

## Marital Quality and Spouses' Marriage Work With Close Friends and Each Other

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### **Abstract:**

Through in-home interviews with 142 married couples, we explored how husbands' and wives' marriage work with close friends and one another was linked to their perceptions of marital quality. Results showed that husbands engaged in more marriage work with their wives than with close friends, whereas wives engaged in similar levels of marriage work with their close friends and husbands. For wives, marriage work with their spouses was found to moderate the relationship between marital quality and marriage work with friends. At low levels of marriage work with their spouses, wives' marriage work with friends was negatively related to their reports of marital love and positively related to reports of ineffective arguing. In contrast, at high levels of marriage work with their husbands, no significant relationship was found between wives' marriage work with friends and marital quality for wives. Findings underscore the role of spouses' friendships and suggest that the strength of spouses' ties to one another is linked to the social context they and their close friends create.

**Keywords:** friendship | marital quality | marriage | marriage work | social context

### **Article:**

Husbands' and wives' close friendships are one aspect of the social context in which their family relationships develop (Milardo & Helms-Erikson, 2000). Although numerous studies have explored links between marital outcomes and the structural patterns of spouses' social networks (e.g., density, network overlap), little attention has been given to the routine processes that occur in spouses' relationships with particular close friends. Both social support and marital relationship researchers have encouraged greater attention to everyday interactions that spouses experience with specific friends (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Huston, 2000). For example, Leatham and Duck (1990) argue that

Attention needs to be paid not only to the obvious heroic instances of transactions of social support, but also to the run-of-the-mill transactions of friendship that provide the backdrop against which social support is delivered in a crisis or circumstances of special need. (pp. 1–2)

In the current study, we explored the links between friendship and marriage by paying particular attention to both husbands' and wives' routine disclosures with their closest friends about their marriage—a process we label *marriage work* based on earlier research by Oliner (1989). More specifically, we examined (a) the extent to which both husbands and wives engaged in marriage work with their close friends and one another, and (b) the associations between spouses' perceptions of marital quality and husbands' and wives' reliance on marriage work with one another and their close friends.

### **Marriage work with friends and marital quality**

Oliner's (1989) conceptualization of marriage work was based, in part, on Hochschild's (1979, 1983) construct of emotion work. Hochschild defined emotion work as deliberate attempts to change or shape emotions or feelings in a given relational context. She proposed that individuals attempt to actively change their emotions or feelings in either degree or quality to comply with socially constructed, internalized *feeling rules* that dictate the appropriateness of an emotion. For example, an individual may perceive that anger is not justified in a given situation and may try not to be angry. In conceptualizing marriage work, Oliner focused on the cognitive techniques Hochschild proposed for managing emotions. Cognitive techniques were defined as attempts to change “images, ideas or thoughts in the service of changing feelings associated with them” (Hochschild, 1979, p. 562). For example, the women in Oliner's study said that talking about marital problems with a close friend changed their attitudes and feelings about the problems, their husbands, or their marriages. Discussions usually included friends validating wives' feelings as well as introducing new perspectives. This process often resulted in modulation of wives' volatile emotions, allowing them to further analyze the marital situation and explore constructive strategies for change in a less emotionally charged environment. Although the women in Oliner's study spoke of the benefits of marriage work with friends, Hochschild was careful to point out that emotion work in its purest sense refers to the attempt to manage feelings and not to the outcome; emotion work may or may not prove ultimately successful.

The extent to which wives perceived marriage work with close friends to be helpful or harmful to perceptions of marital quality was a key theme emerging from Oliner's (1989) in-depth interviews with 17 working- and middle-class wives and three divorced women, all of whom reported that they routinely discussed marital problems with their friends. Oliner used the term *marriage work* to describe women's active involvement in one another's marriages. More specifically, she defined marriage work as “reflection or action to achieve or sustain the stability of a marriage and the sense of its adequacy” (p. 123) through routine disclosures about concerns related to marriage and marital roles. Oliner observed that married women purposefully sought out friends for validation, understanding, and advice concerning their roles as wives and mothers.

In addition, wives reported that they talked extensively about their marital problems and concerns with close friends and that these discussions resulted in reinforced commitment to marriage and improved feelings about their marriages (i.e., greater marital satisfaction). In short, Oliner proposed that marriage work with friends led to changes in wives' emotional states regarding their marriages and their perceptions of marital quality which, in turn, had a stabilizing effect on most marriages.

