent to which they thought of themselves as 'part of a couple' and how important being 'part of a couple' was to the way they saw themselves each on the same 1 to 5 scale. These items were averaged to form the couple identity score. Some of the items were pilot tested on an earlier study (Acitelli, unpublished data, 1991) and provided construct validity for relational and non-relational identities. All of the items in the current scale were also pretested by Markus and Herzog (Herzog et al., 1998; Markus, 1994), who derived items from focus group discussions on how people define themselves in terms of sociodemographic descriptors, social roles, interests, person-

ality characteristics, and interpersonal attributes. In the current study, an exploratory factor analysis (including other items) revealed a relational identity factor consisting of the following items: friendly, caring about others, friend, and son/daughter. As it was important to distinguish this general relational factor from the more specific couple identity, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed and demonstrated that a two-factor model (corresponding with relational and couple identities) fit the data.

We conducted the confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996) to ensure that the constructs of couple identity and relational identity are distinct for men and women. The model included the constructs of men's relational identity, women's relational identity, men's couple identity and women's couple identity, as assessed by the 8-item and 2-item scales previously described. The constructs of men's and women's relational identity were allowed to covary, as were men's and women's couple identity. In addition, each partner's relational identity was allowed to covary with his or her own couple identity. At the item level, 'descriptive' and 'importance' ratings for each item were allowed to covary within spouse (i.e., the extent to which 'friendly' is descriptive for men was allowed to covary with the extent to which men rated 'friendly' as important). Also, identical items were allowed to covary between spouses (i.e., the extent to which friendly is descriptive for men was allowed to covary with the extent to which friendly is descriptive for women). Men's and women's items were constrained to load equally on their respective constructs. Although the χ^2 test was significant, $\chi^2(156, n = 234) = 267.40$, $p < .0001$, the ratio of χ^2 to degrees of freedom was < 2 and other indices of fit suggest that the model provided an adequate fit to the data (RMSEA = .055, GFI = .90, CFI = .92).

Positive relationship thinking was measured by adapting the scale developed by Cate et al. (1995). Their scale includes three subscales that have been derived through factor analyses and that assess three types of relationship thinking: positive affect, partner, and network. For the purposes of this project, we use only those items that reflect positive thoughts about the relationship (or positive affect thinking, Cate et al., 1995). The other subscales focus more on the partner and the social network than the relationship and, thus, do not fit the purposes of this particular study. To assess positive relationship thinking, participants were asked (on a 1–4 scale): whether each item is *a lot like you*, *somewhat like you*, *not much like you*, or *not at all like you* — I think about: 1. All of the experiences that we have shared together; 2. The memories I have of our relationship; 3. How much I love my partner; 4. All of the fun we have had together; 5. How close my partner feels toward me. This measure taps into thought concerning relational constructs, behavioral events, and subjective events that can occur both during interaction with the partner and when alone (Cate et al., 1995). It assesses the extent to which the participant sees oneself as a person who engages in such thought and, as such, is distinguishable from a measure of relationship satisfaction that taps into a global evaluation of one's feelings about the relationship. For example, one satisfaction item reads 'All in all, how satisfied are you with your relationship'?, whereas the thinking measure asks participants if it is typical for them to 'think about all the memories I have of our relationship.' In essence, the relationship thinking measure asks, 'Are you likely to think about your relationship in this way'?, whereas the relationship satisfaction measure asks, 'How do you feel about your relationship?' Alphas on the current sample for the relationship thinking measure were .78 and .75 for men and women, respectively.

Results

Basic descriptors

On average, participants reported high relationship satisfaction (M = 3.50, SD = .58), positive relationship thinking (M = 3.60, SD = .41), relationship identity (M = 4.26, SD = .48), and couple identity (M = 4.32, SD = .60). Means for men and women are reported separately in later subsections. Table 1 shows the intercorrelations between all variables for men and women separately. As expected, scores for couple identity were significantly correlated with those of relationship satisfaction, but not so high to be considered measures of identical constructs.

