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## An Analysis of Four Empathy Variables as Predictors of Marital Satisfaction

Teck Seong Chee  
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**AN ANALYSIS OF FOUR EMPATHY VARIABLES  
AS PREDICTORS OF MARITAL SATISFACTION**

by

**Teck Seong Chee**

A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Faculty of The Graduate College  
In partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
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Department of Communication

Western Michigan University  
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AN ANALYSIS OF FOUR EMPATHY VARIABLES  
AS PREDICTORS OF MARITAL SATISFACTION

Teck Seong Chee, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 1988

The objective of this study was to determine if empathy was predictive of marital satisfaction, and which, if any, of the four empathy variables from Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index (1980), would serve as predictors of marital satisfaction. Correlation and regression analyses were used to evaluate the relationships of fantasy, empathic concern, perspective taking and personal distress with marital satisfaction. Variables of secondary interest included those of sex, birth order, length of marriage and age married. Both individuals and couples were used as units of analysis.

Empathic concern and perspective taking were found to be predictors of marital satisfaction. No significant differences were found between sex or birth order and any of the empathy variables. However, negative relationships were found between number of years married and marital satisfaction, and empathic concern. Age of subjects when they married was positively correlated with marital satisfaction, empathic concern and perspective taking.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to Peggy whose love inspires me. I would also like to dedicate this study in loving remembrance of my father, Anthony, and to my mother, Rosalind, for all her love and support.

Without the generosity of my brother, Stephen, and his wife, Theresa, the long journey toward the completion of this work would not have been possible. Thank you both. And to my brother, Vincent, and sister, Ann; your support and prayers are very much appreciated.

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Finally, to all the others who helped me in one way or another; Kathy, Scott, the contact persons, the couples, and especially Peter Northouse. Thank you.

And to my dear friend, Mary, and her family, thanks for simply being there for me.

Teck Seong Chee  
(Benedict Chee)

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Western Michigan University, 1988

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most important functions of communication is the establishment of relationships between and among people. Relationships give meaning to life, and the deeper the relationship, the greater the meaning. Basic to forming meaningful relationships is the ability to understand the perspective of others and to respond affectively to their feelings.

Those who exhibit little empathy toward others are usually categorized as being cold, hard or distant. Such persons risk alienating themselves from those they may wish to befriend. Those who exhibit much empathy may build strong bonds with others. Kohut (1978) states that empathy "constitutes a powerful psychological bond between individuals that - more perhaps than love, the expression and sublimation of the sexual drive - counteracts man's destructiveness against his fellows" (p. 705).

If empathy is important in friendships, how much more important is it in intimate relationships like that of marital relations. Sillars and Scott (1983), in writing about interpersonal perception between intimates, state that intimacy exists in a relationship where there is "repeated interaction, higher self-disclosure, high interdependence (i.e., mutual influence), and high emotional involvement" (p. 154). Hence, the greater the intimacy, the higher the level of emotional involvement in that relationship.

Marital researchers (e.g., Burr, 1973; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Lewis & Spanier, 1979) have done extensive work in the area of marital satisfaction, but have not extended their work to include assessment of empathy. In brief, the role of empathy in the area of marital satisfaction has been neglected by researchers.

At the heart of understanding marital relationships is communication. Wahlroos (1983) states that the greatest happiness and deepest satisfaction in life, the most intense enthusiasm and the most profound inner peace, all come from being a member of a loving family. It is largely through communication that we become what we are, learn what we know, and solve our problems in life.

Yet, the literature regarding the study of empathy in loving relationships is rather scarce. One reason for this neglect to study empathy is because the construct is abstractly defined. Another reason is that the assessment procedures are relatively new, and a third reason is the lack of effective multidimensional assessment procedures.

It was only in the late 1940's that Cottrell and Dymond (1949) from Cornell University brought attention to the need for researchers to study the concept of empathy. The concept was already known, but its theoretical base left much to be desired. Furthermore, there were no reliable and valid empathy assessment procedures developed and empirical research was practically nonexistent.

Since the 1950's, however, great strides have been made in the theoretical development of the concept of empathy and in the area of empirical research. Important distinctions between empathy and other psychological constructs like projection and identification were made (Dymond, 1950; Rogers, 1951). Other researchers like Katz (1963) and Deutsch and Madle (1975) have worked to clarify the concept of empathy with that of sympathy and self-other differentiation.

By the beginning of the 1980's, the understanding of the concept of empathy had become more sophisticated, and research was being conducted to determine its multidimensionality (Northouse, 1981). One of the more recent empathy measures, for example, developed by Davis in 1980, was based on the theory that empathy

encompasses more than one dimension and can be measured by several distinct but related constructs. For the purpose of this study, empathy is defined as the ability to place one's self in another's position or situation and to respond with understanding and affect.

#### Statement of Problem

Empathy is important in forming meaningful relationships, such as in marriage. Marital studies, like that of marital satisfaction, have focused on many variables related to the communication process. However, empathy has hardly been one of the communication variables studied in relation to marital satisfaction.

