Wives' Domain-Specific "Marriage Work" with Friends and Spouses: Links to Marital Quality

By: Christine M. Proulx, Heather M. Helms, C. Chris Payne

Made available courtesy of Wiley-Blackwell:
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.0197-6664.2004.00046.x/abstract

Abstract:

This study examined the friendship experiences of 52 wives and mothers, with particular attention given to wives' marriage work (discussions about concerns and problems in the marriage) in 10 domains with friends and spouses. A series of within-subjects repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) indicated that in all but two domains, wives were equally likely to talk to their spouses and their close friends about marital concerns. A series of hierarchical regression analyses tested whether women's marriage work with their spouses moderated the link between marriage work with friends and reports of marital quality. Support for moderation was found for reports of conflict or negativity and satisfaction. Implications for family practitioners and programming are discussed.

Keywords: communication | friendship | marital quality | marriage

Article:

Studies addressing wives' close relationships with friends and spouses suggest that women's friendships are intricately linked with the spousal relationship (e.g., Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003; Oliker, 1989). Whereas men are likely to describe their friendships as activity based (Rubin, 1985), women are likely to emphasize discussion or shared intimacies (Fehr, 1996; Rubin). In such discussions, women are more likely than men to self-disclose (Johnson & Aries, 1983; Tschann, 1988) on a wide range of topics, from their children to their intimate relationships with others, and from work-related concerns to concerns about their marriage (Fehr; Harrison, 1998; O'Connor, 1992; Oliker).

Unlike husbands, who tend to self-disclose more with spouses than with friends (Rands, 1988; Rubin, 1985; Weiss, 1985), results from both qualitative and quantitative studies (Helms

et al., 2003; Oliker, 1989; Rubin) suggest that wives are more likely than husbands to engage their close friends in conversations about marital concerns and to seek out friends more than spouses for emotional support. In her qualitative work, Oliker labeled these types of discussions with close friends "marriage work"(p. 45). Engaging in marriage work with friends about marital problems appears to be beneficial for women in that maritally satisfied wives feel better about their spouses and marriages after such discussions (Julien et al., 2000). Recent work (Helms et al.) suggests that what matters most for wives' marital quality is the extent to which discussions about marital concerns co-occur in the friendship and the marriage. More specifically, wives' marriage work with close friends is beneficial for marriage only to the extent that wives also engage their husbands in similar discussions.

Here we pay particular attention to the types of marital issues that wives discuss with friends, focusing specifically on marital domains that typically are addressed in marital communication and education programs (i.e., marital communication, husbands' support for wives' employment, childrearing philosophies, husbands' support for wives' parenting, family decision making, social life and leisure, division of housework, division of child care, parent or in-law contact, and finances (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2002). More specifically, we conducted a partial replication and extension of previous work (Helms et al., 2003; Helms-Erikson, 2000) that examined the links between marital quality and wives' global routine disclosures about marital concerns to friends and spouses. Using a different sample of wives, we examined how wives' discussions with their spouses and close friends are differentially related to marital satisfaction and conflict across 10 distinct domains of marriage. We focused exclusively on wives, because past work suggests that women are more likely than men to discuss their marriages with friends (e.g., Oliker, 1989; Rubin, 1985), and talking with friends about marital concerns has been linked with marital quality primarily for wives (Helms et al.; Julien et al., 2000).

Marriage and Close Friendship

The potential significance of wives' friendships for marriage was underscored by Huston (2000) in his review of the marital literature. Huston argued that scholarship focused on marital interaction to the exclusion of spouses' joint and individual social involvements is myopic.

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 the 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)

Similarly, marriage and family therapists point to the importance of the social context of marriage, as evidenced in a special feature edition of *The Family Therapy Networker* (Sandmaier, 1995). In this edition, focusing on spouses' friendships over the life course, Sandmaier charged family therapists to acknowledge the often important role that close friends

play in spouses' lives and further suggested creative ways to integrate spouses' friends into the process of marital and family therapy.

The recent suggestions offered by scholars and practitioners to recognize the importance of friendships makes implicit the need to consider the social context of marriage when planning and implementing marital programs. Despite this emphasis, programs for married or engaged couples largely ignore the close relationships that women have outside marriage. Within the context of promarriage legislation, recent attention has focused on the implementation of empirically based premarital and marital programs as a form of divorce prevention (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2002; Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Although such programs often emphasize marital conflict resolution, few recognize the role that friends (particularly wives' friends) play. Programs that do address spouses' friendships outside the marriage only address levels of friends' support for the marriage (e.g., PREPARE; Olson & Olson, 1999) or discourage spouses from discussing the marriage with outsiders such as friends (Stahmann, 2000).

With a focus on women, their everyday lives, and gendered relations, contemporary feminist scholars have led the field in addressing the processes that women routinely engage in with close friends, and how these processes are linked with marriage. Although some feminist scholars suggest that friendships simply tie women down to patriarchal norms by reinforcing commitment to sex-segregated gender behavior in marriage (e.g., O'Connor, 1992, 1998), others maintain that this is not the case (Harrison, 1998). In her qualitative study of 22 middle- and upper-class White women, Harrison discovered that female friends provide a support base for wives to confront their husbands on important issues such as wives' entitlement to time with friends. Although Harrison did not detail the specific marital concerns that wives discussed with their friends, she reported that women spoke at length with their female friends about marital concerns and complaints in an environment they viewed as nonjudgmental. Although O'Connor (1998) interpreted similar exchanges as "simply a kind of shared victimization"(p. 122), Harrison argued that these conversations served the purpose of exploring and challenging social norms and positions. As such, we draw heavily from feminist scholarship on women's friendships and argue that through further understanding of wives' routine interactions with friends, much can be learned about the importance of friends for marriage.