Tests of hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Women will report more positive thinking about their relationships than will men. A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on the relationship thinking index with sex as the repeated measure. Consistent with the hypothesis, women reported thinking more about their relationships (M = 3.67) than did men (M = 3.52), $F(1, 229) = 16.79$, $p < .001$, $r = .26$ (effect size, Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2: Women's self-concepts are more relational than men's. A similar repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on the relational identity index. Consistent with the hypothesis, the self-concepts of women were more relational (M = 4.39) than those of men (M = 4.14), $F(1, 237) = 33.46$, $p < .001$, $r = .35$. In addition, women's couple identity (M = 4.37) was stronger than men's (M = 4.27), $F(1, 237) = 3.92$, $p < .05$, $r = .22$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3(a): Within sex, the positive association between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction will be stronger among those with a strong relational self-concept. On the other hand, when relational qualities are less central to one's self-concept, thinking about the relationship will not be linked to satisfaction. **3(b):** The above effect may vary depending on marital status. Thus, relational identity may moderate the association between relationship thinking and satisfaction primarily for unmarried couples.

TABLE 1
Bivariate means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among study variables (N = 238)

Variable	Females M	Females SD	Males M	Males SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Relational identity	4.39	.45	4.14	.47	.02	.46***	.34***	.18**	−.11
2. Couple identity	4.37	.63	4.27	.57	.34***	.22***	.29***	.46***	.03
3. Relationship thinking	3.67	.37	3.52	.44	.24***	.23***	.13*	.31***	−.16
4. Relationship satisfaction	3.52	.59	3.48	.57	.06	.47***	.25***	.58***	.16**
5. Marital status[a]	—		—		−.12	.03	−.09	.32***	—

[a]Unmarried = 1; Married = 2.

Note: For correlation matrix, correlations for females are above the diagonal, correlations for males are below the diagonal, and female–male correlations are along the diagonal.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

To examine these two hypotheses simultaneously, a series of hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted on the relationship satisfaction index, for men and women separately. Relational identity, relationship thinking, and marital status were entered at step 1, followed by the three two-way product terms (relational identity × relationship thinking; relationship thinking × marital status; relational identity × marital status) at step 2. The three-way product term (relational identity × relational thinking × marital status) was entered at step 3. First, in analyses conducted on women, married women tended to be happier with their relationships than unmarried women, $F(1, 229) = 13.84$, $p < .001$, pr (partial correlation) = .24. Further, women who frequently think positively about their relationship were more satisfied with it, $F(1, 229) = 22.92$, $p < .001$, $pr = .30$. Thus, as in previous research (Acitelli, 1992; Cate et al., 1995), thinking positively about one's relationship was linked to relationship happiness. Consistent with Hypothesis 3a, this was especially true of women higher in relational identity, as indicated by an interaction between marital status and relational identity, $F(1, 226) = 3.96$, $p < .05$, $pr = .13$. More importantly, Hypothesis 3b was supported by a three-way interaction between relationship thinking, relational identity, and marital status, $F(1, 225) = 9.41$, $p < .01$, $pr = .20$. Follow-up analyses revealed that the relationship thinking × relational identity interaction was significant among unmarried women, $F(1, 85) = 7.67$, $p < .01$, $pr = .29$, but not among married women. Figure 1 provides the predicted satisfaction scores derived from the regression equation in each follow-up analysis, as a function of relationship thinking and relational identity (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). As expected, thinking positively about one's relationship was more strongly linked to satisfaction for those higher in relational identity. Further, this was the case primarily among unmarried partners.

A similar pattern of results occurred for men. Because the pattern of results for men was similar to that of women, results for men will not be reiterated in additional figures. Again, married men were happier with their relationships than unmarried men, $F(1, 233) = 32.28$, $p < .001$, $pr = .35$. Further, thinking positively about one's relationship was associated with being satisfied with it, $F(1, 233) = 19.53$, $p < .001$, $pr = .28$. Finally, a significant three-way interaction between relationship thinking, relational identity, and marital status emerged, $F(1, 229) = 4.59$, $p < .05$, $pr = .14$. As with women, thinking positively about the relationship was more strongly associated with satisfaction among men higher in relational identity. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, positive thinking about one's relationship was associated with feeling satisfied primarily among those with a relational self-concept and who were unmarried. Thus Hypotheses 3a and 3b were supported.

Hypothesis 4: Couple identity is expected to moderate the association between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction, primarily among marrieds. Whereas relational identity was an appropriate moderator among unmarrieds, couple identity may be an appropriate moderator among marrieds. Accordingly, the previous analyses were repeated by substituting couple identity for relational identity everywhere it occurred. Among women, thinking positively about one's relationship was associated with being more satisfied, as before, $F(1, 229) = 14.70$, $p < .001$, $pr = .25$. Also, married women were more satisfied with their relationships than unmarried women, as before, $F(1, 229) = 11.41$, $p < .001$, $pr = .22$. A main effect of couple identity revealed that simply thinking of oneself as part of a couple was also associated with being satisfied,

FIGURE 1
Relationship satisfaction as a function of positive relationship thinking, relational identity, and marital status.