Lending support to Oliner's (1989) work is the conclusion reached by other qualitative researchers (Harrison, 1998; O'Connor, 1992; Rubin, 1985) that, for some married women, close friendships with women friends may actually strengthen marriage. Several of these studies point to gender differences in husbands' and wives' relationship experiences with close friends, suggesting that husbands' friendships are more likely to be viewed as sources of companionship arising from shared beliefs, interests, and activities, whereas wives are more likely to experience their friendships as sources of emotional support based on reciprocal communication (Rubin; Weiss & Lowenthal, 1975). For example, in Rubin's study—based on in-depth semistructured interviews with 300 professional, middle-, and working-class men and women—most of the married men reported having “augmenting relationships” with nonkin friends. That is, married men tended to turn to their wives for emotional support and intimacy and viewed relationships outside the marriage as opportunities for conversation and companionship, rather than emotional outlet and expression. In contrast, Rubin found that the married women in her study often turned to their friends (rather than their husbands) as sources of emotional support and intimacy. Rather than being a strain on the marriage, Rubin proposed that married women's friendships are an important source of support for the marriage, filling gaps in the marriage and “allowing the wife to appreciate those things the husband can give, rather than to focus on those he can't” (p. 141). It appears that, at least for some women, relationships with close friends outside the marriage may help wives reframe marital problems in more positive terms.

But what about men? Do husbands discuss their marital problems with close friends? The available evidence suggests that men are less likely than women to discuss personal problems, to acknowledge marital dissatisfaction, and to explore emotional issues in their close relationships (Kessler, Brown, & Broman, 1981; Komarovsky, 1967; Rands, 1988; Weiss, 1985). Little attention has been given to the extent to which husbands engage in marriage work with friends, however, and how this process might be linked to their perceptions of marital quality. Although Oliner (1989) did not interview husbands as part of her study of friendship and marriage, she did ask wives to comment on their husbands' friendships. All but one wife perceived that husbands talked about personal issues with friends less frequently than they themselves did, and none felt that their husbands engaged in marriage work with friends.

In their review of the marital satisfaction literature, Bradbury et al. (2000) concluded that to better understand marriage and spouses' perceptions of marital quality, researchers need to pay greater attention to the nature of support that *both* partners obtain outside of the marriage. Although there is little research to date to suggest that marriage work with friends is as salient to

men's relationships as it is to women's, this area of inquiry has been largely unexplored. Results from an observational study of spouses' conversations with their best friends (i.e., 33 husband-friend pairs and 55 wife-friend pairs) about a current marital problem suggest that both husbands and wives may experience changes in their perceptions of marital quality following conversations with close friends (Julien et al., 2000). From pre- and postconversation measures of spouses' perceptions of marital quality, Julien et al. learned that maritally satisfied husbands and wives reported feeling closer to their spouses after discussing a marital problem with their best friends than did maritally dissatisfied spouses; this difference was more pronounced for wives than husbands. Not surprisingly, dissatisfied spouses and their friends expressed fewer positive and more negative views during conversations than did the spouses and friends in the maritally satisfied group. Posthoc analyses showed that content of the conversations (e.g., positive vs. negative content by spouse and friend) did not mediate the links between husbands' and wives' pre- and postconversation marital ratings for satisfied spouses, suggesting that regardless of what was actually said during these conversations, friends of satisfied spouses were influential in helping husbands and wives maintain a sense of marital closeness during times of difficulty.

### **Marriage work with spouse and marital quality**

Although links between spouses' marriage work with one another and their perceptions of marital quality have not been specifically studied, researchers have examined how husbands' and wives' participation in emotion work is related to marital quality. In several of these studies, emotion work was viewed as another form of domestic labor (Erickson, 1993; Stevens, Kiger, & Riley, 2001) and was more broadly defined than Hochschild's (1979) emotional management of feelings. Marital emotion work as domestic labor involves monitoring and managing the emotional life of a marriage (Erickson; Stevens et al.), which implies not only managing one's own feelings and perceptions about the marriage, but also providing emotional support and enhancing the emotional well-being of one's partner. Displays of emotion work in marriage may take the form of dyadic activities such as confiding in one's partner, initiating discussions about concerns, and being sensitive and responsive to one another's emotional states.

Recognizing the *companionate marriage* ideal of the 20th century (Cancian, 1987), researchers have found that emotional support in marriage is positively related to spouses' psychological well-being (Williams, 1988) and subjective ratings of marital quality (Julien & Markman, 1991). Although viewed as essential for marriage, "having someone to talk things over with" was found to be the domain of marriage that both divorced and married spouses perceived to be most problematic in their marriages when compared with other marital domains (e.g., provider/homemaker, leisure companion, sexual partner; Kitson, 1992).

