Idealization of One's Spouse and Marriage, and the Psychological Well-Being of Long-Wed Spouses

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My spouse has never made me angry…

If my spouse has any faults, I am not aware of them…

If every person in the world had been available and willing to marry me, I could not have made a better choice…

O'Rourke, N., & Cappeliez, P. (2002). Development and validation of a couples measure of biased responding: The Marital Aggrandizement Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 78,* 301-320.

Marital Idealization

- 18-item Marital Aggrandizement Scale
  - a measure of idealization of one's spouse and relationship
  - responses provided along 7-point Likert-type scale
  - only responses of '6' or '7' tallied for scale scores
- Internal consistency of responses $.84 \leq \alpha \leq .86$
- Test-retest reliability, $r = .80$ over 15 months
- Indistinguishable between older men and women

Marital Idealization: socio-demographic similarity

- MAS response levels not confounded by:
  - sex: ♂ M = 5.44, SD = 416; ♀ M = 4.69, SD = 3.82
  - age
  - years of formal education
  - years married
  - number of times married
  - religious denomination or religious service attendance
  - anonymous versus self-identified completion

Marital Idealization - correlates

- Yet MAS response levels associated with:
  - absence of distress among spouses of dementia patients
  - marital satisfaction among those undergoing alcohol T_x
  - adaptation to widowhood (idealizing deceased husband)
  - physical health of older couples at the time of recruitment
    - and over time, 16-months thereafter

- Understood within cognitive adaptation theory
  - interpersonal form of *positive illusion*
  - discount negative interpersonal perceptions and experience
  - attend to interpersonal information with confirms beliefs
    - discount incongruent beliefs and perceptions

Marital Idealization – studies examined

Today discuss the results of two separate studies

- 125 couples married a minimum of 20 years
- husbands and wives completed the NEO-FFI at recruitment
- came to lab three weeks later
  - completed NEO-FFI (Form R, specific to one's spouse)
- compare self versus spousal trait descriptions
  - idealization predicted by relatively more positive appraisals

Second study with 90 spouses of Alzheimer P_ts

- does idealization predict psychological well-being?
- burden and life satisfaction assessed 1-year later

Marital Idealization – older married couples

Couples recruited for 3-year marriage & health study

- average age of participants was 59.2 years of age
- had been married 33.83 years
- had completed 14.82 years of formal education
- equivalent proportions worked now or prior to retirement in clerical/administrative (112 or 44.8%) or professional/managerial positions (93 or 37.2%).
- most participants self-identified as Caucasian (92.4%)

Participants 50+years of age, married 20+ years

- advertisements were placed in various daily newspapers

Marital Idealization – older married couples

Multilevel models analyze discrepancies between dependent responses

Address dyadic congruence, direction and magnitude of differences

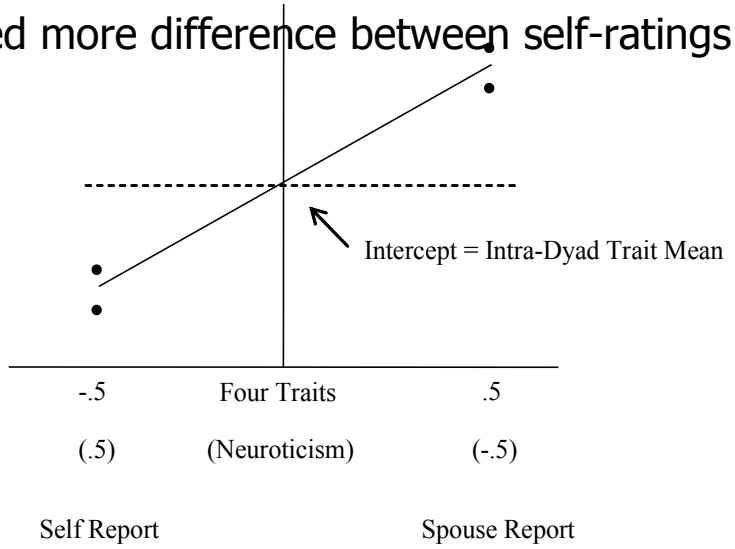
- takes into account measurement error
  - provides better estimates of true congruence
- individual and dyad level effects
  - accounts for shared variance between couple responses
- MLM adjusts error variance to account for interdependence within dyads
  - resulting in more accurate standard errors and
  - reduced the likelihood of Type I errors
- hierarchical linear modeling statistical program (HLM 6)

