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VERBAL AGGRESSIVENESS IN MARRIAGE:
EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF EMPATHY AND ACCOUNTABILITY
ON THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

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VERBAL AGGRESSIVENESS IN MARRIAGE:
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ON THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This study examined causal attributions made for verbal aggressiveness in marriage relationships. Specifically, empathy and accountability interventions were used to mitigate the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE), or the tendency to underestimate the involvement of situational factors and overestimate the role of dispositional traits in a person's behavior (Heider, 1958). Other relevant variables were also examined for their association with attributions, including relationship satisfaction, closeness, emotional distress, and severity associated with the verbally aggressive message.

An experimental design containing four conditions—accountability, empathy, additive (those who received both accountability and empathy manipulations), and control—was used to assess attributions and perceptions associated with verbal aggressiveness in marriage. Results indicated support for the FAE. Individuals in the control condition made significantly more dispositional attributions for their partners' aggressive behavior as compared to the other conditions. While the empathy and accountability interventions failed to have a significant influence on causal attributions, individuals who reported greater feelings of empathy toward their partners made significantly more situational attributions and significantly less dispositional attributions for their partners' aggressive behavior.

Relationship satisfaction was also positively related to situational attributions and negatively related to dispositional attributions and to emotional distress associated with the verbally aggressive episode. Emotional distress and relational harm were also positively related, as were severity of episode and relational harm. Similarly, severity of episode and satisfaction were negatively related. Finally, emotional distress and

severity of episode were both positively related to dispositional attributions for partners' aggressive behavior. Results suggest that generating targeted feelings of empathy—rather than general feelings of empathy—may be an effective therapeutic approach for reducing negative reciprocity in verbal aggressive encounters. Additional practical implications involving relationship satisfaction, emotional distress, severity of episode, relational harm, and causal attributions are discussed.

Verbal Aggressiveness in Marriage: Examining the Influence of Empathy and Accountability on the Fundamental Attribution Error

Chapter 1: Introduction

According to one popular self-help book, the most important difference between aggression, which generally has a negative connotation, and assertion, often seen as positive, is a person's *intent*. The author explained, "During assertion, we move ourselves *toward* another; during aggression, we move ourselves *against* another" (Witkin, 2000, p. 143, emphasis added). This insightful statement about human interaction seems to accurately describe a general principle in the social world: The underlying forces associated with observable behavior are important. The perceived intentions and causes behind one's actions are an integral part of most interpersonal interactions. In fact, the way people assess and explain certain behaviors affects the manner in which they respond and react to other people (Vangelisti, 2001). Attributions of the social world influence one's corresponding attitudes and actions. But what happens when our perceptions of another person's behaviors and intentions are not accurate? More specifically, in marriage, what happens when we attribute a partner's negative behavior to a trait such as selfishness or malevolence when a circumstantial factor such as financial strain or a distress-inducing event is to blame?

Past studies show evidence of a strong association between attributions and relationship satisfaction in marriage (Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994). As Fincham et al. described, interpreting a partner's negative behavior as "selfishly motivated, intentional, and blameworthy is likely to activate a negative evaluation of the spouse and lead to a temporary reduction

in relationship satisfaction" (p. 268). Repeated over time, the authors explain, the pattern also impacts long-term satisfaction levels, which undoubtedly influence the health of the relationship. However, such a negative outcome may potentially be avoided in close relationships if ego-centric biases are reduced through inductions of empathy or accountability as individuals make causal attributions for their relational partner's behavior.

The current study aimed at better understanding causal attributions in marriage relationships by attempting to attenuate the fundamental attribution error (FAE; Heider, 1958) using interventions of both empathy and accountability. Specifically, the study attempted to evoke empathetic feelings through perspective-taking in the form of a visual story device (i.e., video clip). Empathy involves assuming the emotional role of another person and adopting his or her phenomenological perspective (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Regan & Totten, 1975). Additionally, this study attempted to induce feelings of accountability through the expectation to justify one's responses after initial attributions were made for his/her partner's behavior. Accountability refers to the expectation to explain or justify to others the position a person has taken (Tetlock, 1985). This study expected the empathy and accountability interventions to be associated with situational attributions to a greater extent than with dispositional attributions for a relational partner's verbally aggressive behavior, thus mitigating the FAE. By definition, the FAE is the tendency for an individual to underestimate the involvement of situational factors and overestimate the role of dispositional, or trait, factors in a person's behavior (Ross, 1977).

By attempting to attenuate the FAE, this study addressed ways to evoke more realistic causal attributions for verbal aggressive behavior, resulting in greater relationship-enhancing responses. In general, people's attitudes can change after being exposed to interventions such as therapeutic efforts, relevant education and information, persuasive arguments, and media campaigns (Ross, 1977). In addition to changing people's attitudes, certain interventions have also been shown to alter attributions. Past research provides examples of specific interventions that can affect the attributions individuals make about other people and their behaviors, including mood alteration (Forgas, 1998), training in logic and reason (Stalder, 2000), exposure to powerful social and situational factors (Riggio & Garcia, 2009), increased FAE awareness (Howell & Shepperd, 2011), empathy (Regan & Totten, 1975), and accountability (Tetlock, 1985). Using interventions and gaining a better understanding of the relational dynamics associated with attributions provide insights that may generate effective therapeutic applications for couples and practitioners.

From a communication standpoint, the current study targeted verbally aggressive messages as communicative behavior that activates attributional processing among relational partners. Verbal aggressiveness, by definition, refers to "attacking the self-concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person's position on a topic of communication" in an effort to cause the person psychological pain (Infante & Wigley, 1986, p. 61). Verbal aggressive messages were chosen for this study because they are often poignant and prominent acts that activate cognitive mechanisms of appraisal (Kinney, 1994; Kinney & Segrin, 1998) and can produce emotional reactions (Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990). Past studies have also shown acts of

verbal aggressiveness to have a negative effect on relationship satisfaction (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Martin & Anderson, 1995). Specifically, Venable and Martin (1997) found that both participants' and partners' use of verbal aggressiveness was negatively related to perceptions of relationship satisfaction.

While people often participate in sense-making for their own and other people's actions on a regular basis, situations that are unexpected, negative, and/or salient generally require more cognitive time and energy, thus lending themselves to attributional processing (Manusov, 2006). Because verbal aggressiveness is considered a destructive form of communication (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992) that can cause psychological pain (Infante & Wigley, 1986), it serves as a viable example which meets Manusov's (2006) qualifications for triggering attribution-making cognitions among relational partners.

Attributions are an important field of inquiry. It is believed that interpretations of our social world enable people to "achieve a greater degree of understanding of, and hence control over, their environment" (Harvey & Weary, 1984, p. 428). Therefore, this study addressed at least four issues related to attributions for verbal aggressiveness in marriage. First, this study examined the influence of empathy as evoked by perspective-taking through exposure to a visual story device in the form of a brief induction video. Previous studies have looked at the potential role of empathy in making causal attributions (Fiske, Taylor, Etcoff, & Laufer, 1979; Harvey, Yarkin, Lightner, & Town, 1980; Regan & Totten, 1975), but all these studies induced empathetic feelings solely by *instructing* subjects to empathize with another person, imagine being someone else, or to try to feel what another person is feeling. By using a

visual story device to evoke empathy, the current study tapped into subjects' cognitive role-taking devices associated with observing visual cues that prompt "thoughts and feelings, enabling them to see the world through the characters' eyes and feel their feelings" (Manney, 2008, p. 52). Providing support for the use of perspective-taking stories to evoke empathetic feelings and influence causal attributions of negative behavior can enable relational partners, along with practitioners and therapists, to reduce dispositional attributions that may be related to perceived dissatisfaction or harmful effects on the relationship.

A second issue this study addressed is the potential role of accountability—the expectation to justify one's opinions and feelings—as a potential intervention for attributions of behavior, namely a verbally aggressive encounter with a relational partner. In a previous study, Tetlock (1983) induced accountability to examine its influence on people's first impressions of others. Additionally, Tetlock (1985) later induced accountability to assess its effect on situational and dispositional attributions regarding another person's perspective on affirmative action. However, in both of these studies, attributions were based on written, hypothetical scenarios featuring an unrelated actor's behavior. The current study attempted to use accountability to influence attributions for actual and personally relevant behavior. Subjects' recollection of a specific verbally aggressive episode with a marriage partner, rather than assessing aggression in a hypothetical situation, was expected to evoke greater levels of accountability because observers (i.e., subjects) seemingly have more invested in the relationship. Observers were not simply explaining their responses about an objective third party; they were justifying their attributions about their marriage partner.

Third, this study examined attributions and verbal aggressiveness through a communicative lens. Attributions are associated with and have application to the field of communication because they are (a) socially-created and often verbal explanations for behavior, (b) ways to categorize communicative behavior, and (c) provide expression to perception and meaning attached to behavior (Manusov, 2006). Only limited research has been done on attributions and expressions of verbal aggressiveness. For example, Patten and Woods (1978) found low self-esteem recipients of verbal aggression made significantly more self-attributions (i.e., blamed themselves) for interpersonal aggression than did high self-esteem individuals. Additionally, the study showed that perceived severity of aggression was positively related to blaming the aggressor and negatively related to blaming self. In a more recent study comparing attributions and effects of verbal aggression and sexual harassment in the workplace, Hershcovis and Barling (2010) found recipients of workplace aggression were more likely than victims of sexual harassment to personalize and make internal attributions for the mistreatment. By assessing attributions for verbal aggressiveness, the current study underscored both the social and meaning-making aspects of communication.

Finally, the current study addressed the potential negative ramifications of dyadic verbal aggressiveness by providing support for the positive influence of satisfaction and the negative influence of relational harm, severity of episode, and emotional distress on causal attributions. Past research has shown that attributions influence actions (Harvey & Weary, 1984; Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973). The perceived reasons for an observed behavior are believed to have an important influence on a person's response in a social setting. Kelley (1973) claimed attributions serve as an

impetus to action, and Reich and Arkin (2006) argued that we use attributions to guide not just our interpretations of the social world but also our subsequent behaviors. Undoubtedly, people's "thoughts and actions are woven together in intricate patterns" (Harvey & Weary, 1984, p. 447).

An example of the association between attributions and actions can be seen in existing marital research. In the context of distressed married couples, maladaptive attributions were related to negative subsequent behaviors, such as less-effective problem solving actions by spouses (Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). Furthermore, wives' negative interpretations of intention by someone in a hypothetical situation have been associated with their own criticism of their spouses and anger-filled responses to their spouses (Doherty, 1982). These findings suggest that subsequent emotional and behavioral responses may be influenced by attributions regarding cause and intent of a partner's negatively perceived behavior.

Therefore, since attributions are directly linked to subsequent behaviors, understanding the attributions that marriage partners make about a verbally aggressive encounter helps practitioners and relational partners better regulate subsequent behaviors during and after the aggressive interaction. Specifically with this study's examination of the FAE, findings inform marriage partners about acknowledging and potentially overcoming attribution bias, thus forming assessments that more accurately reflect the actual causes behind negative behavior. More accurate attributions may then result in improved understanding and more appropriate behavioral responses by partners following a verbally aggressive episode.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Attribution theory

A growing body of literature on attributions and the FAE in close relationships provides a basis for the present study. This chapter will review some of the theoretical and empirical studies in attribution research while examining the ways prior research informs the current study.

Over the course of an interpersonal relationship, individuals often make attributions about each other's behaviors. Such attributions, or causal cognitions, are thought to influence behavior (Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987; Harvey & Weary, 1984). Consequently, what a person perceives about a relational partner's actions—namely his or her motivation behind and intention for those actions—is thought to influence how that individual responds and reacts to the partner. This type of social cognition paradigm is deeply rooted in psychology and communication research.

Heider (1958) laid the groundwork for attribution theory with what Weiner (2010) called a "common sense approach" to motivational behavior (p. 30). Heider conjectured that people try to make sense out of relevant social stimuli by "ordering them in terms of the distal invariants and their relevant dispositional properties" (p. 296). He referred to this ordering and classifying process as *attribution*. More specifically, attribution is a cognitive process used to understand perceived causation within one's environment (Heider, 1976; Harvey & Weary, 1984). Kelley (1973) described attribution as a process of "psychological epistemology," by which he meant attributions serve as a useful method for knowing the world (p. 107). Put simply, attributions are the explanations we use to understand what we experience in life.

Heider's initial work in attribution and motivation continues to influence current attribution research. For example, his original emphasis on the role both situational and dispositional factors play in sense-making has been a persistent theoretical thread woven throughout much of attribution research, including the present study. While explanation and analysis in attribution processes and outcomes have persisted since Heider's initial work, some scholars such as Harvey and Weary (1984) argue that a substantial and all-encompassing theory of attribution still has not emerged due to a lack of comprehensive analysis and integration in existing attribution work. Others take a softer view, contending that the term "theory" in attribution theory is used in a broad sense to describe general principles inherent in attribution research rather than to define an organized set of deductions and propositions (Kelley, 1973). Either way, an attributional approach to social behavior remains a substantial and viable method for understanding important interpersonal communication processes because it addresses cognitions and behaviors at a motivational level (Harvey & Weary, 1984; Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 2010).

Much of the initial work on attribution theory focused on causal attributions. In fact, Heider (1958) identified at least nine different types of behavior causation: (a) situational causes, (b) personal effects, (c) ability, (d) effort, (e) desire, (f) sentiment (i.e., feeling like it), (g) belonging (i.e., going along with others), (h) obligation, and (i) permission. Making sense of our social world means primarily understanding the basic causes for behavior, early attribution scholars reasoned. However, when a person begins to operationalize and assess perceived causes, he quickly understands that causal attribution-making involves multiple, subjective and often complex influences. The

causal locus cannot always be easily assessed. To help provide clarity, Buss (1978) distinguished cause from reason in attribution processes, describing *cause* as a necessary and sufficient condition for behavior and *reason* as the primary purposes and goals behind a specific action.

As attribution theory continued to expand and find application in various contexts, attribution research also continued to expand its recognition of multiple dimensions present and active in attributional processes. For example, Wimer and Kelley (1982) looked at general attributions by students for a variety of events, and found support for multiple dimensions of causal attribution, including good versus bad, simple versus complex, the person, enduring versus transient, and motivation. The authors also found support for the role of additional attributional dimensions, including (a) the relation of the primary cause to other causes and effects, (b) the logical explanation based on the person's motivation, and (c) the types of effects inherently implied by the presence of the cause. Later, Weiner (1985) identified several different dimensions within the attribution process but provided a parsimonious platform for understanding behavior by settling on just three primary dimensions of behavioral attributions: causality (internal/external), stability (long-term/temporary), and controllability (manageable/irrepressible).

Clearly, attributions do more than simply ascribe basic causal locus for a specific behavior. Attributions also "reflect beliefs about the valence, stability, and controllability of a cause as well as how intentional or global the cause is seen to be" (Manusov, 2006, p. 185). Where do such beliefs originate? If certain cognitive norms and beliefs are expected to play an active role in the attributions people make about

behavior, an understanding of those underlying forces would prove beneficial. While some may hope for an objective and universal set of norms and rules to guide attributions, the pioneers of attribution research contended that subjective forces are at work in the attributional process (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). Specifically, three psychological factors have been identified, including (a) self-esteem, (b) self-presentation, and (c) control motivations (Harvey & Weary, 1984).

Other similar subjective forces, such as a self-serving bias (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008), the observer's mood (Forgas, 1998; Forgas, 2001), and his or her goals in impression management (Jellison & Green, 1981), are also thought to influence attributions. For example, Canary and Spitzberg (1990) found support for a self-serving influence in conflict situations. Individuals tended to view their own behavior in conflict as significantly more appropriate than the behavior of their partners. A person's mood also has been shown to influence attributions. In a study wherein happy and sad individuals were asked to view and assess their videotaped interactions with a partner, results indicated that mood, typically viewed as a subjective and varying condition, influenced attributions (Forgas, Bower, & Krantz, 1984). Actions seen as positive and poised by people in a happy mood were viewed as awkward and negative when viewed by people in a bad mood.