Although wives are more likely than husbands to engage in the emotional management of the marriage (Markman, 1984; Rubin, 1985), husbands' performance of emotion work may be more closely linked to wives' marital quality than husbands' involvement in either child care or

housework (Erickson, 1993). Studying a sample of 205 White women in dual-earner marriages, Erickson found that wives' perceptions of marital quality and marital burnout were most powerfully predicted by wives' reports of husbands' involvement in emotion work. Although husbands' involvement in housework and child care was positively related to wives' reports of marital well-being, when emotion work was included in the model, the significant effects of husbands' performance of housework and child care disappeared. In short, the more wives perceived their husbands to be involved in the emotional life of the marriage, the greater their marital well-being and the less likely they were to report feelings of marital burnout.

### **Marriage work and marital quality: A dyadic approach**

Few studies examine the connections between spouses' friendships in which both husbands and wives in the same families participate. Studying *couples* provides an opportunity to explore on a *dyadic level* what it means for marriage when husbands or wives seek marital support from a close friend rather than, or in addition to, support from their spouse. Implicit in a dyadic conceptualization of relationships is the understanding that what goes on between a spouse and a close friend has implications for the marriage. The reverse is also true: The marital relationship processes that spouses engage in—or fail to engage in—have implications for what each does with, or needs from, their respective close friends (Marks, 1986). To fully understand how relations with close friends may affect a marriage, it is important to consider the routine processes of relating, not only in the partner's relationship with a close friend, but also within the marriage. Applying a dyadic approach (see Crouter & Helms-Erikson, 1997, for a more detailed explanation) to the study of marriage and friendship shifts the focus from simply linking friendship processes and marital quality to a more complex analysis of the relationship dynamics simultaneously occurring in both the friendship and the marriage. In this way, the links between marital quality and the nature of each spouse's close friendship is understood in the context of the marital relationship and vice-versa.

Two studies that included couples in their samples highlight the complexity involved in balancing close relationships. Lee (1988) utilized a large sample of older married persons, but examined husbands and wives separately in all analyses. Results showed marital satisfaction to be highest for those husbands and wives who identified their spouse as confidant, with the effect somewhat stronger for wives than husbands. Spouses who named someone other than their marital partner as the primary person they confided in or discussed problems with reported lower than average levels of marital satisfaction; the lowest levels of marital satisfaction were found for men who confided in nonkin friends and women who confided in kin friends. Similarly, among a sample of couples whose average age was in their late 30s, Julien and Markman (1991) found the extent to which spouses confided in friends about marital problems, to the exclusion of confiding in their spouse, to be associated with marital distress for both husbands and wives. It is difficult, however, to compare garnering marital support from friends versus spouses, as the two constructs of support were operationalized differently in the study. Although conclusions reached

in these studies should be viewed tentatively given their limitations, they illustrate a first step in researchers' attempts to adopt a dyadic approach to the study of marriage and friendship.

### **Marriage work and marital quality as a function of dispositional and structural factors**

Proponents of both ecological and feminist perspectives as well as friendship researchers (Bleiszner & Adams, 1992; Thompson, 1992; Thompson & Walker, 1995) underscore the importance of attending to both structural (e.g., indices of social position such as occupational prestige and education) and individual characteristics (e.g., age, life course stage, psychological disposition) for a better understanding of adults' close relationships. Here we take into account dispositional and contextual factors that are likely to play a role in explaining the ways in which marriage work is linked to marital quality. First, individuals who engage in marriage work in their close relationships may simply have a greater propensity toward expressivity and self-disclosure. Indeed, past studies suggest that expressiveness is significantly related to an interpersonal orientation (i.e., in which one values being loving and helpful) and to marital quality (Feather, 1984; King, 1993; Lamke, Sollie, Durbin, & Fitzpatrick, 1994). In addition, contextual factors such as social class (i.e., as evidenced by spouses' occupations and education) and whether spouses' friends are also kin may be influential (Burger & Milardo, 1995; Lee, 1988; Milardo & Helms-Erikson, 2000; Wellman & Wortley, 1989). Thus in examining the relationship between marriage work and reports of marital quality, we control for dispositional and structural factors that could account for these associations.