Marital Idealization – older married couples

Husband and wife responses were regressed onto -.5 and .5

Each couple has a regression line, each with a slope and an intercept

- intercept represents intra-couple mean for each trait
- direction and magnitude of discrepancy represents difference between spouses
- smaller numbers indicated more similarity between self-ratings (shallow slopes)
- larger numbers indicated more difference between self-ratings (steep slopes)



Marital Idealization – older married couples

Regressing responses onto equidistant points

- set intra-couple trait means as the intercept for each
  - that is, point where the X axis equals zero
- exactly 1.0 unit between dummy codes
  - slope for each discrepancy value represents the difference between reporters

Marital idealization by both husbands and wives was predicted by:

- husbands' average trait (Avg_H - his reports and wives' reports for him)
- wives' average trait (Avg_W - her reports and husbands' reports for her)
- discrepancy for husbands (Dis_H - difference between his and her reports for him)
- discrepancy for wives (Dis_W - difference between her and his reports for her)

Level 1 Model:

$$Y = \beta_1 \times (\text{Husbands' Marital Idealization}) + \beta_2 \times (\text{Wives' Marital Idealization}) + r$$

Level 2 Model:

$$\beta_1 = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} \times (Avg_H; \text{husband average}) + \gamma_{12} \times (Dis_H; \text{husband discrepancy}) + \gamma_{13} \times (Avg_W; \text{wife average}) + \gamma_{14} \times (Dis_W; \text{wife discrepancy}) + u_1$$

$$\beta_2 = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21} \times (Avg_H; \text{husband average}) + \gamma_{22} \times (Dis_H; \text{husband discrepancy}) + \gamma_{23} \times (Avg_W; \text{wife average}) + \gamma_{24} \times (Dis_W; \text{wife discrepancy}) + u_2$$

Marital Idealization – older married couples

Summary of Significant Coefficients (Standard Errors) Predicting Marital Idealization

	Marital Idealization – Husbands				Marital Idealization – Wives			
	Avg_H	Avg_W	Dis_H	Dis_W	Avg_H	Avg_W	Dis_H	Dis_W
Neuroticism	-.90 * (.45)		X	**1.44 * (.58)**	X		2.07 ** (.62)	**2.32 ** (.53)**
Extraversion	X		X		1.16 * (.55)		2.24 * (.87)	
Openness	-1.15 ** (.47)				X			
Agreeableness	-2.12 ** (.69)		**3.39 ** (.99)**	**3.18 ** (1.01)**	X		**3.77 ** (1.27)**	**3.58 ** (1.08)**
Conscientiousness	1.54 ** (.52)	**1.50 ** (.60)**	X	X	X	**1.48 * (.63)**	.84 ** (.29)	.58 * (.27)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

Study Two – Spouses of Persons with Alzheimer Disease

Substantial increase in numbers with dementia expected

- number of cases of dementia expected to double every 20 years
- roughly 15% of those with Alzheimer disease under 65 years of age
- projections, in fact, may under-estimate future prevalence

Distress unrelated to socio-demographic or illness-related factors

- features of caregivers much more predictive of distress

Idealization of Spouse and premorbid relationship history

- emerged as single strongest (inverse) predictor of distress among AD caregivers
- this preliminary study (later replicated) undertaken as graduate student at UBC
- current study undertaken to examine associations over a 1-year interval

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

Participants Recruited from Clinic for Alzheimer Disease, UBC Hospital

- tertiary diagnostic clinic which receives referrals from all regions of BC
- consecutive referrals between May 2006 – April 2007
- follow-up questionnaires sent 1-year subsequent to initial recruitment
- *N* = 90 caregivers, Time 1 and Time 2 data (with Alzheimer disease D_x)

Inclusion Criteria

- Spousal caregiver (distinct experience from other family caregivers)
- Patient receives Alzheimer D_x (vs. frontotemporal D_x distinct behavioural features)
- Patient and caregiver co-reside in the community

Cross-sectional Analyses Limitation of Previous Caregiving Research

- we undertook more dynamic approach
- examined both marital idealization and well-being at two points of measurement
- enabled us to examine the Time 1 – Time 2, trajectory and magnitude of change

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

Multilevel modelling applied (HLM programme)

- observations nested within the individual
- violates GLM assumption of independence of observations
- considerably less susceptible to Type I error versus repeated measures ANOVA
- does not require listwise deletion of cases with missing data
  - instead, cases weighted on the basis of available data

Caregiver Burden and Life Satisfaction Examined as Predicted

- recognition that positive emotional experience possible with caregiving
- as previously noted, well-being not simply the absence of distress