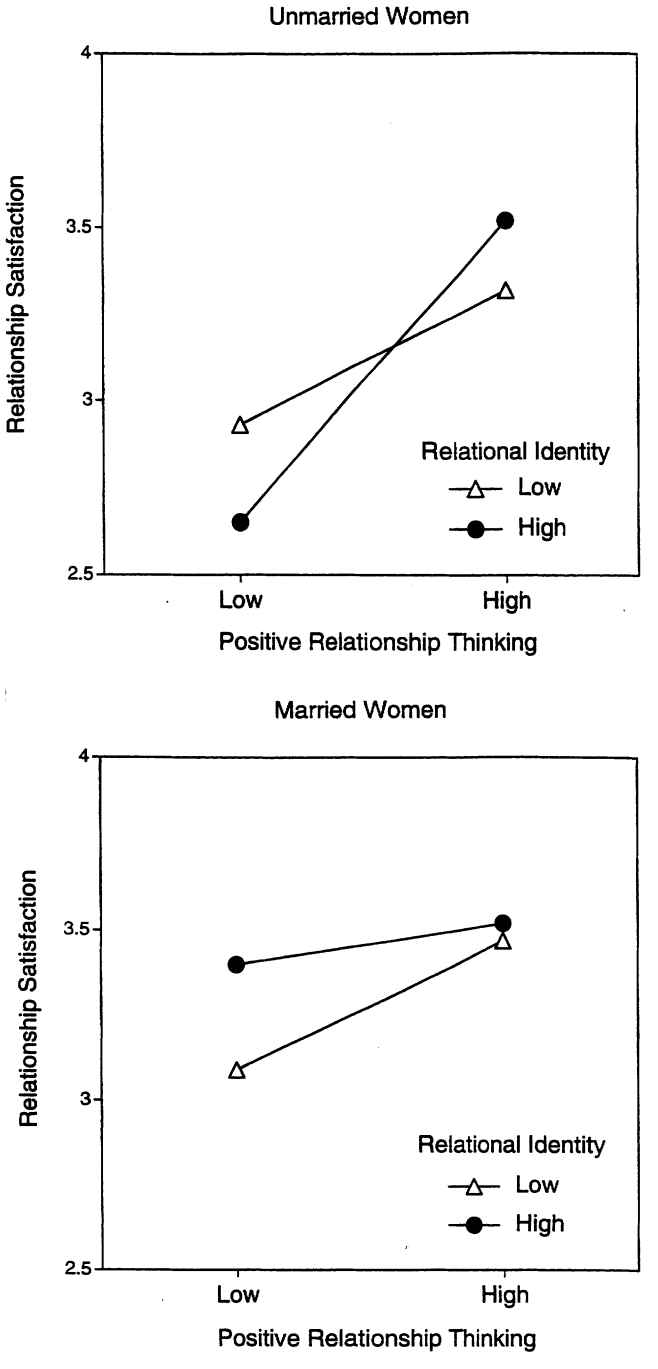
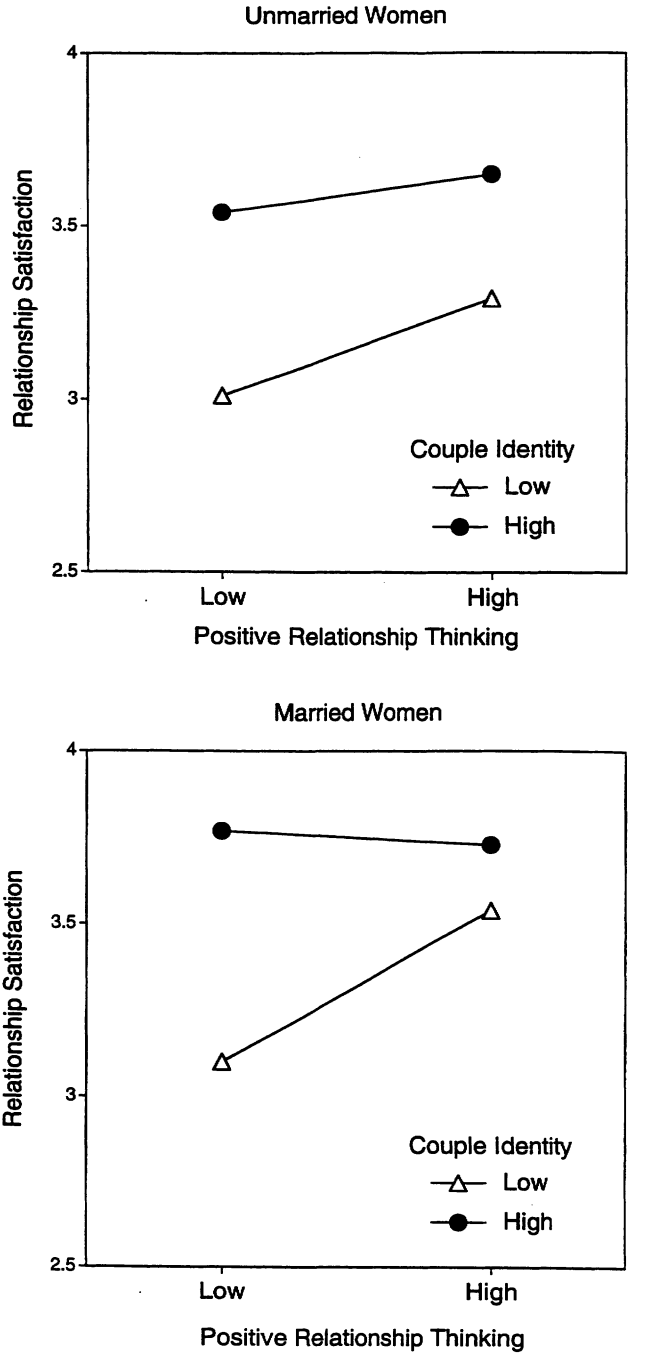