Regarding impression management as a subjective influence, Jellison and Green (1981) asked students to report first impressions of their peers based on personality tests. They discovered a positive relationship between the desire for social approval and internal causal attributions for their peers. Acknowledging these and other potential subjective forces influencing assessments of behavior helps solidify the potential role of

bias and error in the attribution process. If attributions are at least partially based on subjective cognitions and dynamic dives such as social approval and impression management, how can we know attributions are accurate and reliable?

Fundamental Attribution Error

The FAE addresses human bias and subjectivity in the attribution process. By definition, FAE is the tendency for an individual to underestimate the role of situational factors and overestimate the influence of dispositional, or personal, attributes on behavior (Ross, 1977). As individuals perceive and assess interactions and behaviors within a given context, the primary locus for attributions is typically either external—a cause emerging from one's situation or circumstances—or internal—a cause originating within one's disposition or personality (Kelley, 1967). Situational causes for behavior typically include external stimulus from the environment while dispositional causes represent a person's character or personality. The FAE has also been referred to as "correspondence bias" (Gilbert & Jones, 1986), referring to the subjective nature of corresponding attributions with behavior.

Acknowledging that attributions can be made for behavior based on either situational or dispositional causes, previous scholars have attempted to understand just how these types of attributions are made. Early attribution researchers viewed people as active interpreters who use consistent and logical methods for interpreting their surrounding social world (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965). Later, Kelley (1967) expanded on the notion of people's active interpretation of behavior by outlining four criteria that people seemingly consider when making attributions: (a) the distinctiveness of the behavior, (b) the consistency of the behavior over time, (c) the consistency of the

behavior over modes of interaction, and (d) the possible consensus among observers regarding the locus of attributions being made. The author argued that to the extent an individual's attributions meet these four criteria, he "feels confident that he has a true picture of his external world" (Kelley, 1967, p. 197). However, attribution research suggests that one's picture of observed behavior is not always a "true" reflection of the motives and causes generating a specific behavior, thus introducing attributional bias known as the FAE. Indeed, observing the behavior of others often evokes an information processing mechanism that "biases the actor toward situational and away from dispositional attributions, while having the opposite effect for the observer" (Jones & Nisbett, 1971, p. 851).

Although some scholars assume people use consistent and logical methods to make interpretations of behavior (Manusov, 2006), additional discoveries have shown the influence of various subjective forces in the attribution process. Specifically, it appears that multiple psychological and subjective factors seemingly interact to help formulate personal interpretations and assessments of events within one's environment. Consistency and logic cannot always be assumed when it comes to making attributions for our social world. The pioneer of attribution research acknowledged that attributions take place at the psychological level, and even went so far as to claim that motives and feelings "cannot be measured by a ruler, weighed by a scale, nor examined by a light meter" (Heider, 1958, p. 32). While current-day social scientists would likely argue for the legitimacy of measuring *perceptions* of motives and feelings, Heider's statement does underscore the subjective nature of the cognitive processes involved in making attributions. General patterns may persist, but the cognitive processes that produce

attributions are not believed to be stable, universal, or always an accurate representation of another person's motives or intent. Therefore, because interpretations of events and behaviors are constructed from subjective, psychological forces, the attribution process lacks a standard of universal objectivity, thus making it subject to human bias (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Manusov, 2006).

Although closely related, the FAE is distinguished from another attribution bias called the actor-observer effect (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Jones, 1976). The actor-observer effect refers to the tendency for individuals to attribute their *own* behavior to situational factors and constraints while attributing other people's behavior to dispositional forces (Ross, 1977). While other biases and errors have been acknowledged and studied in attribution research, the FAE is thought to be the most commonly observed. In fact, Littlejohn and Foss (2011) referred to the FAE as "one of the most persistent findings in attribution research" (p. 85). Although now applied in multiple cross-contextual disciplines, the FAE emerged from early deliberations in social psychology (Kelley, 1967).

In their brief history of the FAE, Gilbert and Malone (1995) credited the foundational work of Kurt Lewin in 1931 for bringing the potential role of situational factors in behavior into our collective consciousness. Until then, the authors argued, psychology limited its interpretation of behavior mainly to dispositional factors rather than viewing behavior as the result of internal and external conditions interacting with each other. Heider (1958) provided a basis for subjective bias in the attribution process while acknowledging and advancing the role of both dispositional and situational factors in his landmark work on attribution theory. Almost two decades later, Ross

(1977) discovered that individuals have a tendency to underestimate the power of situational factors, leading to the formal introduction of the FAE.

During this time, social psychologists continued to use previous insights and assumptions about the FAE to conduct experiments testing for attribution error. Support for the FAE was found. Classic behavioral studies demonstrated individuals' tendencies to discount the role of compelling situational factors in triggering negative behavior. For example, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) showed how individuals could overlook the social pressure applied by a research assistant when asking people to tell a little white lie. Jones and Harris (1967) found support for the FAE when looking at behaviors associated with pro-Castro comments that were instructed by a debate coach. Furthermore, using the classic Milgram (1963) situation, Bierbrauer (1973) found that subjects failed to acknowledge the influential role of the experimenter when commanding a person to deliver an electric shock to another person. In all of these classic studies, the situational factor—namely social pressure and/or direct instructions—was overlooked when making attributions about behavior.

Beyond its rudimentary roots in social psychology, the FAE has gained prominence as support has accumulated over the years for the tendency of individuals to underestimate situational factors when making attributions about behavior (Harvey & Weary, 1984). Studies in the FAE have extended to multiple contexts, including the subject matter of the current study, interpersonal communication. Communication scholars have assessed dispositional and situational causal attributions for communicative acts and have applied the FAE to various communicative contexts, making important theoretical and practical advancements in attribution research from a

communication perspective. Baxter (1980) made a case for examining the FAE in communication research, arguing that communication scholars must expand their focus from the communicators involved to the contextual cues. Specifically, the author claimed that "the relevance of our (communication) research to the real world can never be enhanced until communicologists become cognizant of the situation" (p. 30).

Other communication researchers seemingly took Baxter's advice and examined both dispositional and situational attributions in interpersonal contexts. Asking observers to make attributions for their partners' positive and negative nonverbal cues, Manusov (1990) found that as relational satisfaction decreased, negative cues were viewed as more intentional, stable, and controllable while positive nonverbal cues were seen as more external, unstable, and specific. Attributional bias also emerged in a later interpersonal communication study wherein marriage partners made less internal, stable, and global causal attributions for their own negative behavior than did their marriage partners (Manusov, Floyd, & Kerssen-Griep, 1997). Hansen, Kimble, and Biers (2001) also found support for the FAE in an interpersonal communication context. The authors found that individuals made more dispositional attributions for an associate's unfriendly behavior. Additionally, research done by Manusov et al. (1998) focused on causal attributions for both friends and strangers when discussing failure events. The authors found that friends' public explanations for failure were associated with positive and external causes to a greater extent than their private explanations. According to the authors, self-presentation motives influenced attributions among friends. Studies such as these provide compelling support for the existence of attributional bias within interpersonal interactions. However, the FAE cannot be

addressed in a review such as this one without calling attention to some of the controversy it has generated from critics.

Acknowledging the extensive research lending support for bias in attributions, critics often argue that, because the FAE is not always a foregone conclusion in certain situations, the tendency to underestimate situational factors is "not as concrete or simple" as our basic understanding might suggest (Langdridge & Butt, 2004, p. 359). In fact, the FAE has been placed under the proverbial microscope and examined closely to expose at least two main areas of critique. First, the consistency of findings supporting the FAE based on multiple applications has been questioned (Harvey, Town, & Yarkin, 1981; Winter & Uleman, 1984). Some studies have shown a lack of support for the FAE based on the diversity of observers making the attributions and the existence of certain circumstances, causing some scholars to speculate about the FAE's consistency as a social phenomenon (see Goldberg, 1981; Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000). For example, Winter and Uleman (1984) found support for the FAE in written descriptions of behavior, but not in face-to-face descriptions, and Bauman and Skitka (2010) examined attributions made across multiple demographic categories and found the lack of support for the universality of the FAE based on demographic differences.

To help explain FAE's apparent lack of consistency in contextual application, Langdridge and Butt (2004) summarized five potential "problems" with the FAE: (a) the bias is likely learned through social development (White, 1988), (b) FAE is seemingly not universal across diverse demographics and cultures (Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000), (c) individual differences must be considered as potential influencers of attributions (Block & Funder, 1986), (d) certain psychological and/or emotional forces,

such as one's mood, can attenuate the FAE (Forgas, 1998), and (e) the FAE is less likely to occur in face-to-face encounters (Winter & Uleman, 1984). While some of these issues have found support in existing research, some have also been challenged. For example, regarding the apparent lack of universality across cultures, Krull et al. (1999) found no significant differences in the attributions of individualistic versus collective cultures. The FAE was present in both cultures.

A second area of evaluation of the FAE involves the complex and somewhat ambiguous nature of causal attributions and the possibility of alternative explanations for apparent misattributions. In their critique of the FAE, Sabini, Siepmann, and Stein (2001) reviewed classic FAE behavioral studies and raised some interesting questions about the perceived ambiguous distinction between internal and external attributions. Specifically, the authors examined the classic Milgram (1963; 1974) electrical shock situation and suggested an alternative conclusion to the dismissal of situational factors. Rather than viewing the command to shock another person as a situational factor, the authors presented the possibility that behavior was prompted by a strong *disposition* within a person to obey authority figures, even if the person in authority is giving orders to seemingly harm another person. Therefore, while the explicit command was the reason for the behavior, the internal desire to obey the command was the actual motivation behind the behavior, some would argue.

Perhaps Baxter's (1980) clarification of the term "situation" in a communication context helps bring clarity and provides some useful boundary conditions for situational factors associated with behavior. The author described "situation" as "a composite cluster of four-components: activity, relationship, immediate setting, and socio-

historical location" (p. 28). Such an understanding of situational forces would seemingly exclude influences such as goal-directed motivation to please a relational partner or feelings of personal inadequacy that may even result from perceptions of one's surroundings. These types of influences on attributions are associated with a person's situational circumstances, but they are likely initiated within a person's own cognition and/or disposition. Therefore, a shared operationalization of situational factors may help address some of the perceived ambiguity associated with the FAE.

The complex and somewhat ambiguous nature of causal attributions is also highlighted when consideration is given to the multiple and sometimes conflicting psychological forces that often undergird attributions of behavior. Gilbert and Malone (1995) proposed at least four distinct psychological mechanisms that influence attributions and can potentially lead to the FAE: (a) the lack of awareness of situational constraints, or not fully understanding the context, (b) unrealistic expectations for behavior, (c) inflated categorizations of behavior, or judging behavior based on preconceived assumptions, and (d) incomplete corrections of dispositional inferences, or the lack of modification of initial impressions of another person's behaviors. All four of these psychological influences are variables that may influence the degree to which an observer makes situational versus dispositional attributions for behavior. Additionally, the role of other psychological dynamics, such as saving face, obedience, and conformity, have been identified as potential influencers that can be dismissed or overlooked by observers making attributions about their social world (Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001).

The overriding bias most associated with the FAE seems to be egocentric. In a general sense, one's own behavior and the behaviors of other people are often observed and judged in relation to one's own perspective and egocentric biases (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Therefore, when a person perceives the actions or reactions of another person as different from his or her own projected or real behaviors, that individual is inclined to attribute the opposing behaviors to personal character (Kelley, 1967). In fact, the FAE states that the same type of rationalization of negative behavior is not made for other people's observed negative behaviors compared to the rationalization for one's own negative behavior. The concepts of face saving (Goffman, 1955; 1959) and impression management emerge from an egocentric bias, and have received significant attention regarding their role in the attribution process. According to Goffman, face saving refers to the emotional drive to portray a positive image of self while trying to avoid embarrassment through face threatening acts. Face-saving drives may be a primary motivator for the attributor who is attempting to elevate dispositions of self above the character of the other person (Ross, 1977) or seek social approval (Jellison & Green, 1981), or for the actor who engages a particular behavior in an effort to present a positive image of self to others (Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001). Dispositional factors, such as the psychological dynamics just mentioned, may be the primary reasons for a person's negative behavior, not a misinterpreted character flaw or a particular undesirable dispositional trait of the actor. Therefore, some critics argue that the external-internal distinction associated with the FAE fails to fully grasp the complexity of causal influences, and they call for a clearer distinction to be made even within dispositional causal attributions (Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001). Clearly, research

on attributions, and specifically the FAE, has unveiled the complex nature of both causal influences among actors and potential attributional processes among observers, thus scrutinizing the status of the FAE as a persistent phenomenon in our social world.

To designate attributions for behavior as erroneous, a singular and definitive cause for the behavior must exist and be acknowledged. An *error* suggests someone missed the mark. In other words, for an attribution error to occur, an observer's causal attributions do not accurately match the actual cause for the actor's behavior. However, as Sabini, Siepmann, and Stein (2001) remind us, "there is typically no right answer to the question, 'Was this behavior internally or externally caused?'" (p. 8). Often multiple factors influence behavior, including some that may be misinterpreted as situational or dispositional. In fact, the FAE has been criticized as neither an "error" nor "fundamental" because it implies inaccuracy and universality (Harvey, Town, & Yarkin, 1981).

To shed some light on the debate and to find common ground for proponents and critics of the FAE, some scholars simply cite semantics as the main source of and solution to the problem. Since "error" infers inaccuracy, which presumes a clear and distinct reason for behavior which may or may not be recognizable, the alternate term "bias" has been recommended (Harvey & Weary, 1984). Therefore, some scholars prefer the previously introduced term "correspondence bias" when discussing the tendency to underestimate situational factors affecting behavior. While debate will likely persist, the biases involved in attributional processes will also continue to be examined and discussed. Clearly, decades of research have provided support for a subjective bias that often results in greater dispositional attributions for an actor's

behavior as compared to situational, making the FAE a social phenomenon that some have called "the most robust and ubiquitous finding in the domain of interpersonal perception" (Jones, 1990, p. 164).

The current study hopes to contribute new knowledge to the existing literature on causal attributions, specifically regarding the FAE and potential interventions to mitigate the attribution bias in interpersonal interactions. This study does not seek to settle the ongoing debate about the questioned consistency of findings with the FAE, but rather acknowledges that the FAE is a persistent social phenomenon that, due to multiple and complex influences, often corresponds with inaccurate or biased assessments of behavior. Based on that presupposition, this study examines two distinct interventions, namely empathy and accountability, which are expected to attenuate the FAE by increasing situational, rather than dispositional, attributions for behavior. Such findings aid efforts to increase theoretical understanding of the nature of the FAE as well as provide beneficial therapeutic applications for practitioners.

Verbal Aggressiveness

The specific communicative behavior being examined in the current study is verbal aggressiveness. By definition, verbal aggressiveness denotes "attacking the self-concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person's position on a topic of communication" in an effort to cause psychological pain (Infante & Wigley, 1986, p. 61). Verbal aggressiveness has emerged from a broader model of aggressive communication that includes two contrasting pairs of human expression, namely assertiveness/argumentation and hostility/verbal aggressiveness (Infante & Rancer, 1996). While assertiveness and argumentation are considered positive, constructive

expressions of aggression, hostility and verbal aggressiveness are considered negative, destructive expressions (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992). Moreover, verbal aggressiveness is an expression of the more global trait of hostility, meaning all verbal aggressiveness is hostile, but not all forms of hostility contain verbal aggressiveness (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Martin & Anderson, 1996).

Multiple typologies of verbal aggressiveness have emerged from past studies, but Infante and colleagues (Infante, 1987; Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992; Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990; Infante & Wigley, 1986) published arguably the most inclusive and recognized typology. The authors found that a verbally aggressive message can be placed in at least one of 10 categories: (a) competence attack, (b) character attack, (c) background attack, (d) physical appearance attack, (e) malediction, or a negative wish or curse, (f) teasing, (g) ridicule, (h) threats, (i) profanity, or (j) nonverbal emblems. These various forms of verbal aggressiveness are considered hurtful and typically prompt negative reactions from recipients (Kinney & Segrin, 1998). While extensive research has been done on the perceived causes and effects of verbal aggressiveness, the current study will investigate attributions by recipients of verbally aggressive messages based on the primary dimension of situational versus dispositional causes for this destructive behavior, and attempt to attenuate the expected bias toward dispositional causes.