Level 1 Model:

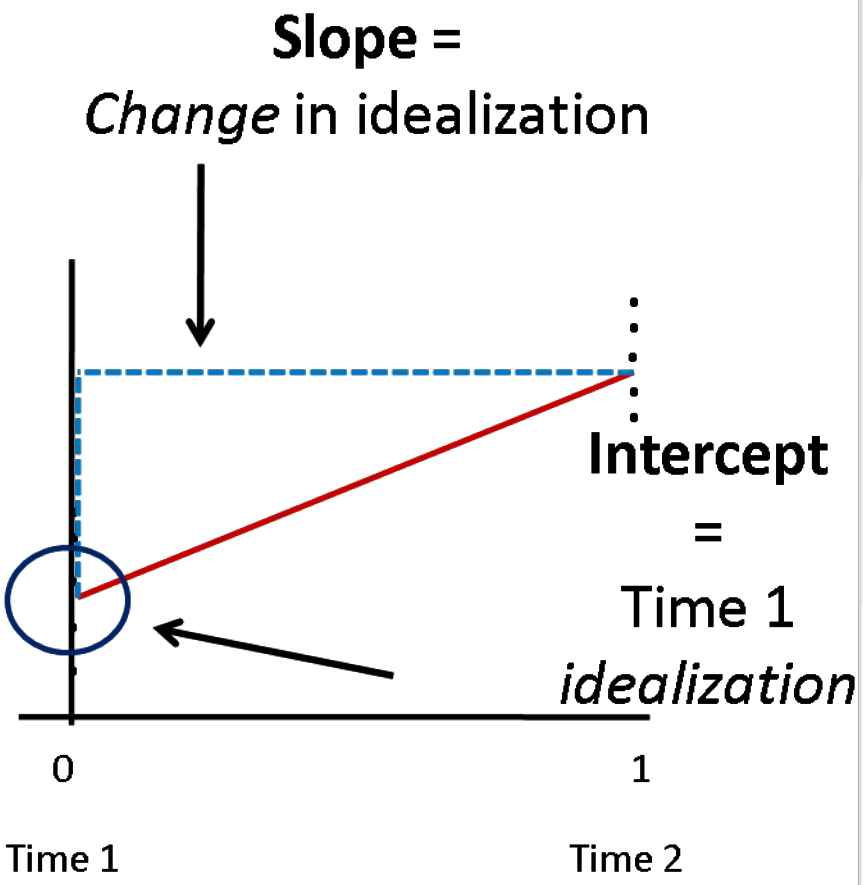
$Y = B_0 \times (\text{Time 2 Well-Being}) + B_1 \times (\text{Change in Well-Being; Time 1 to Time 2}) + r$

Level 2 Model:

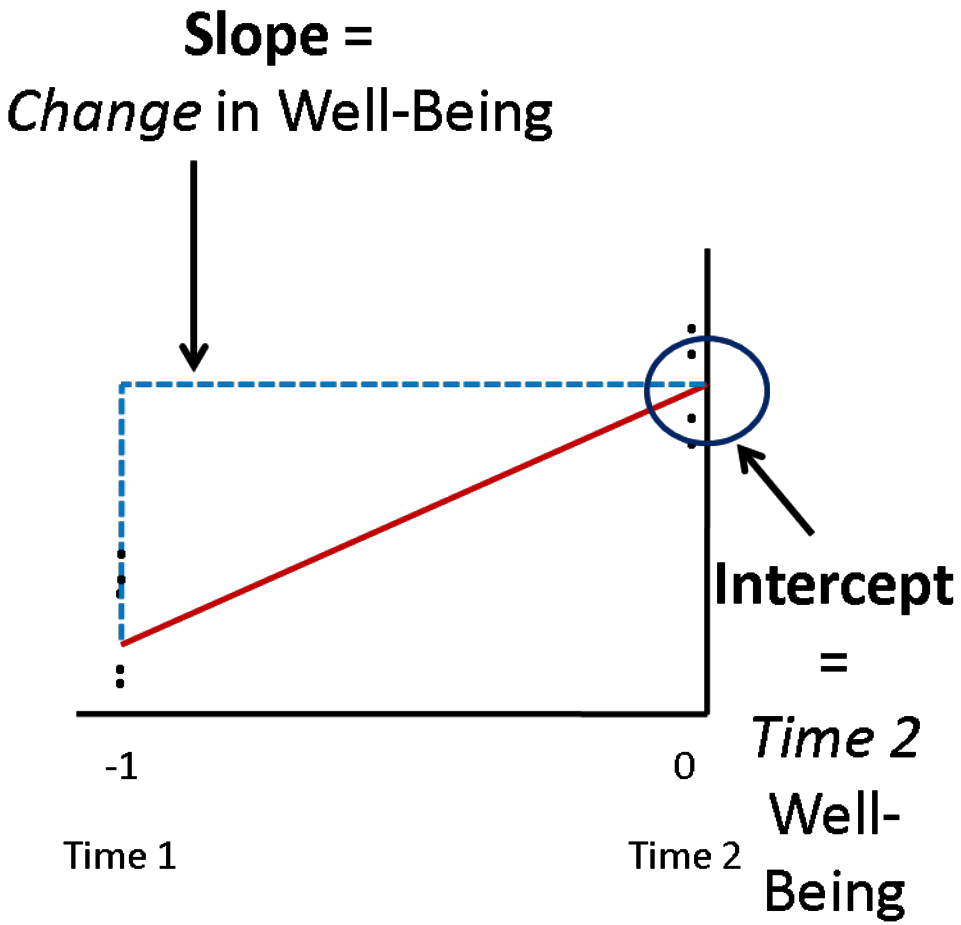
$B_0 = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \times (\text{Covariate}) + \gamma_{02} \times (\text{Time 1 Idealization}) + \gamma_{03} \times (\text{Change in Idealization}) + u_1$