Wives' Marriage Work and Marital Quality

Oliker's (1989) qualitative work focused on a specific type of conversation in which women engage with close friends—something she labeled "marriage work"(p. 45). Oliker used marriage work to describe women's active involvement in one another's marriages. 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. 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 her in-depth interviews with 17 working- and middle-class wives and 3 divorced women, all of whom reported that they

routinely discussed marital problems with their friends. Although Oliker did not conduct a detailed examination of the specific content areas of marriage work, she found that, in general, wives' marriage work with friends resulted in reinforced commitment to the marriage and improved feelings about their marriages (i.e., greater marital satisfaction). In short, Oliker concluded 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 their marriages.

Results from other qualitative studies lend support to Oliker's (1989) findings. In her qualitative study of 300 working- and middle-class men and women, Rubin (1985) found gender differences in the links between spouses' friendships and marriages. Men were more likely to turn to their wives for emotional support and intimacy rather than their friends. Similar to the women in Oliker's study, the women in Rubin's study turned more to their friends than their husbands for emotional expression and support. These women insisted that friendship did not cause strain in their marriages, but that their marriages continued to exist in part because of the support they received from their friends: "Woman after woman told of the ways in which friends fill the gaps the marriage relationship leaves, allowing the wife to appreciate those things the husband can give rather than those he can't"(p. 141). Her findings suggest that women's relationships with close friends facilitate an acceptance of the limits of marriage and offer a source of emotional support and intimacy outside marriage.

Lending support to these qualitative findings are the results of a recent study on spouses' disclosure of marital conflict to a close friend (Julien et al., 2000). Participants were predominantly White and middle-class, and included 55 female best-friend pairs. Participants varied on marital satisfaction, creating relatively equal groups of satisfied and unsatisfied wives. Through laboratory observations, Julien et al. assessed the nature of wives' disclosures about marital conflict to their best friends, and friends' responses during these conversations. Both maritally satisfied and unsatisfied wives expressed concerns and negative affect about some aspect of their spouses or marriages during their conversations with their friends, and friends listened without interference and often reframed the complaint in positive terms. However, maritally satisfied and unsatisfied wives differed in the feelings that they reported after such conversations. Satisfied wives reported feeling closer to their husbands, whereas unsatisfied wives reported no change in feelings. These results suggest that friends were influential in helping maritally satisfied wives maintain a sense of a good marriage in times of marital conflict.

Noting Julien et al.'s (2000) laboratory observational design as a methodological strength, the study was limited in that the observed discussions with friends were restricted to a predetermined topic selected by the spouse and the researcher. Although all spouses reported having discussed marital concerns with friends prior to their laboratory sessions, the authors did not examine the range of topics that spouses routinely discussed with friends and spouses or their links with marital quality.

Links between Wives' Marital Quality and the Extent of Marriage Work with Spouse Versus Friend

Recommendations to keep discussions about marital concerns within the marriage imply that engaging in marriage work with friends can be potentially problematic for marital quality. As summarized here, past research documents that marriage work with friends is something that many wives engage in on a routine basis and find helpful. In an attempt to reconcile the incongruity between beliefs about appropriate disclosure and women's lived experience, recent research suggests that the extent to which wives engage in similar discussions with their husbands is an important moderating variable in the link between marriage work with friends and marital quality.

What appears to be problematic for marriage is a pattern of engaging in marriage work with friends to the exclusion of the spouse. Although marriage work per se was not addressed in the study, Lee (1988) found that marital satisfaction was highest for those husbands and wives who identified their spouses as a confidant, with the effect somewhat stronger for wives than for husbands. A spouse who named someone other than his or her spouse as the primary person he or she confided in or discussed problems with reported lower than average levels of marital satisfaction; the lowest levels of marital satisfaction were found for women who confided in kin friends. More recently, Julien and Markman (1991) found that the extent to which spouses confided in friends about marital problems to the exclusion of confiding in their spouses to be associated with marital distress. However, it is difficult to make clear comparisons in this study between garnering marital support from friends versus spouses because the two constructs of support were operationalized differently.

In the only study to date to examine the links between marital quality and spouses' marriage work with one another and with their close friends, Helms et al. (2003; Helms-Erikson, 2000) proposed a model in which the links between marriage work with a close friend and marital qualities were moderated by marriage work done with a spouse. Results showed that for women who engage in low levels of marriage work with their husbands, marriage work with friends is negatively related to wives' reports of marital love and satisfaction, and positively related to their reports of ineffective arguing and conflict or negativity; no significant relationship was found between wives' marriage work with friends and these marital qualities for wives who engage in high levels of marriage work with their husbands. In short, marriage work with spouse moderated the link between marriage work with friend and marital quality. For wives who engaged in low levels of marriage work with their husbands, the more they talked with their friends about marital concerns, the less marital love and satisfaction and the more ineffective conflict management and conflict or negativity they perceived in the marriage. For wives who often brought up marital concerns to their husbands, the extent to which they talked with their friends about marital concerns was unrelated to their perceptions of the marriage. Thus, although this work supports the hypothesis that the links between wives' marriage work with friends and marital quality are moderated by marriage work with their spouses, this study (as well as earlier

work) did not address the specific areas of marriage that were being discussed and how they may be differentially related to marital quality.