With Davis' empathy measure, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980), we now have the opportunity to investigate the link between marital satisfaction and empathic response in a more complete manner. Hence, the general proposition of this study is to investigate the relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction.

#### Review of Literature

##### Marital Satisfaction

Research in the area of marital satisfaction over the past 25 years has been extensive and continues to be pursued with great interest by therapists and researchers. As a result, a body of literature has been created that identifies a great number of variables that have been studied by researchers in their attempt to measure and account for marital satisfaction. Communication variables have repeatedly been at the core of most attempts to understand marital relationships (e.g., Barnes, Schumm, Jurich & Bollman, 1984; Spanier & Lewis, 1980; Rhyne, 1981).



Recently, one important theoretical aspect of marital satisfaction is that of intimacy (Sleburg, 1985). Weiss' (1968) also includes intimacy as one of his five distinct categories of marital relationship along with social integration, opportunity for nurturant behavior, reassurance of worth and assistance. From Weiss' perspective, intimacy is found in relationships where people feel free to express their deepest thoughts and feelings, and are assured of being understood and accepted.

Of all relationships, Wilmot (1975) suggests that the dyadic relationships are the most intimate and unique. They transform our condition of solitariness into one of personal intimacy. The deepest meanings in our lives are found in the friendships that we form, and in many cases our closest friend may be our marital partner. After all, in our society, the highest expression of personal intimacy is witnessed between two people who are free to express their deepest feelings. Lowenthal and Havens (1968) state that marital status is an indication of the capacity for intimacy.

The quality of marital relations, however, depends on many factors like empathy, how couples manage conflict, spend leisure time together and the kind of support they give to one another. It is the support and nourishment that each spouse provides one another in everyday living that is of vital consequence for empathy to develop. With such mutual support and nourishment, the conditions are right for a joyous marriage and family life, but without a supportive and rich environment, marital relations deteriorate. Empathy may be one element of a supportive and nourishing environment in marital relations.

Blood and Wolfe (1960), for example, maintain that empathy is of key importance in establishing a stable, gratifying marital relationship, but they have no empirical support to this broad claim. Defining empathy as the ability to perceive the partner's attitudes and feelings, they state that such a skill is needed if each spouse is

to responsibly meet the needs of his or her partner.

### Empathy

Although empathy is one vital component in forming meaningful relationships, it has not received much attention from marital researchers. Other researchers have long felt that it plays an important role in the bonding of people and satisfying our need to be understood and accepted by others. Since the assessment of empathy is relatively new, it is important to trace its historical development.

The need to give serious attention to empathy was voiced by Cottrell and Dymond in 1949. Although Lipps (1909) had first coined the term, his definition of it was far from satisfactory from the research point of view. For one thing, it focused on objects instead of persons, and it also lacked the element of anticipation. The self was assessed in relation to physical objects rather than self-other differentiation. Furthermore, no attention was given to empathy as shared feelings, or an understanding of another's affect alone or in a situation (Deutsch & Madle, 1975; Kerr & Speroff, 1954; Wispe, 1986).

As researchers began answering the call to investigate the empathic process, several other issues were raised. Since empathy is closely associated with feeling for others, especially for one's partner, how is it related to projection, identification, and sympathy? Dymond (1950) argues that projection is conceptually the opposite of empathy because it involves attributing one's own thoughts and feelings to others. Empathy, on the other hand, is the experiencing of other's state of mind and emotions.

Unlike projection, identification requires the ability to take the role of others. It is more lasting and emotional than empathy. Thus, empathy does not necessarily

imply that one has to like the other person or have any emotional ties with him or her (Dymond, 1950; Rogers, 1949). Several researchers tried to explain further the notion of identification in relation to empathy.

Reik (1948) states that, through identification, we become involved in the experience of others due to our own imitative power and by a relocation of our conscious controls. This process is spontaneous and not a result of conscious role taking. In the second phase, incorporation, the empathizer takes in the experience of the other and feels the other's experience as his or her own. The third phase of reverberation involves the stimulation of a similar experience in the empathizer. The last stage is called detachment. By way of detachment, the empathizer withdraws from subjective involvement and moves into rational scrutiny.

Reik's phases of empathy is somewhat similar to Stewart's phase of identification. The main difference is that Reik did not have a reidentification stage in his model. Stewart (1956) outlines four stages of identification. He states that the first stage involves raw identification in which emotional connections are made unconsciously. The second stage is deliberate identification. Here, the emotional tie involving two people are made on a conscious level as they pursue a common goal. In the third stage, resistance, the empathizer distances himself or herself from the other so as to gain a better understanding of that person. The fourth stage of reidentification is a drawing closer again of the two people on a conscious level.

Sympathy, Dymond (1950) states, is a product of the empathic process. It is the act of giving assistance to another. The most recent debate on the issue of empathy versus sympathy is taken up by Wispe (1986). After giving a historical development of the two concepts and the different kinds of empathy research, he goes on to define sympathy as the heightened awareness of the suffering of another person as

something to be alleviated. It involves knowing what it would be like to be that other person.