### **Research goals and hypotheses**

The first goal of this study was to examine the construct of marriage work from a dyadic perspective by comparing the extent to which both husbands and wives engage in marriage work with their close friends versus with one another. Given results pointing to gender differences in spouses' emotion work, we predicted that wives, more often than husbands, would report engaging in marriage work. In addition, research suggesting gender differences in husbands' and wives' experiences with friends and spouses led us to predict that husbands would engage in more marriage work with their wives than with their friends. In contrast, wives were expected to engage in more marriage work with their friends than with their spouses.

The second goal of the study was to examine the relationship between spouses' perceptions of marital quality and husbands' and wives' marriage work with their close friends. To this end, we proposed that the links between husbands' and wives' marriage work with friends and marital quality can be better understood by considering the extent to which marriage work co-occurs in the marital relationship. Results from earlier studies suggest that confiding in friends is problematic for both husbands' and wives' perceptions of marital quality when spouses do not engage one another in similar discussions (Julien & Markman, 1991; Lee, 1988). Thus, we predicted that talking to one's close friend about marital concerns, to the exclusion of one's spouse, may reduce spouses' motivation to address issues within the marriage by providing an

alternative, and perhaps competing, resource and, in turn, decrease husbands' and wives' emotional attachment to the marriage and marital partner. We did not expect to find gender differences in this pattern, nor did we expect to find links between marriage work with friends and marital quality in situations where husbands and wives were engaging their spouses in marriage work.

Although the factors that sustain the emotional aspects of marriage (e.g., love) are likely to be anchored in how spouses cognitively evaluate their marriage (e.g., evaluations of their ability to solve problems together), Huston argues that focusing on one domain to the exclusion of the other is insufficient and does not adequately capture the total constellation of psychological forces that draw spouses together. To this end, we examined both affective and cognitive evaluations of marital quality (see Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Huston, 2000; Johnson, White, Edwards, & Booth, 1986; and Spanier, 1976, for comments on the use of multidimensional constructs) focusing on spouses' perceptions of marital love (i.e., emotional) and evaluations of how well they manage marital conflict as a couple (i.e., cognitive evaluations).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample was drawn from a short-term longitudinal study of family relations and adolescent development. Participants in the larger study were 194 nondivorced, predominantly White, dual-earner couples with adolescent children participating in the second phase of the study. The couples were recruited via letters sent home to parents of 8th, 9th, and 10th graders in 13 school districts in a northeastern state. The letter to parents described the research effort in general terms and asked parents to return postcards if they were interested in participating. Eligible families included nondivorced, dual-earner couples with a firstborn in the 8th, 9th, or 10th grade at the onset of the study and a secondborn child approximately 1 to 3 years younger. Although it was not possible to calculate the overall participation rate due to school district concerns about confidentiality, the participation rate was 95% for eligible families who expressed an interest in the study. Subsequent comparisons of our sample with U.S. Census data on families from the same geographic areas suggested that the parents in our sample were slightly older and considerably better educated than their dual-earner Census counterparts from the same counties. In part to address this issue, we controlled for parents' education in our models predicting marital quality.

The sample used in the current study included couples in which both husbands and wives reported having a close friend ( $n = 142$ , 73% of the couples participating in the larger study at Year 2). Fifty-two couples were excluded: (a) for nine couples, both husbands and wives reported having no close friend; (b) for 40 couples, wives reported having a close friend but husbands did not; and (c) for three couples, husbands reported having a close friend but wives did not. There were no significant differences on any background variables (i.e., spouses'

education, income, occupational prestige, or work hours) or family characteristics (i.e., family size, length of marriage, and spouses' ages) between the excluded couples and those in the sample studied here (results are available from the author). Wives were 41 and husbands were 43 years of age, on average, and had been married an average of 19 years. Reflecting the demographic characteristics of the region, participants were predominantly White (98%) and from working- and middle-class backgrounds. Families resided in small cities (20%), towns (32%), and rural areas (48%). Finally, slightly more than half of the families (57%) had two children, 32% had three children, and the remainder of the families reported that they had four or more children.

Friends' characteristics, as reported by spouses, were similar to those of participants. The majority of husbands and wives had close friends of the same sex (96% for wives and 97% for husbands). Friends were 42 and 43 years of age on average for wives' and husbands' friends, respectively. The majority of spouses' close friends were married (78% for wives' friends and 82% for husbands' friends) and had one or more children (88.5% for wives' friends and 81% for husbands' friends). Approximately 40% of both husbands' and wives' close friends had earned bachelor's degrees, and most friends were employed for pay (81% of wives' and 91% of husbands' friends). Both husbands and wives had long-lasting relationships with their close friends, with wives' friendships averaging 18 years and husbands' friendships 20 years. The majority of husbands and wives were not related to their close friends (79% for wives and 80% for husbands).