The Present Study

Given the lack of attention to the specific content areas of the marriage that wives address as they engage in marriage work, we examined 10 domains of marriage and their links with marital quality. We argue that a domain-specific approach to the study of the link between marital quality and wives' marriage work with spouse and friend is warranted in that some marital domains are more closely linked than others to marital conflict (e.g., finances), marital satisfaction (e.g., power), and marital negativity (e.g., inequities in division of labor; see Fincham & Beach, 1999 for a review). In addition, a focus on the specific topics of marital concern also highlights the complexities of the everyday lived experience of women, who often juggle many roles that intersect with marriage, such as parent, employee, maintainer of the home, and daughter-in-law. Finally, a domain-specific approach is particularly relevant for practitioners who implement and design topically based marital programs and work directly with spouses who are addressing particular areas of concern in their marriages.

Research Goals and Hypotheses

Our first goal was to assess and compare the extent to which women engage in marriage work with their close friends versus their spouses across 10 domains of marriage: marital communication, husbands' support for wives' work roles, childrearing philosophies, husbands' support for wives' parenting, family decision making, social life and leisure, division of housework, division of child care, parent or in-law contact, and finances. Based on previous work (Helms et al., 2003; Oliker, 1989; Rubin, 1985), we predicted that women would engage in marriage work more with their friends than their spouses, with one exception in the domain of family finances. Because conflicts about financial concerns often are cited as an emotionally charged, primary source of marital controversy for couples (Benjamin & Irving, 2001; Storaasli & Markman, 1990), we hypothesized that wives would be less inclined to discuss financial issues with friends and more likely to keep such discussions within the marital dyad.

Our second goal was to examine the relationship between wives' perceptions of marital quality and their reliance on their spouses and close friends as sources of marriage work in each of the 10 marital domains. Here, we extended the work of Helms et al. (2003) by exploring the extent to which marriage work co-occurs with friends and spouses in specific content areas of marriage. Based on findings suggesting that confiding in friends may be problematic for marriage when wives do not engage spouses in similar discussions (Helms et al.; Julien & Markman, 1991; Lee, 1988), we predicted that talking with one's close friend about specific marital concerns to a greater extent than one's husband will be negatively related to marital quality. More specifically, we predicted that this will hold for those domains of marriage that are consistently linked with marital conflict, satisfaction, and instability, such as division of household chores, support for

wives' work roles, family decision making, and family finances (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Given that these areas may be the most salient for marital quality, the associations between marriage work with friend and spouse in these domains is important to consider.

Further, based on recommendations of Blieszner and Adams (1992), we took 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. For example, structural factors, such as social class and the kin status of spouses' friends, may influence the extent to which wives express their marital concerns and their reports of marital quality (Burger & Milardo, 1995; Lee, 1988; South & Spitze, 1986). In addition, dispositional factors like depression influence and are influenced by the extent to which wives communicate intimate feelings with others and their reports of marital quality (Beach, 1996), whether they have a close friend (Helms-Erikson, 2000), and their ability to garner social support from others (Cutrona, 1996). Thus, in examining how wives' marriage work with their husbands and their close friends is linked with multidimensional reports of marital quality, we controlled for dispositional and structural factors that may account for the relationship.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Data for the study were collected as part of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care. A detailed description of the study can be found in NICHD ECCRN (1994). Participants included 52 wives involved in Phase III of this longitudinal study from one of the 10 data collection sites. Mothers were initially recruited from hospitals in a rural town in a southern state during selected 24-hour sampling periods in 1991. A subset of this group ($N = 137$) was then selected in accordance with a conditional random sampling plan designed to ensure that the recruited families: (a) included relatively equal groups of mothers who planned to work or attend school full time, part time, or stay home with the child in the first year; and (b) reflected the demographic (economic, educational, ethnic) diversity of the data collection site. At Phase III, 92 participating mothers completed mother-child site visits as part of the larger study. Fifty-two women completed a series of measures pertaining to marriage and close friendship that were appended to a packet of measures (more specifically focused on the child) as part of the larger study. Forty women were excluded from the sample used here, because 22 had already completed their mother-child site visits when data collection for the current study began, and 18 were unpartnered at the time of the interview. A series of chi-square tests revealed one difference between participants and those excluded: More women in the sample were not employed (25%) as compared with the nonparticipant group (15%), $\chi^2(2, N = 92) = 11.94, p < .01$.

Because this study was, in part, a replication of previous work, we conducted a series of analyses to determine background differences between this sample and the one used by Helms et al. (2003) that might account for potentially different patterns of findings across the two studies.