Considerable research has been done on the negative effects of verbal aggressiveness. Negative emotional reactions evoked by verbally aggressive encounters include varied degrees of hurtfulness (Myers & Bryant, 2008; Infante et al., 1992), feelings of increased relational distance (Vangelisti & Young, 2000), and feelings of

anger, annoyance, sadness, depression, and fear (Kinney, 1994). Additionally, verbal aggressive attacks often prompt reciprocity in the form of counter attacks of verbal aggression or physical violence (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Sabourin, 1995). In fact, according to Berkowitz (1973), aggressive stimuli such as hostile forms of communication "can elicit impulsive aggressive responses from those persons who are set to act aggressively" (p. 113). Sabourin (1995) found support for patterns of negative reciprocity in abusive versus non-abusive marital relationships, and suggested skill deficiency in argumentation as a potential cause. In other words, if relational partners are ill-equipped to argue—one of the constructive expressions of aggressive behavior—then they are likely to respond with and reciprocate negative expressions of verbal aggressiveness.

Verbal aggressiveness was selected as the behavioral focus for this study because of two main reasons. First, verbal aggressiveness seemingly prompts causal attributions by recipients of verbally aggressive attacks. Assessment and interpretation of behavior can occur for virtually any action, but episodes that are unexpected, negative, and/or salient are presumed to require greater cognitive resources and generate attributions (Manusov, 2006). These three conditions are all seemingly represented by verbal aggressiveness. In fact, verbal aggressive behavior is considered a negative form of aggressive expression (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992) and a manifestation of hostility (Martin & Anderson, 1996), suggesting that verbal aggressiveness prompts greater cognitive resources when making attributions than compared with routine interactions. Moreover, negative behaviors are more likely than positive or neutral actions to activate attributional processes (Manusov, 1990), and

verbal attacks are thought to evoke specific emotional reactions through cognitive appraisal processes (Kinney, 1994). Clearly, negative behavior such as verbal aggressiveness triggers appraisal processes and prompts causal attributions.

While limited studies have addressed causal attributions associated with verbal aggressiveness (see Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Patten & Woods, 1978), past research suggests verbal aggressiveness is an especially suitable communicative act for which to examine attributions. For example, Kinney and Segrin (1998), found evidence for cognitive moderators such as self-discrepancies (i.e., beliefs about violating social standards) and sensitivity to feedback (i.e., the ability to classify incoming information as helpful or harmful to self) at work in the information processing responses to verbal aggressiveness. Because verbal aggressiveness triggers cognitions such as self-discrepancies and sensitivity to feedback, and cognitive processing is associated with attributional processing (Manusov, 2006), verbally aggressive behavior is positioned as a relevant and noteworthy subject of inquiry for this study.

The second point of rationale for the selection of verbal aggressiveness as the communicative behavior in this study is rooted in the interactional approach to verbal aggressiveness that has emerged in the literature (see Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). The recognition that dispositional and situational factors often interact to prompt aggressive behavior makes it possible for individuals to attribute aggression to either or both types of factors, thus providing the opportunity for the FAE to be present. It should be noted that much of the research tends to view verbal aggressiveness primarily from a dispositional perspective, recognizing personal traits and tendencies that prompt aggression. In fact, Beatty and McCroskey (1997) concluded that verbal aggressiveness

is “in our nature” (p. 446), emerging as expressions of innate, biological functions of a person. Furthermore, the four primary causes of verbal aggressiveness that have permeated much of the aggression literature all represent dispositional factors within the person: psychopathology, disdain, social learning, and argumentative skills deficiencies (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Infante & Wigley, 1986). Personal depression has also been associated with verbal aggressiveness in relational partners (Segrin & Fitzpatrick, 1992). Focusing on the communication-based cause among those previously listed, Infante, Chandler, and Rudd (1989) found support for the role of argumentative skills deficiency in assessing aggressive behavior. Specifically, the authors found that partners in violent marriages were less argumentative than those in nonviolent unions, and that partners in violent relationships demonstrated higher levels of verbal aggressiveness than those in nonviolent unions. Therefore, dispositional causes for aggression—including communication skills deficiency—undoubtedly have an influential role in provoking aggressive behavior. Additional support for a dispositional approach to verbal aggressiveness is seen in one of its primary modes of measurement. The trait verbal aggressiveness scale, a widely-used scale containing items such as “If individuals I am trying to influence really deserve it, I attack their character,” and “When I attack (people’s) ideas, I try not to damage their self-concepts,” is grounded in a dispositional perspective (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Based on the previous discussion, approaching verbal aggressiveness from a dispositional perspective has merit.

However, approaching verbal aggressiveness solely from a dispositional perspective raises some problems for a study on the FAE. For example, if verbal aggressive behavior is primarily caused by personality factors such as psychopathology,

disdain, social learning, and/or argumentative skills deficiencies, then making dispositional attributions such as these for verbally aggressive behavior would not be considered an "error." Rather, causal attributions based on the aggressor's personality and disposition would likely serve as an accurate representation of the factors prompting aggression. In other words, limiting one's sphere of possible causes strictly to dispositional factors excludes the possibility of situational attributions. Therefore, it is important to call attention to previous research that focuses on the role of certain *situational* factors in producing verbal aggressive behavior.

Numerous situational factors have been identified for their role in the expression of negative forms of communication such as verbal aggressiveness (Infante & Rancer, 1996). In fact, various situational factors have been shown to constrain or contribute to verbally aggressive behavior (Berkowitz, 1962). Interestingly, Wigley (2010) posits that more than half of all verbally aggressive encounters are a reactive response to situational events. Examples of situational factors that influence aggressive behavior include whether a conflict is violent or not (Infante, et al., 1990), the inflexibility of one's opponent (Infante, Trebing, Shepherd, & Seeds, 1984), gender (Infante, Wall, Leap, & Danielson, 1984; Kinney, Smith, & Donzella, 2001), the presence of aggression cues or the anticipation of positive consequences in a situation (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992), and verbal triggers (Wigley, 2010). Furthermore, in a study to determine some of the self-reported reasons for using verbal aggression, Infante, Riddle, Horvath, and Tumlin (1992) found that *situations* involving anger, bad moods, a desire for reciprocity, or negative humor were more likely to facilitate expressions of verbal aggressiveness. These types of studies are important because they

provide a broader perspective on the complex nature of verbally aggressive behavior by highlighting the influence and salience of multiple situational factors at work.

Rather than approaching verbal aggressiveness from either a dispositional *or* a situational perspective, an interactional approach more fully captures the complexity of the phenomenon. An interactional perspective recognizes the influence of both personality traits and various situational factors on verbal aggressiveness (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006) and understands behavior as a joint product of both situational and dispositional factors (Infante & Rancer, 1996). In fact, some scholars assert that delineating a single source—situational or dispositional factors—is impossible because both types of factors interact to influence behavior (Gilovich & Eibach, 2001). Applying the previously discussed studies, a hypothetical example of interactional influences on verbal aggressiveness might be helpful. An aggressor may harbor feelings of jealousy or disdain against someone viewed as an adversary (dispositional factors), and those internal forces may be triggered by ridicule or other forms of perceived hostility by the adversary (situational factors), thus resulting in a verbal assault by the aggressor. Past research has provided support for an interactional view of verbal aggressiveness. For example, in an interesting study of students seeking employment, Simmons, Lamude, and Scudder (2003) found that apprehension with job interviews was significantly and positively correlated with verbal aggressiveness. Internal apprehension interacted with the external process of being interviewed by another person and resulted in greater instances of verbal aggression.

Considering the previous example, some may disagree with the interactional description, arguing that apprehension is a personality trait and, therefore, should be

considered solely a dispositional attribution for aggressive behavior. However, if apprehension is only triggered by a stressful event such as a job interview, then the apprehension is grounded in a situational factor (i.e., the interview). Therefore, an objective observer must ask if the primary source of influence for aggression in such an episode is dispositional or situational. This rudimentary example's lack of clarity illustrates the understated and often unrecognized influence of the subtle interactions between dispositional and situational factors in many negative communication exchanges.

In a separate study on verbal aggressiveness and teacher burnout, support for an underlying interaction between dispositional and situational factors helps further illustrate the point. Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment were significantly related to verbal aggression in teachers (Avtgis & Rancer, 2008). These three dimensions of what the authors called "teacher burnout syndrome" (p. 86) are likely produced, or at least exasperated, by situational factors such as classroom conditions and student behavior. Again, an interactional approach best identifies the multiple and complex forces that influence aggressive behavior. Some scholars have concluded, "An interactional approach to personality contends that both the situational and trait approaches are deficient because each does not account for the variability in behavior explained by the other; however, the interactional approach considers both sources of behavioral variability" (Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 331). Therefore, because it is embedded in multiple external and internal sources—and both may be identified as potential causes of aggression—verbal aggressiveness presents itself as a viable communicative behavior in which to examine the FAE.

Interventions for Fundamental Attribution Error

Causal attributions are not permanent or inflexible interpretations of behavior. In fact, personal interactions with relevant information (i.e., education), persuasive arguments, and media presentations have been shown to change people's view of themselves, other people, and their environment (Ross, 1977). In attribution research, various informational cues are believed to influence the attributions people make about their social world (Kelley, 1967). For example, in their review of attribution research, Harvey and Weary (1984) described the influence of salience of stimuli on causal attributions, explaining that salient factors may draw causal attributions because (a) subjects often perceive dynamic events directly, (b) salient factors are easier to recall, (c) salience effects occur at the encoding stage of information processing, and/or (d) salience exerts influence across encoding, processing, and recall phases. In addition, affect and emotion have also been shown to influence attributions (Forgas & Locke, 2005). These authors found that individuals with happy moods reported more positive causal attributions while negative mood people were more critical. The authors also found that individuals in a positive mood were less attentive to external factors influencing behavior of self and others in hypothetical situations.

The current study attempts to reduce the FAE by using both empathy and accountability to influence attributions made about verbal aggressiveness. Mitigating the FAE, or more precisely, attempting to evoke more situational than dispositional attributions for a partner's verbal aggressiveness is an important undertaking for both theoretical and practical reasons. First, from a theoretical perspective, attempting to attenuate the FAE in verbally aggressive encounters helps us better understand the

attributional process by recognizing the intervening role of certain forces. Specifically, if inductions such as empathy and accountability successfully attenuate the FAE, then intervention efforts may be an effective way to minimize some biases in the attributional process.

Past research has shown that dispositional factors in the observer, such as mood (Forgas, 1998; Forgas & Locke, 2005), self-doubt (Reich & Arkin, 2006), feelings of jealousy (Bauerle, Amirkhan, & Hupka, 2002), and mindfulness (i.e., cognitive awareness of a situation from an objective standpoint) (Heppner et al., 2008) are related to the attributions people make about relational partners' behavior. If these and other internal forms of affect and cognition—including empathy and accountability—can be induced within the cognitions of the observer and introduced in the attributional process, then biases may be reduced, thus demonstrating the mitigating influence of certain forces such as empathy and accountability.

Existing research provides support for this bias-reducing approach. Specifically, Stalder (2000) viewed logic as a moderating factor and suggested providing training in logic and reasoning to diminish the FAE. Riggio and Garcia (2009) conducted an interesting study that involved participants viewing a video about the Jonestown cult, which vividly exposed the influence of strong social influence. Afterwards, they read a hypothetical story and made causal attributions about the main character's bad day. The authors found that both exposing individuals to "powerful situational forces" (p. 111) and providing information on the FAE were related to making fewer dispositional attributions and more situational attributions on an unrelated task. In a study that moved beyond a basic behavior-attribution situation, Howell and Shepperd (2011)

found that a simple demonstration on the FAE could improve a person's ability to recognize and identify the FAE in hypothetical situations. Past research has shown the mitigating influence on the FAE of certain informational, emotional, and psychological factors. The current study will continue this line of inquiry by examining the potential influence of empathy and accountability, and will contribute to the ongoing dialogue concerning theoretical aspects of the FAE.

The second rationale for attempting to attenuate some of the attributional biases during aggressive episodes in marriage relationships grows out of a practical concern. More clearly, situational attributions for negative behavior are believed to enhance relationships to a greater extent than dispositional attributions; therefore, intervention can be used with a therapeutic application. In their commentary on the FAE, Gilovich and Eibach (2001) referred to the attempt to attribute a person's failure, disability, and misfortune to relevant environmental factors rather than to the person's sense of self as a "great humanizing message" (p. 26). The irony of the previous statement cannot be ignored—shifting the focus from the person as the primary cause of behavior actually seems to promote the person! Consequently, a higher regard for the other person is expected to relate to a higher regard for the relationship and increased satisfaction.

This line of thinking makes sense when viewed in connection with existing attribution research in close relationships. Past studies have shown that negative nonverbal cues by romantic partners were viewed as more controllable, stable, and intentional as relationship satisfaction decreased (Manusov, 1990). These three attributes of behavior, which are associated with decreasing satisfaction, are more closely connected with the disposition of the person rather than the external situation.

Fincham (1985) produced similar results regarding the relationship between attributions and relationship satisfaction in married couples. The author found that distressed spouses, compared to nondistressed spouses, were more likely to view their partner and the relationship as the primary cause of marital problems. Additionally, individuals in distressed marriages viewed negative spouse behavior as selfish and intentional acts deserving of blame (Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987). The authors concluded from their research that distressed couples' attributions for the causes of negative behavior affect various aspects of the relationship. Moreover, Fincham, Beach, and Baucom (1987) found support for a negative attribution bias among distressed couples, wherein spouses made less benign attributions for their partners than for themselves. Similar studies have provided additional support for the relationship between attributions and satisfaction (Fincham, Beach, & Bradbury, 1989; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Fincham & Bradbury, 1989). Therefore, it is expected that close relationships can maintain or increase satisfaction levels if attributions for verbal aggressiveness are displaced from the disposition of a relational partner to the situations surrounding the episode. If reached, this expectation serves as an advantage for relationships that are generally healthy and would benefit from less negative reciprocity and more relationship-enhancing attributions. However, if the relationship is characterized by ongoing forms of oppression, neglect, or abuse, attempts at relationship-enhancing attributions may prolong the inevitable dissolution of a destructive relationship.

The main focus of this study is to examine the mitigating influence of empathy and accountability on the FAE within verbally aggressive interactions. Empathy has been defined as both a cognitive and affective response that involves assuming the

emotional role of another person and adopting his or her phenomenological perspective (Regan & Totten, 1975; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Accountability has been defined as the acknowledgment of "social pressures to explain or justify the position one has taken to others" (Tetlock, 1985, p. 229). Intervention attempts for both empathy and accountability are expected to associate, to a greater extent, with attributions of situational factors than with dispositional factors for partners' verbally aggressive behaviors. This expectation is important because it provides potential therapeutic help for close relationships by reducing attributional bias, and from a theoretical perspective it provides greater understanding of the attributional process and the FAE. Because certain informational cues and situational factors can influence the attributions people make (Kelley, 1967; Riggio & Garcia, 2009), it is reasonable to conclude that the salience of both empathy and accountability will directly impact causal attributions for aggressive encounters between individuals.

Empathy. Empathy involves assuming the emotional role of another person and adopting his or her phenomenological perspective (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Regan & Totten, 1975) and involves both affective and cognitive dimensions (Hoffman, 2000). The affective dimension includes concern, sympathy, and emotion while the cognitive dimension includes perspective-taking and point-of-view (Epley, Savitsky, & Gilovich, 2002; Hoffman, 2000). The current study will attempt to induce both dimensions of empathy, evoking perspective-taking and empathetic feelings through a brief video clip featuring personal perspectives of hypothetical characters.