FIGURE 2
Relationship satisfaction as a function of positive relationship thinking, couple identity, and marital status.



$F(1, 229) = 46.07$, $p < .001$, $pr = .41$. However, as expected, the relation between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction was moderated by couple identity, $F(1, 226) = 6.09$, $p = .01$, $pr = -.16$. The link between thinking positively about one's relationship and being satisfied was particularly strong for those *lower* in couple identity. Follow-up analyses revealed that this two-way interaction was significant among married women, $F(1, 140) = 12.27$, $p < .001$, $pr = -.28$, but not unmarried women. Figure 2 provides predicted satisfaction scores derived from the regression equation in each follow-up analysis, as a function of relationship thinking and couple identity (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). As shown, couple identity moderated the association between positive thinking and satisfaction among married couples only. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported for women.

A similar but weaker pattern of results emerged among men. Again, higher satisfaction was predicted by positive relationship thinking, $F(1, 233) = 11.06$, $p < .001$, $pr = .21$, being married, $F(1, 233) = 36.11$, $p < .001$, $pr = .37$, and having a strong couple identity, $F(1, 233) = 59.41$, $p < .001$, $pr = .45$. The interaction between relationship thinking and couple identity was not significant. However, a marginally significant higher order interaction among thinking, couple identity, and marital status suggested a trend in the same direction found among women, $F(1, 229) = 3.52$, $p = .06$, $pr = .12$. Follow-up analyses revealed that the thinking $\times$ couple identity interaction approached significance for married men, $F(1, 143) = 3.03$, $p = .08$, $pr = .15$, but not for unmarried men. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was partially supported, with the strongest results found in the women's data, while the men's data indicate a trend in the same direction. Substituting biological sex (i.e., male, female) for identity (and treating sex as a within-case factor), we investigated the possibility that sex would moderate the link between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction on the entire sample. We found that there was no sex $\times$ thinking interaction effect, suggesting that biological sex does not moderate the link between positive relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction.

Length of relationship. Because those who were married had relationships of longer duration than those who were unmarried, we performed analyses to rule out the possibility that the significant interactions with marital status were caused by length of relationship instead (e.g., identity $\times$ relational thinking $\times$ relationship length). Thus, four three-way analyses were conducted, as presented earlier, separately for men and women, with either relational or couple identity as moderators. Length of relationship was substituted for marital status. Length of relationship functioned in a fashion similar to marital status only among women when relational identity was the moderator. Results of the other three analyses were inconsistent and did not replicate the pattern of results predicted for marital status. We also conducted a log transformation on relationship length considering that the psychological effect of time might decrease over time. All of the analyses were repeated using this new variable, and there were no substantial differences in our results. For the most part, then, length of relationship had some overlap with, but could not be said to duplicate the function of, marital status.

Longitudinal analyses. To examine whether positive relationship thinking, relational identity, and marital status interact in predicting changes in satisfaction over time, a series of hierarchical multiple regression residual change

analyses were conducted, separately for men and women. Satisfaction at Wave 2 was the criterion. Satisfaction from Wave 1 was entered at step 1 along with relationship thinking, relational identity, and marital status. The two-way product terms were entered at step 2, and the three-way product was entered at step 3. Several important findings emerged.