Results showed no differences between the two samples for depression, work hours, income, or education. The only difference found was age of the eldest child, $F(1, 192) = 159.07$, $p < .0001$, with the eldest child in this study being younger ($M = 11.5$, $SD = 3.05$) than in Helms et al. ($M = 14.96$, $SD = .72$). To address this issue, we controlled for the age of the eldest child in our analyses.

As seen in Table 1, the majority of participants were White and had completed high school, with about half having completed some college or beyond. All of the women had a 9-year-old child (the target child in the original study) and a mean of 2.3 children ($SD = .89$). All of the women reported having a close friend, with the majority of wives' friends (90%) being of the same sex and not kin (88%). Like the women sampled, the majority of their close friends were married (84%) and had one or more child(ren)(90%), with the mean age of the oldest child being 13.27 ($SD = 6.75$).

[Table 1 Omitted]

Measures

Friendships.   Wives were asked to think about their current friendships and to name a friend (if they had one) whom "you are closest to who is not a member of your immediate family—that is, not your spouse or one of your children." Wives' choices were not restricted in any other way. Each wife then responded to a series of background questions about her friend.

Domain-specific marriage work with spouse and friend.   The degree to which wives engaged in marriage work in their close relationships across different domains of marriage was assessed with 10 items from a measure of marriage work designed by Helms et al. (2003). Participants completed two parallel sets of items, with a referent of spouse for marital assessments and friend for friendship assessments of marriage work. The 10 items (communication, support for work role, childrearing philosophies, support for parent role, social life and leisure, division of household tasks, family finances, relations with in-laws, childrearing concerns, and marital decision making) reflect the same domains addressed in marital education and enrichment programs and included such items as "Communication: How often do you bring up how well you and your spouse talk over important and unimportant issues?"(A complete listing of the items can be obtained from the first author.)

Because the items were designed to tap the extent to which spouses engaged in marriage work in these areas rather than simply the extent to which they talked about their marriages in general terms, the following instructions were given:

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.

Using a 9-point rating scale ranging from *never*(1) to *very often*(9), wives indicated how often they had brought up marital concerns and talked about them with their spouse or close friend when problems arose in each of 10 relationship domains in the past year.

In this replication of Helms-Erikson (2000), we focused on two of the four dimensions (marital love, conflict, satisfaction, and ineffective arguing) of marital quality measured in her study for two reasons: (a) to recognize the complexity of both the emotional (e.g., negativity) and cognitive (e.g., marital satisfaction) psychological forces that draw spouses together (Huston, 2000), and (b) to focus on those marital qualities (i.e., conflict or negativity and satisfaction) that have been most closely linked with specific domains of marriage (e.g., division of labor, finances, power, support for work roles; Fincham & Beach, 1999).

Marital conflict/negativity.   Respondents completed the 5-item conflict/negativity subscale from Braiker and Kelley's (1979) Relationship Questionnaire, a measure in which respondents indicate their feelings regarding various dimensions of their relationship on a 9-point scale. Anchors on the scale were worded to correspond to individual items and reflect frequency, such as *not at all* to *very much*, *very little*to *very much*, and *never* to *very often*. The measure was designed to assess spouses' perceptions of conflict or negativity in their marriages and contained items such as, "How often do you feel angry or resentful toward your spouse/partner?" Higher scores indicated greater levels of conflict or negativity.

Marital satisfaction.   Each respondent's satisfaction with her marriage was measured using an adaptation of the Aspects of Married Life Questionnaire (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). Respondents were asked to indicate their satisfaction on a 9-point scale (1 = *extremely dissatisfied*; 9 = *extremely satisfied*), with 10 domains of marriage that correspond to the same 10 domains of marriage work assessed. For example, respondents were asked, "How satisfied are you with how well the two of you talk over important and unimportant issues?"

Structural and Dispositional Variables

Educational attainment.   Educational attainment was coded as 10 or 11, indicating number of years if fewer than 12; 12 represented a high school diploma or GED; 14 represented some college but no degree, an AA degree, or vocational school beyond high school; 16 indicated a bachelor's degree; and 18 represented some graduate work or a master's degree.

Depression.   The extent to which women experienced depressive symptoms was assessed using the 12-item form of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CESD; Radloff, 1977). Respondents were asked to think about the past week and use a 4-item scale ranging from 1 (*rarely*) to 4 (*most of the time*) when answering. These 12 items assess cognitive, affective,

behavioral, and somatic symptoms associated with depression (e.g., "I thought my life had been a failure,""I felt that everything was an effort").

Kin status.   When completing background information on her close friend, respondents were asked whether the friend was kin, and, if so, the type of kin.

Age of eldest child.   Mothers reported the ages of their children at the time of the interview, ranging from youngest to oldest.

Results

Our results are presented in two sections reflecting the two research questions. First, results from a series of within-subjects repeated measures ANOVAs are presented, examining the extent to which women engaged in discussions about 10 specific domains of marriage with their close friends versus their spouses, treating wives' reports of domain-specific marriage work as the dependent variables. Second, results from a series of hierarchical regression analyses follow to show how domain-specific marriage work with spouse and friend is linked to wives' perceptions of marital quality.