This study expects empathy to attenuate the FAE (i.e., associate with greater situational attributions and fewer dispositional attributions) in verbally aggressive

interpersonal interactions because of two primary factors. First, because one's own behavior and the behavior of other people are often interpreted in relation to one's own perspective and egocentric biases (Ross & Sicoly, 1979), an intervention of empathy is expected to shift the interpretative lens from self to other. Causal attributions often become a useful resource for individuals trying to manage the self-presentation process (see Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001). Perceiving the behavior of a relational partner as different from one's own projected or real behavior often prompts the inclination to attribute the opposing behavior to personal character (Kelley, 1967). Accordingly, one's individual perspective often becomes the primary lens through which the observer sees and evaluates the surrounding social world. Support for such an egocentric perspective on attributions is provided by Jellison and Green (1981), who advanced Bradley's (1978) initial work on a self-presentation explanation for making causal attributions for self and other's behavior. The authors claimed that internal attributions of behavior are generally rewarded, but this claim refers mainly to attributions for behavior that is perceived as neutral or positive. When the behavior in question is perceived as negative, a person is likely to excuse himself by making situational attributions for his own negative actions. However, the same benefit-of-the doubt assessment is often not applied to other people's negative behaviors. If personal impression management—portraying a favorable image of self to others—is an overriding drive for making attributions, then an individual will likely blame internal characteristics for someone else's negative behavior while attributing his own negative behavior to external factors. However, if an empathetic perspective is introduced, an

observer of negative behavior may be more likely to consider the role of situational factors.

Egocentric patterns for making attributions are considered normative by some scholars (Crittenden & Wiley, 1985). People are generally expected to assess their own and other people's actions based on how those assessments influence self-presentation rather than considering the feelings, desires, or perspective of the other person. Thus, by conforming to attributional norms, an individual's interpersonal environment can be controlled and the resulting degree of social approval he receives can be managed (Sagaturn & Knudsen, 1982). Social norms that influence the self-presentation nature of attributions are guided by at least two primary factors: audience and social roles (Tetlock, 1981). According to Tetlock, a person making attributions considers the unique perspective of the surrounding audience and the desired role-identity the individual wants to portray when making attributions. To what extent this principle is applicable to interpersonal contexts, as opposed to public social settings, will be examined in the current study. As stated earlier, social expectations and perceptions of oneself often provide the basis for assessing the behavior of others. However, an intervention of empathy is expected to attenuate the self-presentation norms associated with attributions. If the egocentric nature of the attributional process can be mitigated through induced feelings of empathy and perspective-taking, individuals may be more inclined to look outside of themselves and less inclined to attribute the negative behaviors of relational partners to dispositional factors.

A second factor that lends support to the expectation that empathy will mitigate the FAE involves the way people process information when making attributions.

Kelley's (1967) original model of attribution processing suggests that people systematically process available information about a behavior's consistency over time, distinctiveness in its context, and consensus across individuals. However, the elements involved in processing information are altered as perspective changes. For the actor, visual cues about the surrounding environment and circumstances become salient, while for the observer, information about the actor and the specific behavior become relevant (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). These varying frames of reference represent divergent perspectives of the actor and observer that often reveal bias. Specifically, the observer's actions are attributed to situational factors by the observer while the actor's behavior is attributed to dispositional influences (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Regan and Totten (1975) tested the information-processing postulation by instructing individuals to take on the role of the other person before making attributions. The authors found that observers instructed to be empathic made relatively more situational and less dispositional attributions for actors' behaviors, concluding that the perspective a person adopts influences the way the individual processes available information and assesses behavior. While empathy, induced by a researcher through direct instructions, has been shown to have a mitigating effect on attributions, the current study will attempt to evoke a more natural form of empathy (i.e., induced rather than instructed) by using a visual device to prompt perspective-taking cognitions and empathetic concern in observers. As the observer adopts the perspective of a relational partner who initiates verbal aggressiveness, he/she is expected to process available information from the divergent role and make relatively more situational attributions than dispositional attributions for the aggressive behavior.

Accountability. Accountability is also expected to have a mitigating influence on the FAE within a verbally aggressive episode. Accountability refers to the expectation of explaining or justifying to others the position a person has taken (Tetlock, 1985). Much like empathy affects the way information is processed by individuals making causal attributions, "accountability can profoundly affect the cognitive strategies that people use to process social information" (Tetlock, 1985, p. 229). According to Chaiken (1980), subjects who expected to discuss or defend their opinions and judgments processed messages differently than those who felt unaccountable. Interestingly, accountability has been shown to be an effective intervention in attenuating feelings of punitiveness when people make attributions about the harmful behaviors of another person (Lerner, Goldberg, & Tetlock, 1998). Lerner and colleagues found that when viewing an anger-priming video clip, punitive attributions were less severe when made by individuals who were held accountable for their responses. Accountability was induced by creating an expectation among subjects to answer for their assessments in a post-hoc interview. Presumably, when people know they must answer for their perceptions and behaviors, they assess information and/or manage their responses in different ways than when there is no perception of accountability. This assumption reflects some of the basic tenets of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). At its most basic level, the ELM describes the process of exogenous factors influencing process variables, which in turn affect outcome variables (Mongeau & Stiff, 1993). Specifically, elaboration occurs when an individual purposely processes and scrutinizes the available information, draw inferences about the information, and derives an attitude or plan of action in response.

When elaboration likelihood is high, an individual more likely invokes a central route while low elaboration likelihood typically triggers a peripheral route by which to process information (Petty, Kasmer, Haugtvedt, & Cacioppo, 1987). Applied to the current context, an accountability intervention is expected to incite central route processing among individuals by forcing them to consider the potential consequences of justifying their responses, suggesting that accountable individuals will make more situational attributions after processing the implications of their appraisals.

Nesdale and Rule (1974) found support for the mitigating effect of accountability in the context of assessing aggressive behaviors. In their research, the authors found that when people had the expectation of explaining their judgments of others' aggressive behaviors, they saw little difference in both deservedness of punishment and valence of intentions between attractive and unattractive aggressors as compared to when they did not expect to explain their responses. Accountability altered assessments of aggressive behavior. In the current study, accountability as an intervention is expected to have a similar effect, attenuating the FAE as observers make attributions for others' verbally aggressive behavior while under the assumption of explaining their own assessments.

The prediction that accountability will alter attributions and attenuate the FAE in response to verbally aggressive encounters is primarily based on a self-presentation perspective (i.e., managing one's interpersonal environment from an ego-centric perspective) discussed in previous literature. Crittenden and Wiley (1985) found support for an egotistical pattern of making attributions, suggesting self-serving attributions are made to either achieve social approval or to maintain self-esteem.

Therefore, it makes good sense to expect some level of interpretive modification and self-censorship when people know they must explain their actions and assessments to a neutral third party. Because dispositional factors reflect on the personal traits of an individual, attributing someone else's negative behavior to dispositional factors rather than situational factors could potentially place the attributor in the crosshairs of criticism because blame is attached directly to the other person. This type of counter-attack is consistent with the existing research on verbal aggressiveness, providing support for negative reciprocity in aggressive encounters (Berkowitz, 1973; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Sabourin, 1995). However, an induction of accountability may break the cycle of negative reciprocity because accountability "turns people into fence sitters who rarely stray from the 'safe' neutral points of the scales on which they express judgments" (Tetlock, 1985, p. 229). It could be argued that situational attributions for verbal aggression are safer, more neutral interpretations of behavior than dispositional attributions, thus making it easier for attributors to justify their interpretations to others.

Therefore, based on the attenuating effect of both empathy and accountability, the current study makes the following predictions:

H1: Individuals who receive an empathy intervention will attribute their partner's verbally aggressive message to situational factors rather than to dispositional factors to a greater extent than those who do not receive any type of intervention.

H2: Individuals who receive an accountability intervention will attribute their partner's verbally aggressive message to situational factors rather

than to dispositional factors to a greater extent than those who do not receive any type of intervention.

Perceptions of relationship satisfaction and closeness are also expected to have an effect on the FAE in the context of a verbally aggressive episode. Specifically, individuals in marital relationships who perceive greater relationship satisfaction are expected to attribute their partner's aggressive behavior to situational factors to a greater extent than to dispositional factors. The basis for this expectation comes primarily from previously found associations between satisfaction levels and attribution types. In the context of negative relationship interactions, "when people are hurt, their attributions of intent are affected by their past, present, and future associations with the person who hurt their feelings" (Vangelisti, 2001, p. 44). Perceptions about the relationship influence attributions made within the relationship.

An association between attributions and satisfaction in romantic relationships has been found in past studies. In the context of marital relationships, unhappy partners, rather than happy marriage partners, tended to make more negative attributions about their spouses (Johnson, Karney, Rogge, & Bradbury, 2001). Furthermore, in a longitudinal study on marriage, maladaptive causal and responsibility attributions for both spousal behavior and negative events in the relationship predicted adverse shifts in wives' satisfaction levels over one year (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). Interestingly, however, the authors found that *initial* satisfaction levels did not produce significant changes in attributions of behaviors by partners. Therefore, this research generated a hypothesis about the directional association between attributions and relationship satisfaction, noting that partners' attributions affect perceived satisfaction levels.

According to Johnson et al. (2001), this attributions-affect-satisfaction postulation is represented in broader relationship development research and has spawned treatments to reduce distress in relationships. Specifically, behavioral therapy aims at improving the quality of relationships by addressing marriage partners' patterns of thinking, thereby resulting in modified behaviors (Manusov, 2006). However, this unconventional directional line of thinking challenges long-held assumptions about the association between attributions and relationship satisfaction.

The traditional social psychological model suggests a top-down approach, wherein relational satisfaction directly affects attributions (Johnson, Karney, Rogge, & Bradbury, 2001). For example, an individual may be displeased with his or her spouse and unsatisfied with the marriage relationship, thus triggering negative attributions about the spouse's behavior. Support for these types of "distress-maintaining" or "maladaptive attributions" has been found by multiple researchers (Fincham, 1985; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1988; Karney et al., 1994). Conversely, when a relational partner perceives satisfaction in the marriage, he or she is likely to make "relationship-enhancing" attributions about the spouse's behaviors (Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987). Both the distress-maintaining and relationship-enhancing approaches to the attributional process seem to elevate the influential role of perceptions of satisfaction in shaping one's attributions about behavior.

Building on research that supports both the attributions-affect-satisfaction and satisfaction-affects-attributions approaches, some scholars have expanded the directional order of satisfaction and attributions to include a two-way, reciprocal model. Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, and Heron (1987) looked at dating relationships and

discovered a relationship between causal attributions and perceived levels of happiness, commitment, and love in the relationship, positing a potential dual directional connection. The authors concluded that changing levels of happiness, commitment, and love could produce shifts in attributional patterns, or that changes in attributions about the relationship or partner could result in changes in perceptions of happiness, commitment, and love. In addition to dating relationships, support for a dual directional model of attributions and satisfaction has also been explicated for marriage, suggesting that certain attributions influence satisfaction, and that perceptions of satisfaction also affect the types of attributions made about spousal behavior (Johnson, Karney, Rogge, & Bradbury, 2001). These and other similar studies support a reciprocal causal influence between relationship satisfaction and attributions for behavior (Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000).

Informed by the previous studies in romantic relationships, the current study examines the influence of relationship satisfaction on causal attributions for verbal aggressiveness. Because verbally aggressive episodes recalled in this study may have occurred over one year ago, participants are recollecting their original attributions for behavior at virtually the same time as they are reporting satisfaction levels. However, this study asks individuals to report satisfaction levels prior to recalling and reporting attributions for their partner's verbal aggressiveness, and expects greater satisfaction levels to associate with more situational attributions rather than dispositional attributions. Understanding that attributions and satisfaction are related suggests that relational partners who report high satisfaction will attempt to maintain those higher levels of satisfaction even when assessing aggressive behavior. Manusov (2006) and

Manusov and associates' (1997) work on attributions in relationships supports this proposition. They found evidence that relational partners often make biased attributions, either distress-maintaining or relationship-enhancing, based on their satisfaction levels.

Therefore, individuals who are highly satisfied with their relationship are expected to attribute aggressive behavior, such as verbal aggressiveness, to anything other than their partner's character or disposition. Otherwise, the relationship would be jeopardized. Naturally, if the aggressive behavior is attributed to the person, it is more likely to be viewed as persistent, recurring, and damaging. Attributing aggression to one's circumstances, however, provides justification for the behavior and offers hope that the behavior will not endure. Therefore, attributing negative behavior to situational factors, rather than dispositional factors, may be done by individuals as a relationship-enhancing exercise. Based on the previous rationale, this study makes the following prediction:

> *H3:* Individuals who report higher (a) relationship satisfaction and (b) relationship closeness attribute their partner's verbally aggressive message to situational factors rather than to dispositional factors to a greater extent.

While satisfaction levels are expected to influence attributions made for verbally aggressive episodes in marriage, the perceived severity of the aggressive encounter is also expected to have an impact on satisfaction and attributions. According to Johnson and colleagues (2001), "when there are negative behaviors that need to be understood, those who make maladaptive attributions will suffer negative changes in their

relationship" (p. 189). Therefore, when it comes to causal attributions and relationship satisfaction, it appears a threshold may exist for negative behaviors. In other words, if a person assesses his/her relational partner's aggressive behavior as hurtful yet bearable, satisfaction levels may stay intact and attributions may be more situational than dispositional. However, if a person assesses his/her relational partner's aggressive behavior as particularly egregious, relationship satisfaction may not endure and relationship-enhancing attributions may subside. Patten and Woods (1978) provided evidence for the association between severity and dispositional attributions when they found that the perceived severity of verbal aggressiveness by individuals was positively related to blaming the aggressor and negatively related to blaming self. Senchak and Leonard (1994) produced similar findings, showing that wives held their partners' character much more responsible than their own character for severe physical aggression in the marriage.

Moreover, intense emotional distress may elicit dispositional attributions for the aggressive behavior, and because the tendency of many who perceive emotional pain is to avoid further pain (Vangelisti, 2001), relationship distancing is likely to occur. Therefore, based on the supposition that emotional distress and the perceived severity of the aggressive episode influence and are influenced by satisfaction and the attributions individuals make, this study also makes the following predictions:

> *H4:* Individuals who attribute greater emotional distress as recalled for their partner's verbally aggressive message report (a) lower levels of relationship satisfaction and (b) greater levels of relational harm.

H5: Individuals who attribute greater severity associated with their partner's verbally aggressive message report (a) lower levels of relationship satisfaction and (b) greater levels of relational harm.

H6: Perceptions of (a) emotional distress associated with a partner's verbal aggressiveness and (b) severity associated with the aggressive episode have a significant relationship with dispositional attributions, but are unrelated to situational attributions.

Chapter 3: Method

Participants

This study enlisted participation from 419 individuals throughout North America who were 18-65 years old and in a marriage relationship for at least six months. Thirty-nine participants were removed from the study because they could not identify a specific episode of verbally aggressive behavior from their partners. An additional eight individuals from the empathy and additive conditions were removed because they were unable to view and hear the empathy induction video clip embedded in the online survey. Therefore, data from a total of 372 participants was analyzed for this study.

Participants in the study varied in age as follows: 18-29 years old (9.7%), 30-39 years old (20.2%), 40-49 years old (21.5%), 50-59 years old (30.6%), and 60-65 years old (18%). For the 372 participants in this study, there were slightly more women (50.5%) than men (49.5%). The majority of participants were Non-Hispanic white (81.5%), followed by Hispanic/Latino Americans (7.5%), Black/African American (4.3%), East Asian/Asian American (3.2%), American Indian/Native American/Alaskan Native (3%), South Asian/Indian American (1.6%), Middle Eastern/Arab American (.5%), and those who identified as "other" (.5%). Participants were from diverse geographical locations, representing 42 states in the United States, Washington D.C., and British Columbia, Canada. The length of time in their current marriage relationship also varied based on the following time frames: married six months to five years (25.3%), married 6-10 years (17.5%), married 11-20 years (24.2%), and married 21-plus years (33.1%), with the average length of the current relationship as 14.6 years.

Most of the individuals in the study were currently living with their partner (96%) as compared to those not currently living with their partner (3.8%) at the time of the study.