Beginning with the results for relational identity: For women, the thinking × relational identity interaction was significant, $F(1, 141) = 4.01, p < .05, pr = .17$. More importantly, the three-way interaction was significant and in the expected direction, $F(1, 140) = 8.17, p < .01, pr = -.23$. Thus, thinking positively about one's relationship increased satisfaction over time primarily among unmarried women who were higher in relational identity, similar to our predictions for Wave 1.

Turning to men, married men became more satisfied over time relative to unmarried men, $F(1, 146) = 5.59, p < .05, pr = .19$. This increased satisfaction for married men was particularly strong among those lower in relational identity, as evidenced by a significnat two-way interaction between marital status and relational identity, $F(1, 143) = 7.33, p < .01, pr = -.22$. Also, a significant interaction between relationship thinking and relational identity revealed that thinking positively about one's relationship increased satisfaction more strongly among men higher in relational identity, $F(1, 143) = 3.86, p = .05, pr = .16$. Finally, the three-way interaction approached significance, $F(1, 142) = 3.60, p = .06, pr = -.16$. Follow-up analyses suggested that the association between thinking and satisfaction for men high in relational identity was strongest for unmarried men, which is also consistent with our Wave 1 predictions.

The analyses were repeated by replacing relational identity with couple identity in the regression analyses. Among men, those who were married were happier than those who were not, $F(1, 146) = 5.32, p < .05, pr = .19$. No other effects were significant. Among women, a significant thinking × couple identity interaction emerged, $F(1, 141) = 3.82, p = .05, pr = .16$. Follow-up analyses (separating married from unmarried women) again revealed a pattern for married women that is consistent with our Wave 1 finding. Positive thinking about the relationship made little difference to married women with a strong couple identity. In addition, there was a weak but positive association between thinking and satisfaction for those low in couple identity. However, for unmarried women high in couple identity, the association between positive thinking and satisfaction was negative, whereas positive relational thinking had little or no relation to satisfaction for unmarried women with low couple identities. No other effects were significant.

Discussion

As expected, women reported thinking positively about their relationships more often than men. This finding is consistent with earlier research (Acitelli, 1992; Burnett, 1987; Cate et al., 1995) suggesting that men, compared with women, perceive themselves to be less thoughtful about relationships in general. Although it is plausible that men might be less likely to report thinking positive thoughts about relationships because such thinking is not desirable with regard to the traditional male role in US

society, this explanation seems unlikely for two reasons. The first is that participants in this study were well aware throughout the interviews that relationships were the topic of study. One could argue that such awareness could have evoked a response set to report *more* positive thinking about the relationship. The second is that research (Russel & Wells, 1992) has shown that assessments of social desirability and marital quality are positively related in men, but unrelated in women. For both of these reasons, it would seem likely that men might over-report their tendency toward thinking and considering their relationships in a positive light. Therefore, the evidence in the current study provides strong support for Hypothesis 1, which stated that women think positively about relationships more than men.

Findings also support Hypothesis 2, which posed that women think of themselves in more relational terms than men. In line with Cross and Madson's (1997a) contention, having a less relational (or interdependent) self-construal does not mean that men are less sociable than women. Indeed, the independent and interdependent self-concepts 'represent two forms of sociability, not sociability versus social isolation' (p. 51). The point is that women are more likely to incorporate their relationships into their identities than are men. Thus, women's relationships are more likely to influence their cognitions, emotions, and behavior (Cross & Madson, 1997a). However, we must add that the extent to which a person incorporates relationships into one's self-concept is not governed solely by the person's biological sex.

Accordingly, it was expected that for men and women whose identities were more relational, thinking positively about the relationship would be linked to feeling more satisfied with their relationship (Hypothesis 3a) because relational qualities are central to their identity and have more of an influence on cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. Other literatures have also argued that behaviors and outcomes are more strongly related when they are relevant to one's self-concept or identity. For example, revisions to cognitive dissonance theory over the years have implicated the self-concept such that for attitude change to occur, one must feel personally responsible for an aversive event (e.g., Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992). Similarly, the persuasion literature has shown that when people are able and motivated to think deeply on an issue, the changed attitude is more likely to persist, resist attack, and influence behavior (see Chaiken, Wood, & Eagly, 1996, and Petty & Cacioppo, 1986 for reviews). Further, Steele's (1988) self-affirmation theory has argued that, once threatened, the self can be re-affirmed in a variety of ways, often by validating any self-aspect that is central and important. In relating the general literature on self-regulation to relationship processes, self-expansion theory (Aron et al., 1991) has elaborated on how, in the context of close relationships, each partner comes to include the other in the self. Thus, to the extent that one has incorporated aspects of one's partner into oneself, one's relationship becomes an important aspect of self-regulation and affirmation. Just as having a strong self-concept goes hand in hand with thinking positive thoughts about oneself, having an