Mean Differences in Domain-Specific Marriage Work with Friend and Spouse

Because women were given the option to leave items blank if they had not experienced marital concerns in a given area, sample sizes varied slightly across the analyses. Mean values and significant effects for domain-specific marriage work appear in Table 2. With few exceptions, there were no significant differences in the extent to which women engaged in marriage work with their friends and their spouses. Exceptions occurred for wives' reports of marriage work regarding family finances and relations with in-laws. As hypothesized, wives were more likely to discuss concerns about family finances with their husbands than with their close friends. In contrast, wives were more likely to discuss concerns about relations with their in-laws with friends than with husbands.

[Table 2 Omitted]

Links Between Marriage Work and Marital Quality

Next, we examined the relationship between women's perceptions of marital quality and their reliance on their spouses and close friends as sources of marriage work in 10 domains. A series of hierarchical regression analyses, including wives' domain-specific marriage work with friend, marriage work with spouse, and the interaction between these two factors, were conducted to determine if they accounted for significant variance in wives' perceptions of marital quality (i.e., satisfaction and conflict/negativity) beyond that explained by the control variables (kin status of friend, wives' depression, education, and age of eldest child). For each analysis, kin status of the friend was dummy coded as 0 = *nonkin* and 1 = *kin*, and education was dummy coded as 0 = *a high school education or less* and 1 = *some college or beyond*. Continuous variables were

centered (i.e., the item mean was subtracted from each variable before the interaction term was formed) when interaction terms were created to reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard & Turrisi, 2003). Because Type II errors frequently occur for interaction effects because of small sample sizes and multicollinearity in the interaction, the alpha level for interaction effects was set at .10 (Jaccard & Turrisi). Even so, caution should be drawn when interpreting these significant effects because the index of the strength of the interaction tends to be positively biased with small sample sizes (Jaccard & Turrisi). Dependent variables (i.e., marital conflict/negativity and satisfaction) were significantly correlated with one another (see Table 3), suggesting that a similar pattern of results might emerge across the two measures of marital quality.

[Table 3 Omitted]

Links Between Domain-Specific Marriage Work and Marital Quality

Conflict/negativity. The results of the regression analyses for marital conflict/negativity appear in Table 4. Wives' depression was positively related ($\beta = .60$) to their reports of marital conflict and negativity. Wives' marriage work with spouse X marriage work with friend interaction for the domain of husbands' support for wives' work roles (i.e., work either inside or outside the home) was linked to wives' perceptions of marital conflict and negativity ($\beta = -.25$) beyond that explained by the control variables and the main effect of marriage work. To further explain the interaction of marriage work in the domain of husbands' support for wives' work, wives' reports of conflict and negativity in the marriage were regressed onto wives' reports of marriage work with friend for high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) and low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) levels of wives' marriage work with spouse (Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard & Turrisi, 2003). As illustrated in Figure 1, for wives who engaged in low levels of marriage work about work role support with their spouses, marriage work in this domain with friend was more strongly positively associated ($\beta = .39$) with reports of conflict and negativity in the marriage. In contrast, for women who engaged in high levels of marriage work about work role support with spouse, marriage work in this domain with friend was more strongly negatively associated ($\beta = -.26$) with reports of conflict and negativity in the marriage.

[Table 4 Omitted]

[Figure 1 Omitted]

A similar pattern emerged for discussions about two other domains: family finances and spouses' support for the parenting role. Wives' reports of depression were positively related ($\beta = .60$) to their reports of marital conflict and negativity. For wives who engaged in low levels of marriage work about family finances or support for the parenting role with spouse, marriage work in these domains with friend was more strongly positively associated with reports of conflict and negativity in the marriage ($\beta = .34$ for family finances and $\beta = .26$ for support for parenting role). In contrast, for women who engaged in high levels of marriage work about family finances or

spouses' support for the parenting role, marriage work in these domains with friend was more strongly negatively associated with reports of conflict and negativity in the marriage ($\beta = -.17$ for family finances and $\beta = -.28$ for support for parenting role).

Importantly, no interaction effects were found for marriage work in the domains of marital communication, spouses' childrearing philosophies, family decision making, social life and leisure, division of household work, division of child care, or relations with in-laws (these results are available from the first author).

Marital satisfaction.   Only in the domain of support for wives' parenting were significant effects found. Similar to the models predicting marital conflict and negativity, wives' reports of depression were negatively related to their marital satisfaction ($\beta = -.59$; see Table 5). However, unlike the models for marital conflict and negativity, a main effect emerged for wives' reports of marriage work in this domain with spouse ($\beta = .42$): The more women engaged in marriage work with their spouse, the greater their marital satisfaction. Of note, the additional variance explained by the interaction between marriage work with spouse and friend about husbands' support for wives' parenting roles ($\Delta R^2 = .09$) was significant beyond that explained by the control variables and the main effects of marriage work ($R^2 = .39$) for the model predicting marital satisfaction. As seen in Figure 2, for wives who engaged in low levels of marriage work about parenting role support with spouse, marriage work about husbands' parenting role support with friend was more strongly negatively related ($\beta = -.33$) to reports of marital satisfaction. In contrast, for women who engaged in high levels of marriage work about parenting support with spouse, marriage work in this domain with friend was more strongly positively related ($\beta = .25$) to reports of satisfaction in the marriage.