$B_1 = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} \times (\text{Covariate}) + \gamma_{12} \times (\text{Time 1 Idealization}) + \gamma_{13} \times (\text{Change in Idealization}) + u_2$

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts



Marital Idealization



Well-Being

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

Caregiver Burden

- Neither severity of dementia S_x nor duration of illness predicted caregiver burden
- Age of caregiver sole illness or socio-demographic variable associated with burden
  - age of caregivers inversely related to Time 2 burden
  - age accounts for 9.49% reduction in unexplained variance in burden at Time 2
- Time 1 marital idealization inversely associated with caregiver burden at Time 2
  - Time 1 MI accounts for 22.21% reduction in unexplained variance in burden at Time 2
- Increase in marital idealization between time points predicts decrease in burden
  - change in MI accounts for 9.53% reduction in unexplained variance in change in burden

	Time 2 Caregiver Burden		Change in Caregiver Burden	
Covariates	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Caregiver Age	-.01*	.01	-.01	.01
Predictor Variables				
Time 1 Marital Idealization	-1.11 **	.42	.28	.48
Change in Marital Idealization	-5.96	3.18	-6.88 **	2.40

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

Life Satisfaction:

- Sex of caregiver sole socio-demographic variable associated with life satisfaction
  - 15.72% reduction in unexplained variance (life satisfaction lower for wives)
- Time 1 marital idealization predicts with life satisfaction at Time 2
  - Time 1 MI accounts for 17.58% reduction in unexplained variance at Time 2 (above sex)
- Increase in marital idealization between time points predicts increase life satisfaction
  - change in MI accounts for 6.55% reduction in unexplained variance in change in life satisfaction

	Time 2 Life Satisfaction		Change in Life Satisfaction	
Covariates	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Caregiver Sex	-.64 **	.24	-.31	.25
Predictor Variables				
Time 1 marital idealization	2.36 ***	.82	-1.58	1.21
Change in marital idealization	3.01	6.03	16.19 **	6.54

** $p < .01$ *** $p < .005$

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

Life Satisfaction: Interaction effect between Time 1 and change

- Analyses repeated with inclusion of marital idealization interaction term
  - product of Time 1 marital idealization x change in marital idealization
  - 27.28% reduction in unexplained variance (change in life satisfaction)
    - this over and above that previously accounted for by main effect

- Yet what is the meaning of this marital idealization interaction effect?