## **Procedure**

Data collection involved a home visit that lasted from 2 to 3 hours. During the home interview, spouses were separated to complete measures on marriage, relationships with close friends, personal qualities, psychosocial adjustment, and work experiences; they were also interviewed separately about their background, family, and friend characteristics (Table 1).

**[Table 1 Omitted]**

## **Measures**

### **Marriage work with spouse and friend**

The degree to which husbands and wives engaged in marriage work in their close relationships was assessed with two parallel, 10-item measures designed for the current study (see Appendix) and adapted from an inventory of marital satisfaction (see Huston et al., 1986). Because we were interested in tapping the extent to which spouses engaged in marriage *work*, rather than simply the extent to which they *talked* about their marriages in general terms, husbands and wives were given the following instructions before completing the scale:



Spouses vary in how much they talk to their [spouse/close friends] about concerns they have about their marriage or family. Please circle the number that best describes how often you bring up a concern and talk it through with your [spouse/friend], when problems or concerns arise in the following areas of your marriage. If you have had no problems or concerns in a particular area in the past year, simply leave the item blank.

Both measures of marriage work used a 9-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 9 (*always*), and husbands and wives were asked to think about the past year when responding.

Marriage work with friend and marriage work with spouse ratings were presented in separate sections of the home interview. The order was not counterbalanced because previous work with similar samples revealed no effects for order of presentation (McHale, Crouter, & Bartko, 1992).

Given the expectation that the marriage work items tapped a unidimensional construct, confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to assess the goodness-of-fit of a one-factor model for the two measures of marriage work (i.e., marriage work with friend and marriage work with spouse). The single-factor models resulted in acceptable levels of fit for both the marriage work with spouse scores and the marriage work with friend scores (goodness of fit index, adjusted goodness of fit index, and comparative fit index  $> .90$ ; root mean square error of approximation  $< .08$  for both models) when error terms were allowed to correlate in three instances where marriage work items were substantively and statistically related (i.e., Items 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6). Factor loadings for the two models ranged from .45 to .81. In sum, whether spouses were referring to marriage work with marital partners or friends, the marriage work scale conformed to a one-factor structure. Consequently, composite marriage work scores were derived for husbands and wives by summing the 10 marriage work items.

- **Marital quality**

In order to tap both affective and cognitive domains of marital quality, two different constructs of marital quality were assessed: marital love and ineffective arguing. Although couples' ability to effectively resolve differences has been linked to relationship maintenance and stability and is likely to influence spouses' feelings of emotional connection, marital scholars view evaluations of conflict management styles as conceptually distinct from affective evaluations of the marriage (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Huston, 2000). In addition to being conceptually distinct, the two constructs of marital quality we chose to examine differ in that the measure of marital love captures spouses' *individual* perceptions of how much they feel emotionally connected to their partner, whereas the measure of ineffective arguing focuses on spouses' evaluations of their ability to manage disagreements as a *couple*.

- **Love**

The extent to which husbands and wives reported feeling emotionally connected to their spouses was assessed with the marital love subscale from Braiker and Kelley's (1979) Relationship

Questionnaire, a measure in which respondents indicate their feelings regarding various dimensions of their marriage on a 9-point scale. Nine items tapped spouses' perceptions of marital love (e.g., “To what extent do you love your partner at this stage?”; “How close do you feel to your partner?”). Higher scores indicated greater levels of love.

- **Ineffective arguing**

Husbands' and wives' evaluations of their ability to manage conflicts with their partner were assessed with Kurdek's (1994) 8-item Ineffective Arguing Inventory. The eight items of the Ineffective Arguing Inventory (e.g., “By the end of the argument, each of us has been given a fair hearing”; “We go for days without settling our differences”) tapped spouses' perceptions of how well they and their partner handled conflict as a couple. Spouses responded using a 5-point scale (i.e., *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*), with higher scores indicating greater ineffective arguing.

### **Friendships**

During the home interview, husbands and wives were asked to think about their current friendships and to name a friend “you are closest to who is not a member of your immediate family—that is, not your spouse or one of your children.” Spouses' choices were not restricted in any other way. Spouses then responded to a series of background questions about their friend.

### **Structural and dispositional factors**

#### **Spouses' expressivity**

The femininity subscale of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) was used to assess the extent to which husbands' and wives' personalities were characterized by stereotypically feminine traits (e.g., affectionate, understanding, soothing). Respondents indicated how well each of 20 adjectives described their personality by using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*never or almost never true*) to 7 (*always or almost always true*). Higher scores indicated higher levels of expressivity.