identity that is tied to a specific relationship (i.e., couple identity) may go hand in hand with thinking positive thoughts about one's relationship and, in turn, become automatically associated with relationship satisfaction.

Similarly, having a strong general relational identity renders one's evaluation of relationships important to oneself. Neidenthal and Beike (1997) make a similar point in an article on interrelated and isolated self-concepts (comparable to relational and non-relational, interdependent and independent, etc.) using Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model. Her work leads us to conclude that when a partner with a strong relational identity has positive thoughts about one's relationship, he or she is likely to assimilate or incorporate (as opposed to distance the self from) that evaluation of the relationship, just as assimilating the positive evaluation of a close other makes one feel good about the self. As Neidenthal posits, when people with interrelated self-concepts evaluate a close other positively, 'self-evaluation would most likely assimilate with evaluation of the other person;' thus, close others' good qualities would make one feel good about oneself. To extrapolate from Neidenthal and Beike's point, a person with an interrelated self-concept who is evaluating a close other can be likened to a partner with a relational identity thinking positive thoughts about the relationship. If this partner thinks good thoughts about the relationship, it is similar to thinking good thoughts about the self, and thus the person is more likely to evaluate the relationship positively (or have high relationship satisfaction). Thus, the basic psychological processes that have been demonstrated with regard to regulation and maintenance of the self-concept may to some extent carry over to the regulation and maintenance of couple and relational identities and produce a dynamic interplay among identity, self-evaluation, and relationship satisfaction.

Having a relational identity may foster a cognitive readiness to interpret more cognitions, emotions, and behaviors as having implications for relationships (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994). Thinking positive thoughts about a relationship, then, implies relationship satisfaction to those who think of themselves in relational terms. Those whose cognitions are not as readily seen as having implications for relationships could view these positive thoughts about the relationship as isolated phenomena, such as a memory of a nice time together, rather than part of an overall framework for evaluating the relationship.

Further, this link was predicted to be especially strong among unmarried couples (Hypothesis 3b), and this hypothesis was supported. Having a relational identity (i.e., seeing oneself as caring or friendly, or being a friend, son, or daughter) reflects an orientation toward relationships in general, not toward a specific relationship. Thus, in order for unmarried partners with strong relational identities to feel satisfied with a specific relationship, thinking about the relationship positively may be necessary to be happy with it. Analyses substituting length of relationship for marital status showed a similar result for women with strong relational identities. Women with strong relational identities, particularly those who have invested less time in their relationships, also need to think positive thoughts about their

relationships to be happy with them, suggesting that more cognitive effort is needed to maintain unmarried relationships of short duration.

Whereas relational identity moderates the benefits of thinking positively about one's premarital relationship, findings also supported the prediction that couple identity moderates the benefits of thinking about one's marriage (Hypothesis 4). However, in this case, the link between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction was strong for spouses *low* in couple identity. For those high in couple identity, who were already quite happy with their relationships, positive thoughts did not make a difference in their relationship satisfaction. The cognitive connection between couple identity and relationship satisfaction may be a relatively automatic tendency among those who are married. Perhaps having a strong couple identity fosters a positive mindset regarding the relationship, making positive evaluations about the specific relationship chronically accessible, whereas the more general relational identity does not. For married partners who are high in couple identity, then, conscious positive thoughts about their relationship may not be necessary in order to be happy with it.

It is likely that spouses with a strong couple identity are implicitly keeping their relationship in 'tacit awareness,' that is, the couple becomes the lens through which they view the world. Wegner and Guiliano (1982) posit that keeping an entity (in this case, the relationship) in tacit awareness helps maintain a positive view of the entity (relationship). This is similar to the process described by Aron et al. (1991) as including the other in the self. However, in this case, the 'other' is the couple, or the couple's relationship. Tacit awareness of the loved other makes a negative evaluation of the other unlikely and helps maintain a positive evaluation of the partner and the relationship. What begins as the spouse including the valued partner in the self eventually evolves into seeing the valued partner as part of 'us.' In other words, one identifies with the couple or views the world through the lens of the relationship.