Various levels of education were represented in the study population, including 21.8% who completed a high school degree, G.E.D., or less; 37.7% who completed a two-year college degree or at least some college classes; 25.8% who completed an undergraduate college degree; 12.6% who completed some graduate work or earned a master's degree; and 2.1% who completed a doctorate or professional degree. Reported annual household income was dispersed among several levels for participants: less than $20,000 (8.6%), $20,000 to $39,999 (21.5%), $40,000 to $59,999 (25%), $60,000 to $79,999 (21%), $80,000 to $99,999 (9.7%), $100,000 to $199,999 (5.1%), $120,000 to $139,999 (4.6%), $140,000 to $159,999 (2.4%), $160,000 to $179,999 (1.1%), and over $180,000 (1.1%).

Procedures

Participants were recruited through Qualtrics Panels, an online survey builder and population generator. In exchange for their participation, individuals received a retail gift card (approximately $5-$10 in value) or nominal cash credit from Qualtrics. Through an online survey, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (a) empathy, (b) accountability, (c) additive (i.e., participants received both empathy and accountability manipulations), and (d) control. All participants completed an online assessment based on their perceptions of a specific verbally aggressive episode with their marriage partners. First, participants reported perceptions of relationship satisfaction and relationship closeness. Second, participants were asked to recall a single verbally aggressive episode they personally experienced in their

marriage, and report attributions and perceptions associated with that aggressive episode. Based on Infante and Wigley's (1986) definition of verbal aggressiveness and the typology provided by Infante et al., (1990), the following instructions were given to participants:

> Please think of a time when your romantic partner said something to you in an attempt to hurt you. Maybe it occurred during a discussion, argument, or conflict situation, and your romantic partner said something that hurt you or made you feel targeted by him/her. Examples of this type of interaction might include—but are not limited to—cruel teasing, cursing, threats, or insensitive words aimed at your physical appearance, your abilities, or your personal character. Recall a specific time when your romantic partner expressed this type of verbally aggressive behavior towards you.

Participants were asked to write a few descriptive sentences about the specific verbally aggressive episode with their marriage partner. A cursory reading of the open-ended responses revealed accurate interpretations of specific verbal aggressive episodes by participants.

Participants were also asked to identify the type of verbally aggressive message from their partner based on the typology from Infante et al. (1990). Competence attacks (21.5%) were identified slightly more often than character attacks (21%), followed by nonverbal actions that attack self-concept (16%), those identified as "other" (13.4%), swearing and using obscenities (9.4%), physical appearance attacks (6.5%), background attacks (6.2%), teasing or ridiculing (4.3%), cursing (i.e., hoping for misfortune) (.8%),

and threats to punish (.8%). Most of the verbally aggressive episodes recalled by participants occurred within the past year (70.5%). Specifically, the amount of time since the episode varied among individuals based on these time frames: within the past month (33.9%), 1-6 months ago (27.2%), 7-12 months ago (9.4%), and over one year ago (29.6%).

Third, after recalling and briefly describing a specific episode of verbal aggressiveness, participants reported causal attributions for the aggressive behavior from an observer's (i.e., the recipient of the aggressive message) perspective. They also reported perceptions of emotional distress and relational harm associated with the aggressive episode. Before reporting causal attributions and perceptions of their partner's aggressive behavior, individuals in the empathy and additive treatment groups were asked to watch a four-and-a-half minute video clip based on the underlying "stories" of people in a hospital, inviting viewers to consider the perspectives of various individuals in the hospital on a particular day. Additionally, participants in the empathy and additive conditions were instructed to put themselves in their partner's place and feel what they felt before and when the specific verbally aggressive episode took place. The visual and verbal cues in the empathy manipulation were used to enact perspective-taking (Regan & Totten, 1975) and induce empathetic feelings (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987) among participants.

Before participants in the accountability and additive conditions made attributions for their partners' aggressive behavior, they received the accountability manipulation. These participants were given the following instructions: "Within one week after completion of this survey, you will be sent a brief follow-up survey,

requesting you to justify and explain your responses on this survey. Specifically, the follow-up survey will ask you to justify and explain your perceptions about your romantic partner/spouse." A similar accountability induction was used by Tetlock (1985) and Nesdale and Rule (1974), who informed participants they would be called upon to justify the impressions they formed to a research associate. Participants receiving the accountability manipulation in the present study completed the online assessment with the expectation they would have to justify their responses, including the attributions they made for their partners' behavior. However, in reality no actual follow-up surveys were distributed and none of the participants in the present study were ever asked to justify their responses. Participants receiving the accountability manipulation were debriefed as to the purpose of the deception used in the manipulation, and were asked to confirm their desire to participate in the study after learning of the manipulation deception.

Finally, participants responded to empathy and accountability manipulation check items and provided demographic information. Data from participants in all four conditions was collected and analyzed.

Measures

Causal Attributions. Based on Solomon's (1978) assertion that situational and dispositional attributions are not inversely related, as some prior research had posited, the current study measured situational and dispositional attributions as separate variables rather than on one continuous scale. Guided by methods and measures from past research (see Waas & Honer, 1990; Lowe & Medway, 1975; Storms, 1973) four items were used to measure situational attributions and four items were used to measure

dispositional attributions on 5-point Likert scales. The items used to measure situational attributions included (a) “My partner’s behavior was due to difficult circumstances at that time,” (*M* = 3.11, *sd* = 1.26), (b) “My partner’s behavior was triggered by my own behavior,” (*M* = 2.95, *sd* = 1.25), (c) “My partner’s behavior was an outward act mainly caused by his/her circumstances,” (*M* = 3.26, *sd* = 1.09), and (d) “The specific situation or circumstances should not be blamed for my partner’s behavior,” (reverse-coded) (*M* = 3.05, *sd* = 1.14). The reliability alpha for the four situational attribution items was below the acceptable level (Cronbach’s α = .33).

A second scale, containing two items on a 10-point semantic differential (Reeder, et al., 2004) was also used to measure situational attributions. Items included (a) “To what extent was your romantic partner’s verbally aggressive behavior due to the situation your partner was in?” (*M* = 6.21, *sd* = 2.96) and (b) “To what extent was your romantic partner’s verbally aggressive behavior caused by his/her surroundings?” (*M* = 4.66, *sd* = 2.83). Internal consistency improved with the second scale (SB_r = .61). To increase reliability, the two scales for situational attributions were combined and all six items were standardized into z-scores (Cronbach’s α = .62). A situational attribution index for each participant was created using the mean of the z-scores and was used in all analyses.

Dispositional attributions for a partner’s verbally aggressive behavior were measured similarly to situational attributions. Informed by previous research (Waas & Honer, 1990; Lowe & Medway, 1975; Storms, 1973) four items were used to measure dispositional attributions on a 5-point Likert scale. The items used to measure dispositional attributions included (a) “My romantic partner’s behavior was due to

his/her personality," (M = 3.25, sd = 1.21), (b) "My romantic partner's behavior was not caused by a personality trait of my partner," (reverse-coded) (M = 2.93, sd = 1.23), (c) "My romantic partner should be blamed for his/her behavior," (M = 3.22, sd = 1.16), and (d) "My partner's behavior was done on purpose because he/she enjoyed it or wanted to hurt me," (M = 2.24, sd = 1.26). Internal consistency for the items was acceptable (Cronbach's α = .78). Additionally, a 10-point semantic differential scale similar to Reeder et al. (2004) contained two items to measure dispositional attributions: (a) "To what extent was your romantic partner's verbally aggressive behavior due to your partner's personality?" (M = 5.25, sd = 3.01) and (b) "To what extent did your romantic partner's verbally aggressive behavior reflect his/her character?" (M = 5.09, sd = 3). Internal reliability for the two items was high (SB_r = .86). To use as a dependent variable alongside the standardized index for situational attributions, the two dispositional attribution scales were combined, standardized into z-scores, and a dispositional attribution index, based on the mean of the z-scores, was used for all analyses (Cronbach's α = .87).

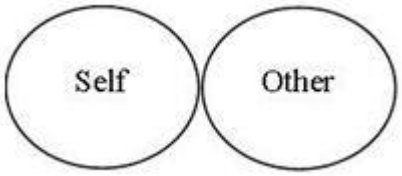
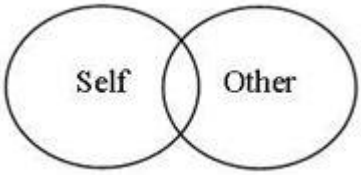
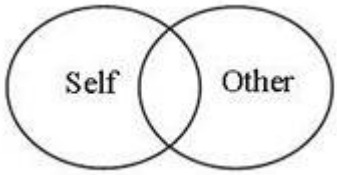
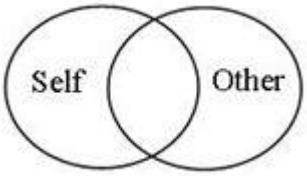
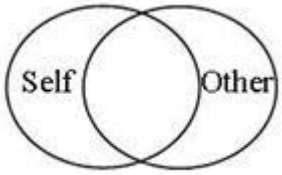
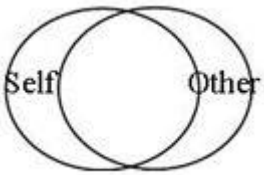
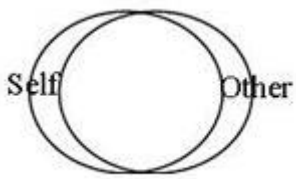
Relationship satisfaction. Hendrick's (1988) Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RAS) was used to assess individuals' perceptions of satisfaction with their marriage relationship. The RAS is a 7-item scale designed to measure general relationship satisfaction. Participants responded to each item using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). According to the author, the RAS is an efficient and effective measure of relationship satisfaction because it "has a coherent factor structure, is internally consistent, is solidly and consistently related to measures of relevant constructs such as love and self-esteem, and shows an extremely high

correlation with the longer Dyadic Adjustment Scale, a well-respected measure of dyadic satisfaction" (Hendrick, 1988, p. 97). Items on the RAS included (a) "How well does your romantic partner meet your needs?" (*M* = 3.92, *sd* = 1.08), (b) "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" (*M* = 4.06, *sd* = .99), (c) "How good is your relationship compared to most?" (*M* = 4.11, *sd* = .97), (d) "How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?" (reverse-coded) (*M* = 4.12, *sd* = 1.22), (e) "To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?" (*M* = 3.77, *sd* = 1.08), (f) "How much do you love your romantic partner?" (*M* = 4.53, *sd* = .88), and (g) "How many problems are there in your relationship?" (reverse-coded) (*M* = 3.43, *sd* = 1.20). Coefficient alpha for the items, .91, indicated high internal reliability.

Relationship closeness. Relationship closeness was assessed using the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smallon, 1992). This scale is a one-item pictorial measure of relationship closeness based on two dimensions of closeness: feeling close and behaving close. Each figure in the pictorial measure consists of two comparative circles and represents a different degree of closeness as perceived by the individual. The seven figures in the measure progress linearly and create an interval-level scale. Reliability on the original single-item measure was obtained through test-retest analysis by Aron, Aron, and Smallon (1992) using a two week time period, resulting in the following correlations: *r* = .83 overall, *r* = .85 for family relationships, *r* = .86 for friendships, and *r* = .85 for romantic relationships. To view the IOS scale and see percentages representing each degree of closeness perceived by participants in the present study, see Table 1.

Table 1

Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smallon, 1992)

Degree of Closeness	Percent
	7%
	7%
	7.8%
	11%
	19.1%
	18.5%
	29.3%

Emotional distress. Emotional distress was measured with the widely-used Impact of Event Scale-6 (IES-6; Thoresen et al., 2010) (Appendix A). The IES-6 is an abbreviated form of an earlier revision of the IES, created to assess subjective emotional distress following exposure to a potentially traumatic event. The self-report measure represents all three subscales associated with assessing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (0 = not at all, 1 = a little bit, 2 = moderately, 3 = quite a bit, and 4 = extremely). The 6-item measure contained the following items, comprising the three subscales: "I thought about it when I didn't mean to," (M = 2.58, sd = 1.15) and "Other things kept making me think about it," (M = 2.34, sd = 1.24) (intrusion subscale); "I was aware that I still had a lot of feelings about it, but I didn't deal with them," (M = 2.46, sd = 1.21) and "I tried not to think about it," (M = 2.97, sd = 1.26) (avoidance subscale); and "I felt watchful or on-guard," (M = 2.43, sd = 1.33) and "I had trouble concentrating," (M = 2.18, sd = 1.29) (hyperarousal subscale). The IES-6 showed good internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$).

Severity of Episode. The perceived severity of the verbally aggressive episode was assessed using the perceived severity scale, a dimension of the Risk Behavior Diagnosis (RBD) Scale used by health care providers to develop effective health risk messages (Witte, Cameron, McKeon, & Berkowitz, 1996). Wording on the three items for the perceived severity scale—originally used to measure the severity associated with a general health threat—was slightly modified to correspond with a particular verbally aggressive encounter. Specifically, (a) the item "I believe that [health threat] is severe," was be changed to "I believe the verbally aggressive encounter was severe," (M = 2.64,

sd = 1.23), (b) the item "I believe that [health threat] is serious," was changed to "I believe the verbally aggressive encounter was serious," (*M* = 3.01, *sd* = 1.23), and (c) the item "I believe that [health threat] is significant," was modified to "I believe the verbally aggressive encounter was significant," (*M* = 3.11, *sd* = 1.16). A fourth item was added, "I believe the verbally aggressive encounter was important," (*M* = 3.30, *sd* = 1.12). Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was calculated to provide an indication of reliability (α = .84). A perceived severity of encounter index was calculated for each participant by averaging the scores of all four items.

Relational Harm. Items used to measure relational harm were taken from Johnson and Roloff (2000) who asked subjects to report if their relationship became closer/more distant (*M* = 4.0, *sd* = 1.8), stronger/weaker (*M* = 3.86, *sd* = 1.75), and more sad/happier (reverse-coded) (*M* = 4.04, *sd* = 1.77) on a 7-point semantic differential scale. To make the scale a four-item scale, participants were also asked to assess the extent to which the relationship became more satisfying/less satisfying (*M* = 4.08, *sd* = 1.82). The four items were combined and the mean was calculated to form an index for perceived relational harm. Higher scores on the index associated with greater relational harm perceived by individuals. Coefficient alpha for the items, .97, indicated high internal reliability.

Empathy. In pilot testing for the present study, empathy was induced using two separate methods. In one pre-test condition (i.e., empathy #1), an attempt to induce empathy came through simple instructions for participants to put themselves in their marriage partner's place and "feel what he/she felt before and when the specific

interaction took place." A similar manipulation approach has been used previously in empathy-related research (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Batson, 1991). Furthermore, Belman and Flanagan (2009) found that when designing video games, instructing the reader/viewer to take an empathetic posture from the beginning and trying to emphasize similarities between characters and the observer were influential in fostering empathy.

In a second pre-test empathy condition (i.e., empathy #2), participants were first asked to recall any hardships their partners may have encountered at the time of the specific verbally aggressive episode. Specifically, participants were given the following instructions:

> As you think about this interaction with your romantic partner, try to recall any difficulties, hardships, or stressful events that are beyond his/her control that your partner may have experienced (e.g., stress with coworkers, job loss, academic pressure, physical challenges, difficult stage of life, previous or current abuse, addictive behavior, family conflict, financial stress or loss, feelings of sadness, etc.). List and briefly describe any troubles/hardships that your romantic partner has dealt with or is currently dealing with.

These instructions were expected to induce perspective-taking cognitions, which is an important dimension of empathy (Manney, 2008; Epley, Savitsky, & Gilovich, 2002; Hoffman, 2000). After reading these instructions, participants in the second empathy pre-test condition were also asked to put themselves in their partner's place and try to feel what he/she felt prior to and during the verbally aggressive episode. The

two empathy manipulations were pre-tested and analyzed for effectiveness. Univariate analysis from the pilot test showed no significant difference between the five pre-test conditions—accountability (M = 3.27, sd = 0.93), empathy #1 (M = 3.17, sd = 0.50), empathy #2 (M = 2.80, sd = 1.02), additive (M = 3.30, sd = 1.24), and control (M = 3.28, sd = 1.0)—on feelings of empathy, $F(4, 39) = 0.46$, $p = .76$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Therefore, a more robust empathy manipulation for the present study was pursued.