[Table 5 Omitted]

[Figure 2 Omitted]

Although no interaction effects were found for marital satisfaction for marriage work in the other domains examined (marital communication, spouses' childrearing philosophies, family decision making, social life and leisure, support for women's work roles, family finances, division of household work, division of child care, or relations with in-laws), significant main effects emerged for marriage work with spouse in three domains. Wives who engaged in marriage work with their spouses in the domains of marital communication ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$), spouse's support for her work role (inside and outside the home; $\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) and social life and leisure ($\beta = .48, p < .001$) reported higher marital satisfaction (findings do not appear in table form).

Discussion

This study explored the social context of marriage by examining the links between wives' domain-specific marriage work with friends and with spouses and perceptions of marital quality, through a partial replication and extension of previous work (Helms et al., 2003). We organize

our discussion around two central questions: To what extent and for which topics do wives engage husbands and friends in marriage work? For which domains of marriage work with friends does marriage work with husbands matter? We then address the implications of the findings for research and practice.

To What Extent and for Which Topics Do Wives Engage Husbands and Friends in Marriage Work?

Analyses revealed that women were equally likely to discuss marital concerns with their spouses and friends in all but two domains of marriage work: family finances and relations with in-laws. Contrary to previous work that examined marriage work on a global level and found wives more likely to engage in this process with friends than with husbands (Helms et al., 2003; Oliker, 1989; Rubin, 1985), our findings revealed that when examining specific domains of marriage work, there are many topics that women may be equally likely to discuss with both their spouses and close friends: marital communication, spouses' childrearing philosophies, family decision making, social life and leisure, support for wives' work roles, support for wives' parenting, division of household chores, and division of child care. Thus, these results support previous research (e.g., Harrison, 1998; Rubin) suggesting that it is normative for women to garner emotional support and discuss marital concerns with their friends. Further, our results extend previous work (Helms et al.) by suggesting that for many topics of concern, wives also look to their husbands as sources of marriage work.

An exception to this general pattern occurred for wives' marriage work about finances. As hypothesized, wives were more likely to discuss financial concerns with their spouses than with their friends. Because of the sensitive and emotionally charged nature of financial concerns (Benjamin & Irving, 2001; Storaasli & Markman, 1990), women may be less inclined to discuss these issues with friends and more inclined to keep such discussions within the marriage. This finding lends support to the importance of a domain-specific approach and suggests that for particularly private or controversial issues that are primary sources of marital conflict, such as finances (Storaasli & Markman), women may be more likely to have these discussions with their spouses only.

Discussions about relations with in-laws emerged as another domain with a divergent pattern of results. Although the finding that women are more likely to discuss relations with in-laws with their friends than with their husbands corroborates previous findings on global marriage work (Helms et al., 2003), it was the only domain for which this held true. Specifically, wives were asked how often they brought up concerns about how well they got along with in-laws and how often and how much they saw them. Thus, engaging in marriage work in this domain is likely to include complaints about in-laws that wives may not feel comfortable voicing to their spouses for fear of causing unnecessary conflict in their marriages and their extended families. Indeed, women may feel reluctant to triangulate their husbands, recognizing that their husbands may be

defensive or sensitive to issues about their families of origin, so wives work out these issues or air complaints with their friends.

Examining the domains individually rather than as a global view of marriage work allowed us to uncover the nuances of everyday discussions that women have with both their friends and their spouses. This approach allowed a more careful examination of those areas of conflict or concern within the marriage that are more sensitive and, therefore, are the ones that women may feel more comfortable discussing with friends (i.e., relations with in-laws) or with husbands (i.e., family finances).

For Which Domains of Marriage Work With Friends Does Marriage Work With Husbands Matter?

We hypothesized that marriage work with spouse would moderate the links between marriage work with friend and marital quality for the domains of division of household chores, support for wives' work roles, family decision making, and family finances. Our hypothesis was only partially supported. In addition, several unanticipated findings emerged, and we focus on the differential pattern of results for satisfaction and conflict and negativity.

Depression.   Although used as a control variable, the significant links between depression and marital quality found here warrant further attention. Wives' depression was consistently associated with marital satisfaction and conflict and negativity. The cross-sectional nature of our data makes it impossible to tease out whether being depressed leads to lower levels of marital quality or vice versa. A possible methodological explanation for these findings is that those wives who report greater levels of depression are more likely to view their marriages in a negative manner than are wives who score low on depression. Alternatively, wives whose marriages are characterized by high levels of conflict and low levels of satisfaction might be more depressed. Regardless of the direction of causality, this finding supports past research that suggests that depression influences and is influenced by reports of marital quality (Beach, 1996).

Conflict/negativity and marital satisfaction.   When examining conflict and negativity, limited support was found for moderation. As hypothesized, moderation was supported in the domains of husbands' support for wives' work roles and family finances. Because support for wives' work roles and family finances are issues salient to marital conflict (Benjamin & Irving, 2001; Storaasli & Markman, 1990; Vannoy & Philliber, 1992), talking to one's friend but not one's spouse may be particularly problematic in marriage. Further, because wives were more likely to discuss family finances with their spouses than their friends, it is not surprising that when women discuss family finances to a greater extent with their friends than their spouses, it signals higher levels of conflict and negativity. Our findings suggest that marriages in which wives engage friends rather than their husbands in discussions about these sensitive topics are likely to be characterized by higher levels of marital conflict.