Thus, to spouses with strong couple identities, thinking positively about the relationship is a rather automatic process, one that does not require consciously applied attention. Thus, one could argue that the reason there is little or no association between positive relationship thinking and satisfaction for people high in couple identity is that the type of thinking we are tapping with the Cate et al. (1995) measure is not automatic and does not assess the type of automatic positive mindset suggested by a high couple identity. However, for those low in couple identity, thinking about their relationship in positive terms does make a difference in their satisfaction because it gives them the stimulus they need to feel satisfied with the relationship. For married people, then, the more they view themselves as being part of a couple, the less they need to think positive thoughts about their relationship to promote satisfaction.

However, why positive relationship thinking does not benefit unmarried partners who are low in couple identity is a question that remains unanswered. Maybe a low couple identity functions similarly to a low relational identity in unmarried partners. That is, unmarried partners low in couple

identity, who are already relatively dissatisfied with their relationships, may not consider positive thoughts about the relationship as part of a framework for evaluating the relationship but rather as isolated thoughts and memories of good times together. However, being married (or publicly committed) may motivate spouses with low couple identities to see positive thoughts and memories as evidence of a satisfactory marriage. Therefore, being married may bolster the capacity for positive thoughts to strengthen satisfaction for partners whose identities are not strongly linked to their relationships, whereas being unmarried may not.

Is there a 'marriage shift'?

Consistent with the above discussion regarding evaluation of one's relationship, partners who are unmarried might still be in an 'evaluation mode' (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Knee, 1998), trying to decide whether the other person is marriage material. Thus, thinking good thoughts about the relationship for unmarried persons with strong relational identities makes them feel satisfied with the relationship because having good feelings and good memories about the relationship may be part of the evaluation process. In addition, those with strong relational identities are those whose identities may be affirmed by having a good relationship. As Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon (1994) demonstrate, unmarried couples are 'positivity seekers' and thus these positive thoughts may be more salient to them than to married couples.

For married couples, we argue, like Swann et al. (1994), that there is a 'marriage shift.' When people get married, they are not as likely to be in the evaluation mode. As Berger and Kellner (1964) state, marrying is an act of two people re-defining themselves, even though the spouses themselves do not consciously acknowledge the transformation. This re-definition involves creating and sharing not only new roles, but also a new reality (Berger & Kellner, 1964). We suggest that the shared reality and shift in identity are key elements of one's couple identity. Thus, those who do not go through this tacit transformation or create a shared reality would be low in couple identity, and might still be in the evaluation mode. For them, thinking positive thoughts about the relationship is necessary to evaluate the relationship positively and be satisfied with it. Being married (or publicly committed) may motivate spouses with low couple identities to see positive thoughts and memories as evidence of a satisfactory marriage. People with a low couple identity may still be 'positivity seekers,' and being married may bolster the capacity for positive thoughts to strengthen satisfaction for partners whose identities have not become part and parcel of the shared reality.

Perhaps spouses with a strong couple identity have successfully maneuvered the 'marriage shift' by making the tacit transformation from 'I' to 'we.' They are no longer in a conscious evaluation mode, and positive thoughts about the relationship are more automatic. Although we note that both married and unmarried couples have both relational and couple identities, we surmise that, for unmarried relationships (that are of shorter

duration in our sample), what partners bring to the relationship (their relational identity), as opposed to what they have developed in it (a couple identity), may have greater relevance to how they think and feel about their relationship. Therefore, the general relational identity may have more salience for unmarried couples, whose relationships are less ostensibly defined and may be of shorter duration, because their couple identities may be perceived as less permanent and less integrated into the self than those of married couples who have created a shared reality and whose relationships are publicly solidified by a legal commitment.

Sex, gender, and the longitudinal evidence

Whereas this study provides evidence supporting the idea that the established sex differences in thinking about relationships are more likely linked to gender-identity, this study also addresses some of the issues underlying the reported sex differences in the link between relational phenomena and relationship satisfaction. Although other studies have demonstrated an association between attending to the relationship and satisfaction with it, this study provides evidence for important moderators of this link. That is, the extent to which individuals view themselves in relational terms, regardless of biological sex, can be an important factor in determining the benefits of thinking positively about the relationship (i.e., relational men have outcomes similar to relational women).