Although perspective-taking instructions have been shown to induce feelings of empathy in previous research (Batson & Moran, 1999), the current study sought to reach beyond perspective-taking cognitions and tap into the emotive aspect of empathy. Specific feelings associated with empathy have been identified in previous research, including sympathy, feeling moved, compassion, tenderness, warmth, and soft-heartedness (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987). Both perspective-taking cognitions and empathetic concern (i.e., emotional responses) are important aspects of empathy (Davis, 1980). In an attempt to induce general feelings of empathy, participants in the empathy and additive conditions of the present study were asked to view a brief video clip depicting the individual "stories" of fictional patients, visitors, family members, nurses, physicians, and other people inside a hospital on a given day.

Using drawings of shapes to examine people's perceptions, Ihde (1986) introduced "the story" as a metaphorical device used to trigger familiarity within the perceiver. Familiarity—or the inclination to connect with another person—is expected to elicit perspective-taking cognitions and empathetic feelings. In fact, storytelling is thought to be an "imaginative act of the reader translating the words on the page into thoughts and feelings, enabling them to see the world through the characters' eyes and

feel their feelings" (Manney, 2008, p. 52). Because arguments can be made and developed effectively through the detailed movements of a narrative (Babrow, Kline, & Rawlins, 2005), a visual story device (i.e., video clip) was introduced in the current study as a perceptual lens through which participants could feel empathetic as they interpreted aggressive behavior from relational partners.

A four-and-a-half minute video clip, titled "Empathy: The Human Connection to Patient Care" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDDWvj_q-o8) was created by the Cleveland Clinic and used by permission (see Appendix B) in the present study as the empathy manipulation. The high-quality video production begins with a quotation written on the screen from Henry David Thoreau: "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" The video then takes the viewer on a slow-motion virtual tour through a hospital and introduces various people in the hospital. The viewer learns an important part of each person's personal story from brief descriptions written on the screen. For example, a man in a wheelchair is helped into the hospital and these words appear: "He has been dreading this appointment. Fears he waited too long." As the man in the wheelchair passes a younger man holding a coffee cup, the camera locks in on the young man as he walks toward the exit. We learn his story: "Wife's surgery went well. Going home to rest." The viewer also sees a nurse providing care for a patient on a gurney and learns that the nurse is "nearing the end of a 12-hour shift." Throughout the brief video clip, the viewer is introduced to several other patients, visitors, family members, nurses, doctors, employees, and other individuals in the hospital, getting a glimpse of each of their "stories" and being asked to consider their perspectives.

In a second round of pre-testing, the empathy video manipulation was compared to the other conditions not viewing the video. While initial univariate analysis yielded no significant differences between the four conditions on empathetic feelings, $F(5, 44) = .68$, $p = .64$, $\eta^2 = .07$, raw mean scores revealed participants in the empathy video condition ($M = 3.67$, $sd = .91$) did report greater feelings of empathy than all the other groups, including the accountability ($M = 3.27$, $sd = .93$), empathy #1, in which individuals were asked to put themselves in their partner's place and feel what they felt ($M = 3.17$, $sd = .50$), empathy #2, in which individuals were asked to recall specific hardships, stressors, and difficulties their partners were facing while putting themselves in their partner's place ($M = 2.8$, $sd = 1.02$), additive ($M = 3.3$, $sd = 1.24$), and control ($M = 3.28$, $sd = 1.0$) conditions. Because insignificant differences may be due to the small sample size in the pilot test and a comparison of means provided marginal support, the empathy video clip and perspective-taking instructions were used as the empathy manipulation in the present study.

Feelings of Empathy. Five items from Johnson et al. (2002) were used to assess the extent of empathy felt by individuals toward their marriage partners. Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = extremely) and assessed various feelings associated with empathy. Items included (a) feelings of sympathy ($M = 2.57$, $sd = 1.3$), (b) feelings of compassion ($M = 2.75$, $sd = 1.27$), (c) feelings of warmth ($M = 3.05$, $sd = 1.33$), (d) feelings of softheartedness ($M = 2.94$, $sd = 1.28$), and (e) feelings of being moved toward one's partner ($M = 2.76$, $sd = 1.28$). Internal reliability for the five items was very high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Accountability. Accountability was induced through the use of explicit instructions given to participants in the accountability and additive conditions at the onset of the online survey. Participants in these conditions were informed they would be given a follow-up survey within a week of completing the original survey. The purpose of the follow-up survey—as explained in the instructions—was to give participants an opportunity to justify and explain their responses on the original survey. The following instructions were given to participants in the accountability and additive conditions: "Important: Within one week after completion of this survey, you will be sent a brief follow-up survey, requesting you to justify and explain your responses on this survey. Specifically, the follow-up survey will ask you to justify and explain your perceptions about your romantic partner/spouse." In actuality, no follow-up surveys were sent, and participants were not required to justify or explain their previous responses. On the final screen of the online assessment, participants were debriefed as to the nature of the deception used to induce feelings of accountability. Precedent for this accountability-priming procedure comes from Tetlock (1985) who used procedural instructions to leave subjects with the expectation to justify and explain their responses to a researcher after initial participation in the study.

Prior to the main study, the accountability manipulation of instructing participants to explain and justify their responses after the initial survey was pre-tested for effectiveness. Univariate analysis yielded a significant difference among the pre-test conditions—accountability (M = 5.50, sd = 3.98), empathy #1 (M = 3.0, sd = 2.89), empathy #2 (M = 3.0, sd = 2.28), additive (M = 6.13, sd = 2.80), and control (M = 2.30, sd = 1.83)—on feelings of responsibility to explain responses, $F(4, 41) = 3.28$, $p = .02$.

Post-hoc analysis showed that participants in the additive (i.e., those who received both the empathy and accountability manipulation) condition reported significantly greater responsibility to explain their responses than did those in the control condition ($p = .05$). Furthermore, participants in the accountability condition also reported greater feelings of responsibility to explain their responses as compared to the other conditions, but the differences were not significant.

Further examination of the pre-test accountability manipulation revealed significant differences between those who received the accountability manipulation (i.e., those left with the expectation to justify their responses on a follow-up survey) and those who did not receive it. Overall, participants who received the accountability manipulation in the pre-test ($M = 5.78$, $sd = 3.42$), as compared to those who did not receive the accountability manipulation ($M = 2.75$, $sd = 2.24$), reported feeling significantly greater responsibility to explain their responses, $t(26.38) = 3.32$, $p = .003$.

In addition to asking participants to report their level of expectation to *explain* their responses, the pre-test also measured participants' feelings of accountability to *justify* their responses. As expected, analysis of variance showed that participants in the additive ($M = 6.25$, $sd = 3.57$) and accountability ($M = 5.70$, $sd = 4.11$) conditions reported greater feelings of accountability to justify their responses than individuals in the empathy #1 ($M = 3.0$, $sd = 2.52$), empathy #2 ($M = 3.82$, $sd = 2.89$), and control ($M = 2.50$, $sd = 2.01$) conditions. However, the differences were not significant. However, when assessing overall differences between participants who received the accountability manipulation and those who did not receive it, significant differences were found on feelings of accountability to justify responses. Specifically, those in the accountability

and additive conditions who received the accountability manipulation (M = 5.94, sd = 3.78), as compared with those in the other conditions who did not receive the accountability manipulation (M = 3.14, sd = 2.49), reported significantly greater accountability to justify their responses, $t(26.51) = 2.78$, $p = .01$. Therefore, the accountability manipulation of instructing participants to justify their responses on a follow-up survey was used in the main study.

Data Analysis

Data from 372 participants was used in the present study. The empathy and accountability manipulations were tested for effectiveness prior to addressing the hypotheses. To assess the effectiveness of the empathy manipulation (i.e., viewing an empathy-inducing video clip), an empathy index was calculated for each participant based on five empathy items, including (a) feelings of sympathy, (b) feelings of compassion, (c) feelings of warmth, (d) feelings of softheartedness, and (e) feelings of being moved toward one's partner (Johnson et al., 2002). The five items were totaled and averaged, creating an overall empathetic feelings index for each participant. A similar technique was used as an empathy manipulation check by Batson et al. (1997). The empathy index was used as the dependent variable in an analysis of variance (ANOVA) comparing all four conditions. The empathy manipulation was also tested by dichotomizing the four conditions into participants who received the empathy manipulation and those who did not receive it. An independent t-test was conducted to compare the two groups on feelings of empathy (i.e., empathy index). Similarly, to test the effectiveness of the accountability manipulation, all four conditions were compared in an ANOVA on feelings of responsibility to explain their responses and feelings of

accountability to justify their responses. Post hoc analysis using pairwise comparisons followed for all analyses.

To assess the FAE in the study, that is, the degree to which participants attributed their partners' verbally aggressive behavior to dispositional attributions rather than situational attributions to a greater extent, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. All four conditions were compared on dispositional and situational attributions. Additionally, the four conditions were dichotomized into the control and treatment groups, and an independent t-test was conducted to compare the groups on dispositional attributions.

The first hypothesis expected participants in the empathy condition to make situational attributions rather than dispositional attributions to a greater extent than those who did not receive the empathy manipulation. Similarly, the second hypothesis expected participants in the accountability condition to make situational attributions rather than dispositional attributions to a greater extent than those who did not receive the accountability manipulation. To test Hypothesis 1 and 2, a series of ANOVAs was used to compare the four conditions on both dispositional and situational attributions. As stated previously, situational and dispositional attributions were examined as separate variables, expecting to find a *positive* association between the treatment manipulations and situational attributions and a *negative* association between the treatment manipulations and dispositional attributions.

To assess Hypotheses 3, 4, 5, and 6, which looked at the various relationships between satisfaction, closeness, emotional distress, relational harm, severity of episode,

and attributions, regression analysis was used to test for potentially significant relationships between the variables based on the study's predictions.

Chapter 4: Results

The current study examined the potential mitigating influence of both empathy and accountability on causal attributions for verbally aggressive messages from a marriage partner. This chapter first reports the effectiveness of the empathy and accountability manipulations and then describes the effects of the manipulations on attributions, followed by an examination of the relationships among the following variables: relationship satisfaction, perceived closeness, severity of the episode, relational harm, emotional distress, and attributions. Four conditions were compared in the experimental design: empathy, accountability, additive, and control.

To assess the effectiveness of the empathy manipulation (e.g., exposure to a perspective-taking video clip) in inducing empathetic feelings among participants as they made attributions for their partner's verbally aggressive behavior, self-reported feelings of empathy were examined from the survey. As in previous research (Johnson et al., 2002; Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002), responses to five empathy adjectives (sympathetic, softhearted, moved, compassionate, and warm) were averaged to form an individual empathy index of self-reported empathetic feelings (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). All participants were asked to make causal attributions for their partner's aggressive behavior, but participants in the empathy condition were also asked (a) to watch a brief perspective-taking video clip and (b) to try and put themselves in their partner's place and feel what he or she felt before and when the specific interaction took place. As expected, a comparison of the four conditions on the empathy index showed feelings of empathy was somewhat higher for participants in the empathy ($M = 2.95$, $sd = 1.19$) and additive ($M = 2.93$, $sd = 1.19$) conditions (i.e., those who received the

empathy manipulation) as compared to the accountability (M = 2.74, sd = 1.08) and control (M = 2.64, sd = 1.03) conditions, but the differences were not significant, F(3, 367) = 1.66, p = .18. However, when all participants who received the empathy manipulation were compared to participants who did not receive it, there was a significant difference on feelings of empathy, t (369) = 2.14, p = .03. Overall, individuals who viewed the empathy video clip (M = 2.94, sd = 1.19) reported significantly greater feelings of empathy towards their partners than those who did not view the video clip (M = 2.69, sd = 1.05). Therefore, the empathy manipulation was viewed as successful, yielding a significant positive relationship between it and self-reported feelings of empathy.

To assess the effectiveness of the accountability manipulation, all participants were asked if they expected to explain their responses and attributions on a brief follow-up survey. A similar intervention technique and manipulation check was used by Nesdale and Rule (1974). See Table 2 for percentages representing each condition's expectation to explain responses on a follow-up survey.

Table 2
Accountability: Do you expect to explain your responses on a follow-up survey?

Condition	Yes	I don't know	No
Empathy	37%	40%	24%
Accountability	82%	17%	1%
Additive	72%	22%	5%
Control	53%	27%	21%

Additionally, participants were asked to report on a 10-point semantic differential scale (a) the extent to which they felt responsible to explain their responses and (b) the extent to which they felt accountable to justify their responses. Univariate tests showed a

significant difference between conditions on responsibility to explain responses, $F(3, 366) = 9.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Post hoc analyses of differences in the four conditions consisted of pairwise comparisons. The Tukey HSD procedure indicated the following two significant findings: (a) Individuals in the accountability condition ($M = 7.85$, $sd = 2.52$) reported significantly greater responsibility to explain their responses than those in the control condition ($M = 6.46$, $sd = 2.88$, $p < .05$) and empathy condition ($M = 6.10$, $sd = 3.08$, $p < .001$) and (b) individuals in the additive condition ($M = 7.71$, $sd = 2.50$) also reported significantly greater responsibility to explain their responses than those in the control condition ($M = 6.46$, $sd = 2.88$, $p < .05$) and empathy condition ($M = 6.10$, $sd = 3.08$, $p < .001$).

Univariate tests also showed a significant difference between conditions on feelings of accountability to justify responses, $F(3, 367) = 5.54$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. The Tukey HSD procedure indicated the following two significant findings: (a) Individuals in the accountability condition ($M = 7.77$, $sd = 2.79$) reported significantly greater feelings of accountability to justify their responses than those in the control condition ($M = 6.53$, $sd = 2.88$, $p < .05$) and empathy condition ($M = 6.22$, $sd = 3.11$, $p = .002$) and (b) individuals in the additive condition ($M = 7.32$, $sd = 2.73$) also reported significantly greater feelings of accountability to justify their responses than those in the empathy condition ($M = 6.22$, $sd = 3.11$, $p < .05$). However, there was not a significant difference between the additive condition ($M = 7.32$, $sd = 2.73$) and the control condition ($M = 6.53$, $sd = 2.88$, $p = .23$) regarding feelings of accountability to justify responses. Overall, the accountability manipulation was considered effective.

Z-scores were computed for both dispositional attributions and situation attributions. For each of these dependent variables, scores from two separate measures (a 5-point Likert scale and a 10-point semantic differential scale) were combined and converted into z-scores, thus creating an overall dispositional score and situational attribution score for participants. The z-scores were then used in the analyses examining attributions. Reliability levels for the standardized dispositional attribution scores were high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). Standardizing the scores for situational attributions also improved its level of internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .62$).

As stated in Chapter 1, the FAE is the tendency to underestimate the role of situational factors and overestimate the role of dispositional, or trait, influences on a person's behavior (Ross, 1977). Because one of the primary goals of this study was to mitigate the FAE using empathy and accountability, an initial multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to check for differences between the four groups on the two dependent variables: dispositional attributions and situational attributions. As expected, the group mean for dispositional attributions was highest for the control group as compared to the other groups (see Table 3).

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Attributions (Z-scores)

Attributions	Condition	Mean	*SD*
Situational	Empathy	.033	.625
	Accountability	-.012	.586
	Additive	-.028	.607
	Control	.002	.532
Dispositional	Empathy	-.067	.783
	Accountability	-.114	.787
	Additive	.011	.770
	Control	.156	.770

However, there was no statistically significant difference between the four groups in terms of their dispositional attribution scores, Wilks's $\Lambda = .98$, $F(6, 734) = 1.19$, $p = .31$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Dichotomizing the four conditions into those who received a manipulation (i.e., empathy, accountability, or both) and those who did not (i.e., control) yielded significant differences. Specifically, independent t-test results showed a significant difference between the control ($M = .16$, $sd = .77$) and treatment groups ($M = -.06$, $sd = .78$) on dispositional attributions, $t(370) = -2.31$, $p = .02$. Participants who received no manipulations made significantly more dispositional attributions for their partner's behavior as compared to those who received either an empathy, accountability, or both manipulations, thus supporting the basic assumptions of the FAE.