#### **Education**

Spouses were asked to indicate the number of years of education they had completed and what degrees they had earned. Education was coded in years of schooling.

#### **Occupational prestige**

Spouses' occupational prestige was classified according to the National Opinion Research Council (NORC) coding system (Nakao & Treas, 1994). Ratings of spouses' primary occupations ranged from 20.05 (*housekeeper*) to 86.05 (*physician*), with average job prestige scores of 50.86 and 47.35 for wives and husbands, respectively. Positions classified in the middle

range included sales representatives; skilled laborers (e.g., carpenters, electricians, plumbers); secretaries; and office supervisors.

### **Kin status of friend**

Spouses indicated whether they were related to their friend and, if so, what relation.

### **Results**

To address the first research question we examined mean level comparisons of partners' marriage work with friend versus spouse. Next, we present results relevant to the second research question focused on how marriage work is linked to husbands' and wives' perceptions of marital quality.

#### **Mean differences in marriage work with friend and spouse**

To examine mean level differences in spouses' marriage work with friends and spouses, a 2 (spouse)  $\times$  2 (relationship) mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, with relationship as the within-groups factor and marriage work with friend and marriage work with spouse as dependent variables. Repeated measures analysis of variance is often used by researchers analyzing dyadic data (for examples of this approach, see Crouter & Manke, 1997; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986) because dyad membership can be treated as a repeated measure, thus accounting for the nonindependence of the data (Bray, Maxwell, & Cole, 1995; Maguire, 1999). Missing data resulted from spouses leaving items blank when they had experienced no marital concerns in a given domain in the past year and yielded a sample of 134 couples for these analyses. A significant spouse effect showed that wives engaged in more marriage work overall than did husbands,  $F(1, 134) = 19.86, p < .001$  ( $M = 45.69$  and  $40.21$  for wives and husbands, respectively). In addition, husbands and wives engaged in more marriage work with each other than with their close friends as indicated by a significant relationship effect,  $F(1, 134) = 3.77, p < .05$  ( $M = 43.82$  and  $42.08$  for marriage and friendship, respectively). These findings, however, were qualified by a significant spouse  $\times$  relationship interaction,  $F(1, 134) = 12.83, p < .001$ , indicating a gender difference in the extent to which husbands and wives talked to friends versus spouses about marital concerns. Husbands talked significantly more to their wives about marital concerns than to their friends. In contrast, wives engaged in marriage work slightly more with their friends than with their spouses.

#### **Links between marriage work and marital quality**

The second goal of the study was to examine the links between spouses' marriage work (both with friends and one another) and their reports of marital quality. Specifically, we hypothesized that marriage work with spouse would moderate the relationship between marriage work with friend and marital quality. In a series of hierarchical regression analyses, the interaction between spouses' marriage work with friend and spouses' marriage work with spouse was examined to see if it accounted for variance in husbands' and wives' perceptions of marital quality (i.e., marital

love, ineffective arguing) beyond that explained by a set of control variables (i.e., spouses' education, occupational prestige, expressivity, and the kin status of the close friend) and the main effects of spouses' marriage work. In all analyses, continuous variables were centered when interaction terms were created to reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990). Significant interactions were interpreted based on guidelines provided by Aiken and West. The regression analyses were conducted separately for husbands' and wives' marriage work. Both husbands' and wives' reports of marital quality were treated as dependent variables for each series of regressions.

### **Links between wives' marriage work and spouses' perceptions of marital quality**

As can be seen in the Marital Love columns of Table 2, the wives' marriage work with spouse  $\times$  marriage work with friend interaction was significantly linked to wives' perceptions of marital love (but not to that of their husbands') beyond that explained by the control variables (Step 1) and the main effects of marriage work (Step 2). Wives' expressivity was linked to their own reports of marital love but was not linked to husbands' perceptions of marital love. Instead, husbands' marital love was predicted by their own expressivity. For wives at low levels of marriage work with their spouse, marriage work with friend was negatively related to wives' reports of marital love. In contrast, no significant relationship was found between wives' marriage work with friend and marital love for wives at high levels of marriage work with their husbands. A similar pattern of findings emerged for Ineffective Arguing. For wives at low levels of marriage work with their spouse, marriage work with friend was positively related to wives' reports of ineffective arguing. For wives at high levels of marriage work with their husbands, no significant relationship was found between wives' marriage work with friend and their reports of ineffective arguing.