Furthermore, the longitudinal analyses provide evidence that thinking positive thoughts about relationships may have more long-term outcomes for women than for men. When we ran the same analyses (using identity, thinking, and satisfaction variables at time 1 predicting relationship satisfaction 2 years later), the results showed a similar pattern to our Wave 1 predictions for both women and men, but the results for men were somewhat weaker. Furthermore, there were no significant results for men with regard to couple identity and the prediction of Wave 2 satisfaction, whereas, for women, the results with couple identity were similar, but not identical, to the findings from the Wave 1 analyses.

Overall, then, the pattern of results for women was similar to those from Wave 1. There was a positive association between time 1 relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction 2 years later for unmarried women who were high in relational identity, and there was a positive association between time 1 relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction 2 years later for married women who were low in couple identity. Furthermore, these findings suggest that, for women, thinking positive thoughts has long-term effects on relationship satisfaction. Earlier work (Ross & Holmberg, 1992; Scott, Fuhrman, & Wyer, 1991) suggests that women's memories for relationship-oriented phenomena are more detailed and have larger associative networks. It also suggests that men, on the other hand, might store such thoughts into their memories as discrete topics without connecting them to relationship outcomes. Thus, positive relationship thinking for women, being more easily linked with a relationship memory, might hold more implications for a relationship's future for a woman than it would a

man. Concurrently, then, relational and couple identities work in a similar fashion for men and women, providing a good explanation for the oft reported sex differences in relationship cognition. However, the longitudinal effects are not so easily explained, except by the fact that women's relational and couple identities have more salience to their lives in general.

Strengths, limitations, and implications of the study

The sample for this study is an area probability sample from the Detroit metropolitan area and is diverse in terms of socioeconomic background. Thus, generalizability (to married and unmarried couples) is stronger here than in many studies, particularly relative to those investigating college samples of individuals or couples in dating relationships. Further, the data allow us to compare married to unmarried couples in the same sample. Although quite valuable, most relationship studies have examined either unmarried or married couples separately, but rarely both simultaneously. Some studies have compared married with unmarried couples (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Swann et al., 1994), although they have used non-probability samples recruited from more than one source. If married and unmarried couples were recruited in different ways and from different sources, then the differences between them might be attributable to factors other than marital status.

Although the current study highlights complex differences between married and unmarried couples, the data cannot reveal if and how individuals, couples, and relationships change as they make the transition to marriage. Nevertheless, it would be important to discover how a couple identity develops in long-term relationships. As Agnew et al. (1998) have discovered in relationships of relatively short duration, cognitive interdependence and commitment to a relationship are bi-directional, in that each can influence the other over time. We would expect couple identity to function in a similar manner. That is, happy partners will come to see themselves as part of a couple, and seeing themselves as part of a couple promotes continued satisfaction with the relationship.

Such work has implications for couples therapy in that therapeutic interventions that work for married couples (such as the identification and rewarding of isolated positive thoughts and behaviors) may not be sufficient to improve the quality of relationships for unmarried couples. For unmarried partners who want to stay in and be satisfied with their relationships, perhaps the development of a couple identity is crucial. For example, approaching a conflict with the realization that it is 'our' problem to be worked out together rather than as two adversaries pitted against one another may help promote further positive outcomes (Acitelli, 1993; Bernal & Baker, 1979).

More questions remain about sex differences in identities. Although, in general, women are more relational than men, there are men who consider relationships as central to their identities as well (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997). More work is needed to discover how biological sex might interact with the construction of a self-image that is interdependent or independent.

However, it is likely that individuals do not characterize themselves as simply interdependent or independent, but as having varying degrees of each. Cross and Madson (1997b) postulate that interdependent and independent views of the self characterize both men and women in US culture. That is, each person has both aspects of these mental representations of self and they 'may be stored separately from each other and accessed with different frequencies' (Cross & Madson, 1997b, p. 27). Just as Constantinople (1973) demonstrated that the concepts of masculine and feminine are independent constructs, research is needed to determine whether the self as connected or separate are two independent dimensions or are at opposite ends of a unidimensional continuum.

Another implication of the study is that, in addition to including close others in the self (Aron et al., 1991), individuals include a specific relationship in the self (represented by couple identity in this study). We are suggesting that in very close relationships, not only do distinct close others become part of the self, but that the connection between the other and the self, or their relationship, also becomes included as part of the self. Extrapolating from Smith and Henry's (1996) idea of the inclusion of a group as a part of the self, including the relationship as part of the self could explain cooperative patterns of behavior that benefit the relationship. However, including the relationship in the self (or having a couple identity) has different outcomes depending on marital status. Further investigations are recommended to examine the possibility that the salience and content of identities and relationship thinking change as the status of relationships change.

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