Before addressing the hypotheses, correlations between many of the primary variables were calculated (Table 4).

Table 4: Correlation Matrix of Variables

Variable	**Mean**	**SD**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
Dispositional Attributions (z-scores)	0.0003	0.78	1								
Situational Attributions (z-scores)	-0.001	0.59	-.17**	1							
Feelings of Empathy	2.81	1.13	-.55**	.27**	1						
Feelings of Accountabilty	6.98	2.78	.03	.10	.18**	1					
Relationship Satisfaction	4	0.85	-.59**	.12*	.52**	.14**	1				
Relationship Closeness	5.02	1.88	-.46**	.07	.39**	.08	.75**	1			
Severity of Episode	3.01	0.98	.45**	.05	-.18**	.13*	-.40**	-.36**	1		
Emotional Distress	2.5	0.95	.46**	.03	-.16**	.11*	-.42**	-.34**	.56**	1	
Relationship Harm	4	1.71	.59**	-.11*	-.59**	-.06	-.60**	-.52**	.39**	.34**	1

The first hypothesis predicted that individuals in the empathy condition would attribute their partner's verbally aggressive behavior to situational factors rather than to dispositional factors to a greater extent than those who did not receive an empathy intervention. A series of analyses of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess potential differences among the four conditions regarding both situational and dispositional attributions (i.e., measured separately). First, the four conditions were compared on the extent of *situational* attributions made for their partners' behavior. As expected, the group mean for situational attributions was highest for the empathy condition as compared to the other groups (refer back to Table 3). However, univariate tests showed no significant difference between the four groups in terms of situational attribution scores, $F(3, 368) = .18$, $p = .91$, $\eta^2 = .001$. Individuals who received the empathy intervention in the empathy ($M = .033$, $sd = .625$) and additive ($M = -.028$, $sd = .607$) conditions did not make significantly greater situational attributions than those in the accountability ($M = .012$, $sd = .586$) and control ($M = .002$, $sd = .532$) conditions.

Second, the four conditions were compared on the extent of *dispositional* attributions made for their partners' behavior, expecting to find a negative association between the empathy manipulation and dispositional attributions. As expected, those who received the empathy manipulation made fewer dispositional attributions for their partners' behavior. However, the ANOVA comparing the conditions on dispositional attributions failed to show significant differences, $F(3, 368) = 2.17$, $p = .09$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Individuals who received the empathy intervention in the empathy ($M = -.067$, $sd = .783$) and additive ($M = .011$, $sd = .770$) conditions did not make significantly less

dispositional attributions than those in the accountability (M = -.114, sd = .787) and control (M = .156, sd = .770) conditions. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

While the first hypothesis—predicting greater situational attributions for individuals who received the empathy intervention—was not supported, additional analysis yielded other significant findings relevant to this hypothesis. Simple linear regression was conducted to determine the potential influence of self-reported feelings of empathy toward partners on both situational and dispositional attributions. As stated previously, feelings of empathy was assessed with an individual empathy index—an average of self-reported scores from five empathy items (Johnson et al., 2002) which was used for the empathy manipulation check. Regression analysis produced a statistically significant model, R^2 = .07, (F (1, 369) = 29.02, p < .001) for situational attributions (Table 5). The adjusted R^2 indicated that 7% of the variance in situational attributions can be explained by the variance in feelings of empathy. Empathetic feelings was shown to be a statistically significant predictor of situational attributions for verbally aggressive messages from a marriage partner (β = .14, p < .001). Individuals who reported higher levels of empathetic feelings toward their marriage partner made significantly more situational attributions for their partner's verbally aggressive behavior.

Table 5. Regression Model for Feelings of Empathy

			Situational Attributions		Dispositional Attributions	
	M	*SD*	β	*t*	β	*t*
Feelings of Empathy	2.81	1.13	0.14	5.39**	-0.38	-12.75**

Note. Situational Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .07, $F(1,369) = 29.02$, $p < .001$; Dispositional Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .31, $F(1,369) = 162.61$, $p < .001$.

**$p < .001$

Regarding the relationship between empathetic feelings and dispositional attributions for verbally aggressive messages, linear regression analysis showed statistically significant results, $R^2 = .31$, (F (1, 369) = 162.61, $p < .001$). Regression analysis indicated a significant negative relationship between empathetic feelings (i.e., empathy index) and dispositional attributions for aggressive behavior ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$). Individuals who reported higher levels of empathetic feelings toward their marriage partner made significantly less dispositional attributions for their partner's verbally aggressive behavior.

The second hypothesis predicted that individuals in the accountability condition would attribute their partner's verbally aggressive behavior to situational factors rather than to dispositional factors to a greater extent than those who did not receive the accountability intervention. First, the four conditions were compared on *situational* attributions made for their partners' behavior, expecting to find a positive association between accountability and situational attributions. However, univariate analysis showed no significant difference between the four groups in terms of situational

attribution scores, $F(3, 368) = .18$, $p = .91$, $\eta^2 = .001$. Individuals who received the accountability intervention in the accountability ($M = -.012$, $sd = .586$) and additive ($M = -.028$, $sd = .607$) conditions did not make significantly greater situational attributions than those in the empathy ($M = .033$, $sd = .625$) and control ($M = .002$, $sd = .532$) conditions.

Second, the conditions were compared on *dispositional* attributions made for their partners' behavior, expecting to find a negative relationship between accountability and dispositional attributions. Again, the ANOVA failed to show significant differences, $F(3, 368) = 2.17$, $p = .09$, $\eta^2 = .02$, for the conditions on dispositional attributions. Individuals who received the accountability intervention in the accountability ($M = -.114$, $sd = .787$) and additive ($M = .011$, $sd = .770$) conditions did not make significantly less dispositional attributions than those in the empathy ($M = -.067$, $sd = .783$) and control ($M = .156$, $sd = .770$) conditions. Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 claimed that perceived (a) relationship satisfaction and (b) relationship closeness would be positively associated with situational attributions rather than to dispositional attributions to a greater extent. There was a strong, positive, statistically significant relationship between relationship satisfaction and relationship closeness, $r(369) = .75$, $p < .001$ (Table 6). For the first part of the hypothesis addressing satisfaction, regression analysis showed a significant model for situational attributions, $R^2 = .02$, (F (1, 370) = 5.52, $p = .02$), and for dispositional attributions, $R^2 = .35$, (F (1, 370) = 194.84, $p < .001$). Analysis indicated a significant positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and situational attributions for a partner's

verbally aggressive behavior (β = .08, p = .02) and a significant negative relationship between relationship satisfaction and dispositional attributions for aggressive behavior (β = -.54, p < .001), thus supporting Hypothesis 3a.

Table 6. Regression Model for Relationship Satisfaction

			Situational Attributions		Dispositional Attributions	
	M	*SD*	β	*t*	β	*t*
Relationship Satisfaction	4.0	0.85	0.08	2.35*	-0.54	-13.96**

Note. Situational Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .01, F(1,370) = 5.52, p < .05; Dispositional Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .34, F(1,370) = 194.84, p < .001.

*p < .05

**p < .001

To address the second part of Hypothesis 3, regression analysis examined potential associations between perceived relationship closeness with both situational and dispositional attributions for a partner's aggressive behavior. The regression model for closeness and situational attributions was not significant, R^2 = .004, (F (1, 369) = 1.60, p = .21) (Table 7). Perceived relationship closeness was shown not to be a statistically significant predictor of situational attributions for a partner's verbally aggressive behavior (β = .02, p = .21). However, regression analysis did show a significant association between relationship closeness and dispositional attributions, R^2 = .21, (F (1, 369) = 97, p < .001). Perceived relationship closeness was negatively related to dispositional attributions (β = -.19, p < .001). Individuals who perceived greater closeness in their marriage relationship made significantly less dispositional

attributions for their partner's verbally aggressive behaviors. Hypothesis 3b received partial support.

Table 7. Regression Model for Relationship Closeness

			Situational Attributions		Dispositional Attributions	
	M	*SD*	β	*t*	β	*t*
Relationship Closeness	5.02	1.88	0.02	1.27	-0.19	-9.85**

Note. Situational Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .002, $F(1,369) = 1.6$, $p = .21$; Dispositional Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .21, $F(1,369) = 97$, $p < .001$.

**$p < .001$

Hypothesis 4 predicted a negative association between perceived emotional distress and relationship satisfaction and a positive association between emotional distress and perceived relational harm. Regression analysis showed a significant model for both satisfaction, R^2 = .18, (F (1, 370) = 81.27, $p < .001$), and relational harm, R^2 = .12, (F (1, 370) = 49.60, $p < .001$) (Table 8). Results indicated a significant negative relationship between emotional distress and relationship satisfaction (β = -.38, $p <$ .001). Individuals who perceived greater levels of emotional distress associated with their partner's verbally aggressive message reported significantly less satisfaction with their marriage relationship. As expected, regression analysis also showed a significant positive association between emotional distress and perceived relational harm (β = .62, $p < .001$). Individuals who perceived greater levels of emotional distressed associated with their partner's aggressive behavior reported significantly more relational harm. Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Table 8. Regression Model for Emotional Distress

			Relationship Satisfaction		Relational Harm	
	M	*SD*	β	*t*	β	*t*
Emotional Distress	2.51	0.95	-0.38	-9.02**	0.62	7.04**

Note. Relationship Satisfaction Adjusted R^2 = .18, $F(1,370) = 81.27$, $p < .001$; Relational Harm Adjusted R^2 = .12, $F(1,370) = 49.60$, $p < .001$.

**$p < .001$

Similar to the previous prediction, Hypothesis 5 expected individuals to associate greater levels of perceived severity of the verbally aggressive episode with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and greater levels of relational harm. Again, regression analysis showed a significant model for satisfaction, $R^2 = .16$, (F (1, 370) = 68.71, $p < .001$), and for relational harm, $R^2 = .15$, (F (1, 370) = 67.46, $p < .001$) (Table 9). Results indicated a significant negative relationship between severity of episode and satisfaction ($\beta = -.35$, $p < .001$) and a significant positive relationship between severity of episode and relational harm ($\beta = .69$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 5 was supported. Individuals who perceived greater levels of severity associated with their partner's aggressive message reported significantly lower levels of relationship satisfaction and significantly greater levels of relational harm.

Table 9. Regression Model for Severity of Episode

			Relationship Satisfaction		Relational Harm	
	M	*SD*	β	*t*	β	*t*
Severity of Episode	3.01	0.98	0.69	8.21**	-0.35	-8.29**

Note. Relationship Satisfaction Adjusted R^2 = .15, $F(1,370) = 67.46$, $p < .001$; Relational Harm Adjusted R^2 = .15, $F(1,370) = 68.71$, $p < .001$.

**$p < .001$

Finally, Hypothesis 6 predicted (a) emotional distress and (b) severity of episode to have a significant relationship with dispositional attributions but to be unrelated to situational attributions. To address the first part of the prediction, the linear regression model showed significant results for the relationship between emotional distress and dispositional attributions, R^2 = .21, (F (1, 370) = 100.51, $p < .001$) (Table 10). Perceived emotional distress was positively related to dispositional attributions (β = .38, $p < .001$). Individuals who perceived greater levels of emotional distress associated with their partner's verbally aggressive behavior made significantly more dispositional attributions for their partner's behavior. The regression model for emotional distress and situational attributions showed no significant association, R^2 = .001, (F (1, 370) = .41, p = .52). Individuals who perceived greater levels of emotional distress associated with their partner's aggressive behavior did not make significantly less situational attributions for their partner's behavior (β = .02, p = .52).

Table 10. Regression Model for Emotional Distress and Attributions

			Situational Attributions		Dispositional Attributions	
	M	*SD*	β	*t*	β	*t*
Emotional Distress	2.51	0.95	0.02	0.64	0.38	10.03 **

Note. Situational Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .002, $F(1,370)$ = .41, p = .52; Dispositional Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .21, $F(1,370)$ = 100.51, p < .001.

**p < .001

The second part of the final hypothesis expected severity of episode to also have a significant association with dispositional attributions. Relevant to the first part of the hypothesis, regression analysis yielded a significant model for dispositional attributions, R^2 = .20, (F (1, 370) = 91.43, p < .001), and a non-significant model for situational attributions, R^2 = .002, (F (1, 370) = .92, p = .34) (Table 11). The severity of the verbally aggressive episode had a significantly positive relationship with dispositional attributions (β = .36, p < .001) and a non-significant relationship with situational attributions (β = .03, p = .34). Individuals who reported greater severity associated with their partner's aggressive message made significantly more dispositional attributions for their partner's behavior. While no significant relationship between either emotional distress or severity of episode and situational attributions was found, Hypothesis 6 is supported based on the significant relationship found between these two independent variables and dispositional attributions.

Table 11. Regression Model for Severity of Episode and Attributions

			Situational Attributions		Dispositional Attributions	
	M	*SD*	β	*t*	β	*t*
Severity of Episode	3.01	0.98	0.03	0.96	0.36	9.56**

Note. Situational Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .000, $F(1,370)$ = .92, p = .34; Dispositional Attributions Adjusted R^2 = .20, $F(1,370)$ = 91.43, $p < .001$.

**$p < .001$

Chapter 5: Discussion

Making attributions for our social world influences how we respond to it (Vangelisti, 2001). Certainly, in a marriage relationship, the way individuals assess their partner's verbally aggressive behavior is expected to affect their response to that partner and the relationship. Therefore, if interventions such as empathy and accountability can help produce more unbiased attributions for negative communication within a marriage, then negative reciprocal responses may be replaced with relationship-enhancing responses.

The present study examined the influence of empathy and accountability on causal attributions for a marriage partner's verbal aggressiveness. Specifically, the experiment attempted to mitigate the FAE, which involves the tendency to underestimate the role of situational influences and overestimate the influence of dispositional factors in another person's behavior (Ross, 1977). The present study also assessed the relationship of certain observer perceptions with the attributional outcomes associated with those aggressive encounters, including relationship satisfaction, closeness, emotional distress, severity of episode, and relational harm.

While not all of this study's hypotheses were supported, the study did help validate the FAE in a unique interpersonal context while also identifying at least four potential influences on attributions for verbal aggressiveness in marriage, including feelings of empathy, relationship satisfaction, emotional distress, and severity of verbally aggressive episode. This chapter will discuss relevant insights, links to prior research, and theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Previous research has questioned the consistency of the FAE as a social phenomenon (Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000; Winter & Uleman, 1984; Goldberg, 1981). The FAE's apparent ambiguity (Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001) and the complex psychological mechanisms undergirding attributional processes (Gilbert & Malone, 1995) have been cited as reasons for its lack of consistency. However, the current study aligns with past research that supports the FAE in an interpersonal communication context. With no intervention, participants in this study made significantly more dispositional attributions for their partner's verbally aggressive behavior than those who received an empathy manipulation, accountability manipulation, or both manipulations. This support for the FAE makes an important contribution to attribution research by introducing verbal aggressiveness in marriage as a unique and specific interpersonal context in which attributional bias has occurred.

The goal of the current experiment was to mitigate the FAE, resulting in greater situational attributions compared to dispositional attributions for marriage partners' verbally aggressive behavior. Interestingly, the empathy induction failed to mitigate the FAE, but self-reported feelings of empathy did successfully mitigate the FAE. Specifically, individuals who reported higher levels of empathetic feelings toward their marriage partner—regardless of whether or not they received an empathy manipulation—made more situational attributions for their partner's verbally aggressive behavior.

This apparent contradiction can likely be explained by the nature of the empathy being felt by individuals. Viewing the perspective-taking video clip likely produced general feelings of empathy while reporting levels of sympathy, compassion, warmth,

softheartedness, and how moved the individual was toward his or her partner seemingly generated targeted feelings of empathy. In short, there appears to be a different attributional influence between having general feelings of empathy and having empathetic feelings directly toward a partner. Previous research has recognized perspective-taking as a salient dimension of empathy (Epley, Savitsky, & Gilovich, 2002; Hoffman, 2000). However, the present study advances prior research by highlighting the importance of *whose* perspective is being considered.