[Table 2 Omitted]

### **Links between husbands' marriage work and spouses' perceptions of marital quality**

In contrast to the findings for wives' marriage work, the interaction between husbands' marriage work with spouse and marriage work with friends was related neither to partner's perceptions of marital love nor to ineffective arguing (see Table 3). Instead, the most consistent pattern to emerge was the link between husbands' expressivity and their own reports of marital love and ineffective arguing and their wives' reports of ineffective arguing.

[Table 3 Omitted]

## **Discussion**

### **Husband-wife differences in levels of marriage work**

The first goal of the study was to examine the construct of marriage work from a dyadic perspective by describing and comparing the extent to which wives and their husbands engaged

in marriage work with their close friends versus one another. Results suggested that both husbands and wives engage in marriage work with both their spouses and their close friends. As hypothesized, wives were likely to engage in somewhat more marriage work with their friends than with their spouses. Also in support of our hypotheses, we found that husbands engaged in less marriage work overall than did wives, and that they spoke more to their wives than to their close friends about marital concerns. These findings supported not only our hypotheses but also past research, suggesting that husbands seek emotional support from wives, whereas wives look to both husbands and friends as confidants (Rubin, 1985; Weiss & Lowenthal, 1975). It should be noted, however, that husbands in our sample did bring up marital concerns with their close friends, albeit to a lesser degree than their wives.

The gender differences found here might have been more pronounced had we further explored the nuances of marriage work as a process. That is, the way marital concerns are brought up and discussed may vary considerably by gender and by the relationship (i.e., marriage or friendship). Husbands' and wives' marriage work with friends is likely to be experienced differently, given the results of previous research suggesting that women's friendships tend to emphasize *face to face* interactions and disclosures, whereas men's friendships are characterized by *side by side* experiences (Wright, 1982). For example, wives may have lengthy, detailed discussions about marital concerns, whereas husbands may bring up marital concerns to a close friend in passing or while engaged in other activities. In addition, marriage work may be experienced differently by husbands and wives based on whether they are discussing concerns with one another or with their close friend. The way marriage work was defined here reveals little about the process that husbands and wives engaged in when bringing up marital concerns and "talking them through" with spouses and close friends.

### **Marriage work and marital quality**

The second goal of this study was to examine the relationship between spouses' perceptions of marital quality and husbands' and wives' reliance on one another and their close friends as sources of marital support. Here, we hypothesized that marriage work with spouse would moderate the links between marriage work with one's close friend and marital quality. Results supported this hypothesis for wives only. For wives who engaged in low levels of marriage work with their husbands, the more they talked to their friends about marital concerns, the less marital love and the more ineffective arguing they perceived in the marriage. For wives who often brought up marital concerns to their husbands, the extent to which they talked to their friends about marital concerns was unrelated to their perceptions of the marriage. In discussing these findings, we focus on three issues: (a) the role of spouses' expressivity, (b) the differential pattern of results for husbands and wives, and (c) the utility of a dyadic approach for understanding the links between friendship and marriage.

### **Expressivity**

The significant links between marriage work and marital quality found in this study emerged beyond the variance explained by the set of control variables that included both spouses' education levels, occupational prestige, self-reports of expressivity, and the kin status of the target spouse's close friend. Indicators of spouses' social class and the kin status of the friend were not consistently linked with marital quality. Spouses' self-reports of expressivity, however, were consistently linked with their own perceptions of marital quality. Although at first glance it may appear that spouses' own perceptions of marital quality may depend, in part, on the degree to which they display expressive traits (e.g., nurturance, caring, being affectionate, sympathetic, gentle, kind), other factors may play a role. The links between spouses' self-report of expressivity and marital quality may reflect shared method variance; self-reports of expressivity were linked with self-reports of marital quality. Results might have been different if husbands' and wives' perceptions of their spouses' expressivity had been substituted for self-reports, or if we had used observational data on marital quality, rather than spouses' self-reports. Another possible methodological explanation for the significant links between spouses' expressivity and their own reports of marital quality is that those spouses who view themselves as warm, likable, nurturing, affectionate, and so on (i.e., items of the expressivity measure) may also be more likely to view their marriages in a more positive manner than spouses who score low on expressivity. In this scenario, the link between expressivity and marital quality is explained by a third factor not measured in this study—that is, the tendency to view one's self and one's relationships in a positive, optimistic manner.