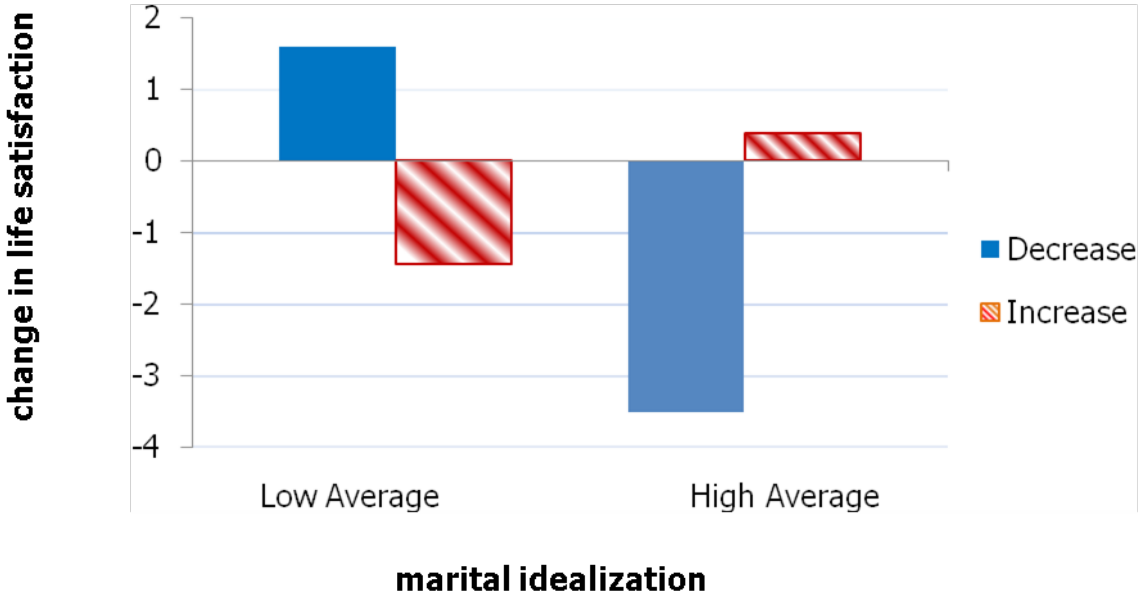
	Time 2 Life Satisfaction		Change in Life Satisfaction	
Covariates	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Caregiver Sex	-.63 **	.24	-.17	.25
Predictor Variables				
Time 1 Marital Idealization	2.34 **	.89	-2.26 *	.96
Change in Marital Idealization	2.24	6.90	3.92	7.41
Interaction Time 1 x Change	6.83	26.72	107.27 ***	28.68

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .005$

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

Impact of change in marital idealization a function of initial levels

- if initially **low** in marital idealization:
  - a drop in marital idealization reflected in an increase in life satisfaction
  - increased marital idealization reflected in a decrease in life satisfaction
- If initially **high** in marital idealization
  - a further increase has a nominally positive affect on life satisfaction
  - a decease has a considerable deleterious affect upon life satisfaction



Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

Summary of Findings

- Few socio-demographic factors associated with caregiver well-being
  - age negatively associated with caregiver burden (more older age normative?)
  - lower life satisfaction reported by female versus male spousal caregivers
- Time 1 marital idealization predicts lower burden at Time 2
- Increase in marital idealization associated with decrease in burden

- Time 1 marital idealization predicts higher life satisfaction at Time 2
- Increased marital idealization associated with increased life satisfaction
  - interaction effect between change in marital idealization and change life satisfaction
  - synergistic effects of increase in marital idealization for those already high
  - marital idealization effective buffering strategy for some if maintained
  - this is the larger of the two groups (versus low marital idealizers)
  - yet subset low in marital idealization for whom decrease enhances life satisfaction
    - increase in marital idealization for these spouses deleterious (decrease in life satisfaction)

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

How might we explain this link between idealization and well-being?

- Neurodegeneration a process against which can affect little change
  - cognitive decline and associated behavioural problems biologically determined
  - few (if any) proactive interventions to impact the course of the disease
- Idealization a mechanism against which care demands less arduous
  - care provision expression of gratitude for lifetime in (near) perfect relationship
- *Perceived superiority* literature, relationship threatened enhanced value
  - suggests that disease process heightens propensity for marital idealization
  - may be one reason we see higher idealization response levels in caregiver samples
- This phenomenon identified in widows and enduring, long-wed couples
  - grant proposal under review to ascertain if phenomenon exists in same-sex couples
  - is relationship idealization product of social conditioning or universal to the species?

Marital Idealization – spouses of dementia P_ts

Burden most often operationalised as form of secondary appraisal

- distress resulting from perception that resources insufficient to meet current & future demands
- may be that perceived demands of spousal care tempered by perception of ideal relationship

Life satisfaction, quality of life on basis of person-specific criteria

- current circumstances compared against subjective standards
- arrive at a global appraisal of life satisfaction
- among idealizers, life not redefined on the basis of current caregiving
- derive meaning and purpose in caregiving role
- set of challenges which do not obscure previous relationship history

Further longitudinal studies required to gain greater understanding

- More questions than answers remain