When examining marital satisfaction, significant moderation emerged only in the domain of husbands' support for wives' parenting; a similar finding emerged for marital conflict and negativity. Given that these women are in the midst of rearing school-aged children, it may be that the extent to which they feel supported as parents by their husbands is particularly salient for both marital conflict and their marital satisfaction. Previous research suggests that friends often play a pivotal role in validating wives' experiences as mothers and are important sources of guidance and support for parenting (Harrison, 1998; Oliker, 1989). Although wives' reliance on friends for parenting support has been thought of as normative and even maritally benign, our results suggest that drawing friends into discussions specific to wives' concerns or disappointments about their husbands' parenting support may have implications for marriage. Specifically, a pattern of wives engaging in marriage work with friends concerning how supported they feel as parents by their husbands may signal less marital satisfaction and more marital conflict and negativity. Conversely, it may be that wives who are experiencing less marital satisfaction and more conflict may draw their friends into such discussions. Perhaps for wives who are in the midst of actively parenting school-aged children, the interdependence of parental and marital roles is so strong that negative spillover may occur from the parenting domain into the marriage or vice versa.

When examining the results regarding marital satisfaction, we found no support for the hypothesized moderation in the domains of family finances, division of household chores, support for wives' work roles, and family decision making. Rather, marriage work in the domains of marital communication, spouses' support for wives' work roles (both inside and outside the home), and social life and leisure were significant predictors of marital satisfaction. It might be that the more wives engage in marriage work with their spouses in these domains, the greater their marital satisfaction. It also may be that women who are experiencing greater marital satisfaction are more likely to engage their spouses in marriage work in these domains. Although not found in Helms et al.'s (2003) study that used a global measure of marriage work, these results support earlier work linking emotion work in marriage to marital well-being (Lee, 1988; Markman, 1984;Rubin, 1985).

Our findings speak to the multidimensional nature of marital quality and the fact that not all marital processes are linked to varying types of marital quality (measured as satisfaction and conflict or negativity here) in the same way. Additionally, it may be that when wives engage in marriage work with their friends, the process is characterized by "emotional unwinding" and, thus, is most strongly linked to those areas of the marriage that reflect emotion (i.e., conflict and negativity). On the other hand, marriage work with spouse may be characterized by problem solving (a cognitive task) and, thus, is linked with wives' cognitive evaluations of their marriages, as reflected by the findings for marital satisfaction. Future research should examine how this process of marriage work differs between spouses and close friends through observational measures.

The cross-sectional nature of this study makes it impossible to determine whether these patterns of interactions lead to declines in marital quality or whether patterns develop in response to negative marital experiences and evaluations. Regardless of the causal explanation, we recommend that future work examine processes that co-occur across multiple relationships rather than the effects of each relationship in isolation. 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.

Implications for Research and Practice

Although the study of friendship and marriage is new and emerging, we echo Huston's (2000) sentiments and suggest that practitioners and researchers alike will benefit from acknowledging the important role that friendships play in spouses' lives. Rather than being tangential to family life, our results indicate that women are likely to discuss many areas of marital concern with their husbands and with their friends. Although none of the six marital education programs reviewed by Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2002) addressed the importance of outside friendships to the marriage, marital and family therapists acknowledge the social context of marriage by creatively integrating partners' friends into the process of therapy (Sandmaier, 1995).

These findings offer additional insights that are important for practitioners as they consider the role that nonmarital friendships play in marriage and incorporate these ideas into therapy and programming. In contrast to popular beliefs that discussions with friends about the marital relationship are likely to be harmful to marriage (Stahmann, 2000), our results support previous work indicating that wives engage in marriage work with friends, and that in many domains of marriage, this "work" is unrelated to marital quality—that is, women could engage in high or low levels of marriage work with their friends, and it is not linked, positively or negatively, to their perceptions of marital quality. However, there are some domains in which marriage work with friends may affect marital quality, particularly when wives are not engaging their husbands in similar discussions. Some of these areas (i.e., support for wives' work roles and support for wives' parenting) are particularly salient to wives who are juggling work and family roles and also raising school-aged children. Another potential "red flag" area to emerge here involves marriage work regarding family finances. Our results indicate that women are more likely to keep such discussions within the marital dyad. Thus, it may be particularly important to consider the extent to which they include their husbands in discussions about family finances when they are engaging in such discussions with friends.

There is much to be learned about how the strength of spouses' ties to one another is linked to the social context that they and their close friends create. Friendship and marriage are dynamic relationships that change and develop over time. No research to date has addressed the dynamic nature of partners' relations with friends and how they may interact with a changing marriage over time. Further, although representative of the married population from which they were

drawn, our participants were predominantly European American. In addition to differences in the kin status of wives' close friends (Timmer & Veroff, 2000), norms concerning friends' involvement in spouses' marriages and their families may vary across ethnic groups. A better understanding of how such spouses negotiate both close friendships and marriage over time could be valuable in alerting couples to potentially adaptive and destructive patterns in ways of relating to one another and friends over the life course.

References

Adler-Baeder, F., & Higginbotham, B. 2002, November). *Putting empirical knowledge to work: Building a framework for linking research and programming focused on marital quality*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Houston, TX.