### **Differential patterns by spouse**

The hypothesis that marriage work with spouse would moderate the relationship between marriage work with friend and marital quality was upheld for wives only. Although tests for gender differences were not performed, a divergent pattern of findings for husbands and wives clearly emerged. The pattern of findings cannot be explained by differences in spouses' marital quality scores, as there was a similar amount of variance to explain in the two partners' scores. The consistent results linking marriage work to marital quality for wives may be explained, in part, by gender differences in spouses' marriage work scores. Wives initiated more conversations about marital concerns than husbands in both their close friendships and their marriages, suggesting that marriage work is less salient to husbands' marital well-being than it is to wives'.

### **Utility of a dyadic approach**

Based on her pioneering work, Oliner (1989) proposed that wives' marriage work with friends was directly linked to marital quality. In this study, we extended Oliner's work by adopting a dyadic approach and testing a more complex model of marriage and friendship relationship dynamics. That is, the links between marital quality and spouses' marriage work with friends were understood in the context of the extent to which husbands and wives engaged in similar processes with each other. Findings suggest that marital quality (both cognitive and affective evaluations of marriage) may be compromised when spouses, particularly wives, discuss marital

concerns with their close friends but fail to do the same in the marriage. Alternatively, wives who discuss marital concerns with their friends, rather than with their marital partners, may be experiencing a different level of marital distress than those who bring up marital concerns both in the marriage and with their close friend. In the former situation, wives may have found marriage work within marriage futile, turning instead to their friends as alternative sources of support. Regardless of the causal explanation, future work should examine processes that co-occur across multiple relationships, rather than the effects of each relationship in isolation. The cross-sectional nature of this study makes it impossible to tease apart whether these patterns of interactions lead to declines in marital quality or if patterns develop in response to negative marital experiences and evaluations. What appears to be important for marital quality is not how much one discusses marital concerns with a close friend, but the marital context in which such discussions with friends occur.

### **Directions for future research**

Although this study did sample both members of the marital dyad, it did not include data from spouses' friends. Learning more about how husbands' and wives' close friends view the marriage and the spouse may provide new insights regarding the links between spouses' marriage work with their close friends and their marital quality. The possible costs of involvement with close friends for marriage should also be considered (see Blieszner, 1994; Bleiszner & Adams, 1992; La Gaipa, 1990; Pagel, Erdly, & Becker, 1987).

One of the strengths of this study was that we examined the marital and friendship experiences of couples who were at similar points in the life course with similar demands on their time (i.e., dual-earners with adolescent children). Our sample, however, has several drawbacks. First, friendship and marriage are dynamic relationships that change and develop over time. Our study offered only a snapshot of the dynamic nature of partners' relations with friends and how they may interact with a changing marriage. Second, the links between relationships with friends and marriage were examined for opposite-sex married partners only. It is unclear whether gay, lesbian, and cohabiting partners experience their relationships with friends in ways similar to husbands and wives. The links between romantic partnership and friendship may differ for cohabiting lesbian couples in particular, who may be more likely to experience their partnership as the companionate ideal (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998) and who also tend to share more friends in common than heterosexual couples (Julien, Chartrand, & Begin, 1999). A final consideration is the ethnicity of the couples in this study. Reflecting the demographics of the region from which the sample was drawn, husbands and wives who participated in the study were predominantly White. Social network researchers have found that kin often predominate Latino and African American spouses' nonmarital close relationships (Milardo, 1992; Moore, 1990; Stein, Bush, Ross, & Ward, 1992). In contrast, the close friends of the husbands and wives in the current study were predominantly nonkin. In addition to differences in the kin status of close friends, norms concerning friends' involvement in spouses' marriages and their families may vary across ethnic groups.

## **Conclusion**

The study of friendship and marriage is new and emerging. As Huston (2000) stated,

Usually ... researchers focusing on the dynamics of marital interaction study couples as two-person units, as if they rarely spent time together as part of a social group. ... The centrality of spouses in each other's day-to-day lives, as well as their joint and independent involvement with friends and kin, reveal much about the nature of the spouses' marital relationship. (pp. 300–301)

The research presented here builds on past work, underscores the importance of the social context of marriage, and suggests new avenues for understanding fundamental relationship processes that occur in spouses' friendships and their marriage. By adopting a dyadic approach, one in which both spouses' relationship with each other and their relationship with their closest friends are considered, the current study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the connections between marriage and friendship than has been previously explored. Here we learn that close friends can be important sources of marriage work for spouses. In addition, the extent to which spouses' marriage work with friends is linked to marital quality is dependent upon the extent to which they engage their spouse in similar discussions, particularly for women. This work is a first step; there remains much to be learned about how the strengths of spouses' ties to one another is linked to the social context they and their close friends create.

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