Empathy may miss its mark if only general feelings of concern are induced. On the contrary, for empathy to effectively mitigate the FAE in verbally aggressive episodes within marriage, individuals may need to specifically consider the perspective of *their partner*. Regan and Totten (1975) provided support for the role of targeted empathy by informing individuals to explicitly take on the role of the other person before making attributions. This type of targeted empathy resulted in more situational and less dispositional attributions for actors' behaviors. Similarly, in the current study, individuals who reported feelings of empathy directly associated with their partners, made more situational attributions for their partners' behaviors.

The influence of empathetic feelings on attributions for partners' verbal aggressiveness highlights the role of shifting one's perspective from self to other, a social dynamic discussed in past research. According to Ross and Sicoly (1979), a person's behavior and the behavior of other people are often interpreted in relation to one's own egocentric biases. In other words, we often see the world around us through our own, self-centered lenses. By considering the perspective of a marriage partner, the

interpretative lens can be shifted from self to other, possibly resulting in less biased attributions about the partner's behavior.

Although a single experimental study cannot provide sound basis for therapeutic responses, this study does have important implications for practice regarding the role of empathy in marital communication. Specifically, because targeted feelings of empathy were associated with greater situational attributions for a partner's verbally aggressive behavior, encouraging individuals to specifically consider their partner's perspective while attempting to induce feelings of direct empathy may remove negative bias in the attribution-making process. Subsequently, a more objective assessment may enable the causal locus of negative behavior to shift from the aggressor, resulting in a beneficial break from a pattern of negative reciprocity common in many verbal aggressive episodes (Berkowitz, 1973; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Sabourin, 1995). Egocentric cognitions and motivation triggering negative retaliation may very well be mitigated to some extent when one's perspective transfers from self to other. It is important to recognize that such an approach may be counterintuitive and difficult for some individuals. In fact, egocentric patterns for making attributions are often considered normative (Crittenden & Wiley, 1985). Considering the perspective of another person does not necessarily come natural for many people, which highlights the importance of empathy training.

Additional research seems to be needed on the role of general versus targeted feelings of empathy, methods for inducing natural and directed feelings of empathy in marriage, and empathy-awareness training. One potential therapeutic approach to consider is to candidly disclose information about the FAE to marriage partners and

encourage them to consciously consider situational factors that may be affecting their partner. Riggio and Garcia (2009) informed individuals about the nature of the FAE while providing compelling situational forces in a study about a hypothetical person's bad day, resulting in less dispositional and greater situational attributions being made by observers.

While targeted empathetic feelings were associated with greater situational attributions, the fact that the empathy manipulation group did not attribute their partners' verbally aggressive behavior to situational factors rather than to dispositional factors to a greater extent than those who did not view the empathy-inducing video clip may have resulted from at least two factors. First, specific episodes of verbal aggressiveness reported in the study may have been so salient and impactful that they mitigated the perspective-taking induction by greatly enhancing the self-presentation drive among individuals. As stated earlier, ego-centric patterns and self-presentation drives often motivate causal attributions (Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001; Crittenden & Wiley, 1985; Harvey & Weary, 1984). People are generally expected to assess other people's actions based on how those assessments will affect self-presentation and increase their ability to save face.

The empathy manipulation was expected to override the self-presentation drive to some extent by causing participants to look outside of themselves and consider their partner's perspective. However, because verbal aggressiveness is considered a destructive form of communication (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992) that can cause psychological pain (Infante & Wigley, 1986), it may have heightened the self-presentation cognitions rather than the perspective-taking cognitions for some

individuals in the study. In fact, the severe nature of the specific verbally aggressive episode may have even shifted cognitions from self-presentation to *self-preservation*, disabling any perspective-taking cognitions otherwise triggered by the empathy manipulation. Findings from this study support this line of thinking. Individuals who attributed greater severity associated with their partner's verbally aggressive behavior made significantly more dispositional attributions for their partner's behavior.

The second factor that may have contributed to the empathy manipulation group not attributing their partners' verbally aggressive behavior to situational factors rather than to dispositional factors to a greater extent involves the nature of the empathy manipulation. While associated with feelings of empathy in the study, the video clip's unrelated subject matter may have been perceived as disconnected to the current context. The brief video clip used in the study was based on hypothetical characters in a context not explicitly related to verbal aggressiveness in marriage. Rather, the clip featured hospital patients, family members, physicians, nurses, and other employees all with different perspectives on life, death, sickness, and other related issues.

Video clips have been used in the past to influence attributional processes. For example, Riggio and Garcia (2009) asked subjects to view a video clip about the Jonestown cult which intensely portrayed the effect of social influence. Afterwards, subjects made more situational attributions and fewer dispositional attributions for a hypothetical story about a man's bad day. Similar to the hospital video clip used in the current study, the Jonestown video clip was unrelated to the circumstances for which attributions were made. However, one important difference is that the Jonestown video depicted actual, historical events and then attributions were made for a hypothetical

event. In the current study, the hospital video clip featured hypothetical characters with hypothetical stories and perspectives, and then viewers were asked to make attributions for real, personal experiences. Bridging the gap between hypothetical, unrelated events and the immediate circumstances of their own personal experiences may be a difficult cognitive task for some individuals. However, Doherty (1982) used a hypothetical scenario and found that wives' negative attributions for a person in the hypothetical situation were associated with their own criticism of their spouses and anger-filled responses to their spouses. Further study is recommended on the use of hypothetical situations to induce empathy for actual events, specifically comparing the directional influence of hypothetical-to-actual with actual-to-hypothetical scenarios.

Similar to the empathy manipulation, the accountability manipulation in the study was not significantly related to situational attributions rather than dispositional attributions to a greater extent. Explanation for this unexpected result is thought to be linked to theoretical and procedural issues. Previous research has shown a link between accountability and situational attributions (Tetlock, 1985) and between accountability and less punitive attributions for an actor's behavior (Lerner, Goldberg, & Tetlock, 1998). People seem to alter their attributions when they feel responsible to justify those attributions. This phenomenon is likely impacted by self-presentation and social approval drives (Jellison & Green, 1981). Answering for one's own attributions provides a responsibility and an opportunity to present oneself in a desirable manner.

The present study did not reflect previous findings in past studies (Tetlock, 1985; Lerner, Goldberg, & Tetlock, 1998) by showing a strong positive association between accountability and situational attributions for a partners' verbally aggressive

behavior. However, it should be pointed out that in both of the previous studies, attributions were made for fictional characters, not actual people connected to the subjects. In the current study, individuals made attributions for real behavior from actual marriage partners. It is quite possible that subjects in previous studies felt much less at stake when making attributions for a fictional person rather than an actual person in their own sphere of influence. Self-approval drives may be diverted when there is more at stake, namely one's role in an actual marriage. In other words, feelings and cognitions about their role in their real marriage relationship may take precedent over desires for social approval from an unknown researcher or neutral third party. Future studies should consider methods for making individuals feel directly accountable to their partners rather than to a researcher, and assess if face-saving drives alter attributions and perceptions.

Furthermore, from a procedural standpoint, accountability was induced in the current study through the expectation of a follow-up survey on which participants would be asked to justify their original attributions and perceptions. Tetlock (1985) used a similar method to induce accountability, but subjects were left with the expectation to justify their original responses during a face-to-face interview with the researcher. As compared to the anticipation of a written follow-up survey, the face-to-face interview may have induced greater feelings of accountability among subjects which became more influential in the attribution-making process. The combination of the salience of a real marriage and the perceived distant nature of a written follow-up survey may have attenuated feelings of accountability which decreased their potential influence on situational attributions. Additional research is suggested to investigate the

existence and possible influence of various levels of accountability on attributions. What significance, if any, does (a) the nature of the subject matter—fictional or real—and (b) the mode of justifying one's attributions have in accountability's role in attributional processing and outcomes?

The present study also reinforced the role of relationship satisfaction in the attribution-making process. Relationship satisfaction was shown to be associated with greater situational attributions as compared to dispositional attributions for partners' verbal aggressiveness. This finding supports previous research that discovered a positive association between relationship satisfaction and situational attributions for a marriage partner (Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987; Fincham, 1985). When people are hurt, their attributions for the hurtful behavior are generally influenced by their past, present, and future relationships with the person who hurt them (Vangelisti, 2001). Clearly, with the average length of marriage as 14 years, individuals in the current study did not make attributions from within a relational vacuum, but likely interpreted their partners' aggressive behavior in the context of past, present, and future relational dynamics.

Previous research indicates that such a relational context influences attributions in marriage. Specifically, several studies have found evidence that relational partners often make either distress-maintaining or relationship-enhancing attributions based on satisfaction levels (Manusov, 2006; Barone, Maddux, & Snyder, 1997; Manusov, Floyd, & Kerssen-Griep, 1997). According to the authors, relationship-enhancing attributions involve allowing negative events to have less influence and positive events to have a greater impact on the relationship. Conversely, distress-maintaining attributions, or

maladaptive attributions, involve making attributions that are harmful to the relationship. Therefore, past research and the current study suggest that individuals who are highly satisfied with their marriage attribute verbally aggressive behavior to situational factors and less to dispositional factors in order to maintain or enhance the relationship. Furthermore, highly satisfied individuals may interpret verbal aggressiveness as a product of their partner's environment rather than of his or her personality in an effort to protect and "humanize" their partner (Gilovich and Eibach, 2001, p. 26).

The findings about satisfaction have interesting implications. On one hand, a high satisfaction level may serve as an effective relational adhesive for partners. If satisfied individuals generally displace the blame from their partner to some external source, the relationship may be sustained and perhaps even enhanced as the couple moves forward. If, on the other hand, blame is displaced by an individual, the marriage partner may not be held responsible when perhaps he or she should be held responsible and confronted. Consequently, negative patterns of interaction may be unintentionally perpetuated and possibly intensified while relationships are held intact at the detriment of one or both marriage partners. Just because someone is satisfied with a relationship does not mean the relationship is healthy. To help assess the health of the relationship, in relation to perceived satisfaction and attributions, further research is recommended to assess relational health from an objective point of view. For example, self-reported satisfaction levels could be compared to third-party observations about relational health to see potential influences on attributions for partners' negative behavior.

Finally, emotional distress and severity of the verbally aggressive episode should be discussed in relation to attributions for verbal aggressiveness in marriage. It is not surprising that both emotional distress associated with the aggressive episode and perceived severity of the episode were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and positively related to relational harm. According to Johnson et al. (2001), maladaptive attributions for negative behavior influence satisfaction levels negatively. By nature, verbally aggressive messages are potentially painful, destructive forms of communication (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992). Furthermore, previous research has shown that acts of verbal aggressiveness can negatively affect relationship satisfaction (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Martin & Anderson, 1995). Findings from previous studies and the current study suggest that as the level of emotional distress and perceived severity associated with the aggressive episode increases, damage to the relationship also increases while satisfaction with the relationship decreases. The important influence of both emotional distress and severity of episode is accentuated when one considers their association with causal attributions for negative behavior. The current study found a strong association between both emotional distress and severity of episode and dispositional attributions. Individuals who reported greater emotional distress and severity associated with verbal aggressiveness from their partner made significantly more dispositional attributions for their partner's behavior.

Past research provides rationale for the association between distress, severity, and dispositional attributions. Assessing victims' attributions for sources of verbal aggressiveness, Patten and Woods (1978) found that perceived severity of aggression was positively related to blaming the aggressor and negatively related to blaming self.

Similarly, in a study on attributions for partner violence, Katz and Arias (2006) found that women made the most negative attributions for more severe episodes of violence, blaming the partner rather than alcohol. Regarding physical aggression, Senchak and Leonard (1994) also found a link between severity of episode and attributions. In their study, severity of violence was related to wives' assessment of their husbands' responsibility.

Therefore, it may be concluded that if an individual assesses his or her partner's aggressive behavior as particularly egregious and distressful, blame may be placed on the partner rather than his or her circumstances. If so, negative reciprocity may occur, causing additional strain on the relationship. Therefore, it may be helpful for researchers and practitioners to focus on marital communication training as a practical method for strengthening marriages. Specifically, because argumentative skills deficiency has been cited as a cause of verbal aggressiveness (Sabourin, 1995; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989), couples should be trained in productive, assertive styles of interaction, namely argumentation. Enhancing a couple's skills in argumentation is expected to decrease the likelihood, severity, and harmful effects of previous patterns of verbal aggressiveness.

Limitations

This study induced feelings of accountability by leaving the expectation with participants they would justify and explain their original responses on a follow-up survey sent to them within one week of completion of their initial survey. Due to privacy policies of Qualtrics Panels prohibiting researchers from soliciting participants' contact information, this method was a modification of the original plan to induce feelings of accountability. Originally, participants were going to be asked to provide

their first name, phone number, and email address so the researcher could seemingly contact participants within a week and ask them to justify and explain their previous responses. Naturally, none of the participants would be contacted and all identifiable information would be destroyed. However, no identifiable information could be gathered due to restrictions by Qualtrics Panels privacy policies. Because no personal information was submitted on the actual survey, participants may have felt less at risk and, therefore, less accountable. Future attempts to induce feelings of accountability should consider ways to make participants feel personally invested.

This study also used a relatively diverse demographic sample of married individuals throughout North America. Results should not be generalized to other relationships beyond marriage. Additionally, the present study asked participants to self-report an episode of verbal aggressiveness based on recall. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic and logistical and financial constraints, marriage partners—the sources of verbal aggressiveness—were not included in the study. The researcher was interested in the assessments and interpretations of the participants and thus their perceptions of the aggressive episodes were considered paramount in terms of predicting how they made attributions for their partners' behavior.

Conclusion

This study allows researchers and practitioners to better understand certain influences on causal attributions for verbal aggressiveness in marriage. It suggests that increased feelings of empathy toward one's partner and relationship satisfaction are associated with making situational attributions for a partner's verbally aggressive behavior. In contrast, emotional distress and severity of the verbally aggressive episode

are related to making dispositional attributions for a partner's aggressive behavior. Furthermore, emotional distress and severity of the episode are negatively associated with relational satisfaction and positively related to relational harm. Practical and theoretical implications for these findings have been described, focusing specifically on relationship-enhancing techniques and directions for future research on attributions for verbal aggressiveness in marriage.

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Appendix A: Impact of Event Scale-6

Impact of Event Scale-6 (Thoresen, Tambs, Hussain, Heir, Johansen, Bisson, 2010)

Rate the following items
(0 = not at all, 1 = a little bit, 2 = moderately, 3 = quite a bit, 4 = extremely).

1. I thought about it when I didn't mean to. 0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4
2. I felt watchful or on-guard. 0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4
3. Other things kept making me think about it. 0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4
4. I was aware that I still had a lot of feelings about it, but I didn't deal with them. 0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4
5. I tried not to think about it. 0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4
6. I had trouble concentrating. 0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4

Appendix B: Permission Letter from Cleveland Clinic



Jan 20, 2014 03:39 PM EST
Cleveland Clinic

Response for WebMail Request #1002079

Dear Randy Roper,

Thank you for contacting Cleveland Clinic through our website. We're pleased to hear that you enjoyed our Empathy video and would like to share it with others. You have our permission to use the video as long as you do not edit or alter it in any way. Below are links that might be helpful to you:

Cleveland Clinic YouTube Channel Link (please select higher quality option if not playing back clearly):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDDWvj_q-o8

WMV for download to desktop:
https://www.yousendit.com/download/UVJoeVdwY3lCSWNYRHNUQw
To access the above WMV file:
1. Click on the above link
2. Select "Download"
3. Select "Save" to save the video to your desktop

Once the download is complete, you may use and view the file from your desktop.

Sincerely,

Kelley

Webmail Representative
CLEVELAND CLINIC
CLEVELAND, OHIO
WWW.CLEVELANDCLINIC.ORG