Aiken, L. S., & West, S. G. 1991). *Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Beach, S. R. H. 1996). Marital therapy in the treatment of depression. In C.Mundt, M. J.Goldstein, K.Hahlweg, & P.Fiedler (Eds.),*Interpersonal factors in the origin and course of affective disorders*(pp. 341–361). London: Gaskell Academic.

Benjamin, M., & Irving, H. 2001). Money and mediation: Patterns of conflict in family mediation of financial matters. *Mediation Quarterly*, **18**, 349–361.

Blieszner, R., & Adams, R. G. 1992). *Adult friendship*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Braiker, H., & Kelley, H. 1978). Conflict in the development of close relationships. In R.Burgess & T.Huston (Eds.), *Social exchange in developing relationships*(pp. 135–168). New York: Academic Press.

Burger, E., & Milardo, R. M. 1995). Marital interdependence and social networks. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, **12**,403–415.

Carroll, J. S., & Doherty, W. J. 2003). Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, **52**, 105–118.

Cutrona, C. E. 1996). *Social support in couples*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fehr, B. 1996). *Friendship processes*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. H. 1999). Marriage in the new millennium: Is there a place for social cognition in marital research?*Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, **16**, 685–704.

Harrison, K. 1998). Rich friendships, affluent friends: Middle-class practices of friendship. In R. G.Adams & G.Allan (Eds.), *Placing friendship in context*(pp. 92–116). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Helms, H. M., Crouter, A. C., & McHale, S. M. 2003). Marital quality and spouses' marriage work with close friends and each other.*Journal of Marriage and Family*, **65**, 963–977.

Helms-Erikson, H. M. 2000). *We get by with a little help from our friends? Friendship as a social context for marriage*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, State College.

Huston, T. 2000). The social ecology of marriage and other intimate unions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, **62**, 298–319.

Huston, T., McHale, S., & Crouter, A. 1986). Changes in the marital relationship during the first year of marriage. In R.Gilmour &S.Duck (Eds.), *The emerging field of personal relationships*(pp. 109–132). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Jaccard, J., & Turrisi, R. 2003). *Interaction effects in multiple regression*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Johnson, F. L., & Aries, E. J. 1983). The talk of women friends. *Women's Studies International Forum*, **6**, 353–361.

Julien, D., & Markman, H. J. 1991). Social support and social networks as determinants of individual and marital outcomes. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, **8**, 549–568.

Julien, D., Tremblay, N., Belanger, I., Dube, M., Begin, J., & Bouthiller, D. 2000). Interaction structure of husbands' and wives' disclosure of marital conflict to their respective best friend. *Journal of Family Psychology*, **14**, 286–303.

Lee, G. R. 1988). Marital intimacy among older persons: The spouse as confidant. *Journal of Family Issues*, **9**, 273–284.

Markman, H. 1984). The longitudinal study of couples' interactions: Implications for understanding and predicting the development of marital distress.
In K.Hahlweg & N.Jacobsen (Eds.), *Marital interaction: Analysis and modification*(pp. 253–281). New York: Guilford.

NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. (1994). Child care and child development: The NICHD Study of Early Child Care. In S. L.Friedman & H. C.Haywood (Eds.), *Developmental follow-up: Concepts, domains, and methods*(pp. 377–396). New York: Academic Press.

O'Connor, P. 1992). *Friendships between women*. New York: Guilford.

O'Connor, P. 1998). Women's friendships in a post-modern world. In R. G.Adams & G.Allan (Eds.), *Placing friendship in context*(pp.117–135). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Oliker, S. J. 1989). *Best friends and marriage: Exchange among women*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Olson, D. H., & Olson, A. 1999). PREPARE/ENRICH Program: Version 2000. In R.Berger & M. T.Hannah (Eds.), *Preventative approaches in couple therapy*(pp. 196–216). Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.

Radloff, L. 1977). The CES-D scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement*, **1**, 385–401.

Rands, M. 1988). Changes in social networks following marital separation and divorce. In R. M.Milardo (Ed.), *Families and social networks*(pp. 127–146). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Rubin, L. B. 1985). *Just friends: The role of friendship in our lives*. New York: Harper and Row.

Sandmaier, M. 1995, JulyAugust). The gift of friendship. *The Family Therapy Networker*, **19**, 22–35.

South, S. J., & Spitze, G. 1986). Determinants of divorce over the marital life course. *American Sociological Review*, **51**, 583–590.

Stahmann, R. F. 2000). Premarital counseling: A focus for family therapy. *Journal of Family Therapy*, **22**, 104–116.

Storaasli, R. D., & Markman, H. J. 1990). Relationship problems in the early stages of marriage: A longitudinal investigation. *Journal of Family Psychology*, **4**, 80–98.

Timmer, S. G., & Veroff, J. 2000). Family ties and the discontinuity of divorce in Black and White newlywed couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, **62**, 349–361.

Tschann, J. 1988). Self-disclosure in adult friendship: Gender and marital status differences. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, **5**, 65–81.

Vannoy, D., & Philliber, W. W. 1992). Wife's employment and quality of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, **54**, 387–398.

Weiss, R. S. 1985). Men in the family. *Family Process*, **24**, 49–58.