Unlike projection, identification and sympathy, empathy refers to the attempt by one "self-aware self" to comprehend unjudgementally the positive and negative experiences of another person. The empathic process requires effort, accuracy in perception and some imagination. The question it poses to an empathizer is what would it be like if he or she were the other person.

Katz (1963) also makes several distinctions between sympathy and empathy. First, the focus of empathy is on the feelings and situation of the other person and not on oneself. One's own feelings become the basis for the cognitive understanding of the other's feelings. Second, empathy is adaptive and tends to abandon self-consciousness, whereas sympathy is reactive and turns attention back on oneself. Third, empathy involves a cognitive understanding in which one has to analyze the other's feelings. Sympathy does not require such a process.

Another shortcoming of earlier definitions of empathy is that it does not address the issue of self-other differentiation. Deutsch and Madle (1975) point out that Lipps' definition assesses only the self in relation to physical objects. Later attempts to define empathy centered on the imitative explanation which again resulted in the failure to make self-other differentiation. However, the distinction between empathy and projection, the idea of person similarity as an important variable in measuring empathy and role theory all combine to make a strong case for the necessity of self-other differentiation in empathy.

In other words, empathy for another person does not entail loss of one's self-identity nor a total preoccupation with one's own projective tendencies. Full identification destroys empathy. Rogers (1958) states that empathy is the ability "to

sense the client's private world as if it were your own but without ever losing the 'as if' quality" (p. 13). Therefore, the counsellor, in taking on a certain role, perceives the hates, hopes and fears of the client in the empathic process but does not him or herself experience or take as his or her own those very thoughts and feelings. This empathic process also applies to marital relations.

Carkhuff (1967) believes that empathy is a necessary ingredient in therapeutic relationships. It facilitates constructive change in clients. In the process of empathizing with the client, the counsellor sees the world through his or her client's eyes, feels the things the client feels, experiences the world the way the client experiences it.

There are those who argue that not only the persons, but the context in which they live, play an important part in empathic response. They do not exist in a vacuum and so situational factors cannot be discounted in measuring empathy. Mead (1934) brings to the forefront the idea that we are social creatures living in the context of our environment. Kurt Lewin (1976) calls it the life-space of a person. We interact with others and with our environment. Katz (1963) states that it is important for the therapist to "become connected with the people and objects in the client's experience" (p. 181).

Brown and Keller (1979), and Rogers (1975) state that empathy is the basic characteristic of understanding others. It provides tolerance for the differences that occur in all relationships. Similarities between people seldom cause frictions, but differences have the tragic potential of destroying relationships, tearing people apart, and alienating each person from another. Hence, we form relationships with those whom we share common interests.

We seek out others and others seek us out because without the companionship of one another, our personalities remain hollow and our potential to be fully human is hard to realize. In our quest to grow, to develop our potential, to discover ourselves, and to lead meaningful lives, we seek meaningful relationships.

However, making connections with others depend on how we perceive them. Part of the communication process involves attracting and being attracted to persons who are similar to us. Those who share the same interests, hobbies, beliefs, opinions and outlook in life are more likely to form bonds of friendship than those who view each other as being different.

There is some support for perceived similarity in relation to empathic expressions. Studies by Deutsch and Madle (1975) and Feshback and Roe (1968) show that children are more empathic toward their peers of the same sex rather than those of the opposite sex. Other studies employing children and adults reveal the same pattern. Rothenberg (1970) discovered that older children were significantly more accurate in perceiving adults' feelings than younger children. Similarity in race has also shown to enhance empathic scores. Cohen and Klein (1968), using female children as subjects, found that they verbalized greater empathy when responding to slides showing children of the same race.

The evolving concept of empathy has not escaped the Cartesian dichotomy of rational versus spiritual, intellect versus emotion. Researchers like Dymond (1949), Kerr and Speroff (1954), Hogan (1969), and Regan and Totten (1975) view empathy as a cognitive process. In such an approach, the empathizer takes the perspective of the other and sees the world as he or she does. It means understanding another's emotional reactions with a clear self-other differentiation without necessarily having an emotional tie.

Other researchers, like Stotland, Mathews, Sherman, Hansson and Richardson (1978), Katz (1963) and Hoffman (1977), stress the affective facets of empathy and define empathy as an emotional reaction by an observer as he or she perceives another's experiencing or near experiencing of an emotion. There is here the actual sharing of another's emotions by the observer. Following up on this approach, Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) and Stotland et al., (1978) studied empathy and helping behavior in which one's emotions seem to play a pivotal role.

However, since the mid-1970s, there have been attempts to integrate the cognitive and affective approaches. It is now accepted that the empathic process includes both these dimensions (Deutsch & Madle, 1975; Hoffman, 1977; Davis, 1983). This process involves the ability of the empathizer to take the perspective of and to feel for another.

Empathy has also been seen as a client-perceived process (Barrett-Lennard, 1981), therapeutic process (Rogers, 1975; Truax & Mitchell, 1971), and role taking (Mead, 1934). All these various treatments of empathy have led researchers to focus on just one aspect of empathy, the one that is most related to that particular field. Each facet has been scrutinized separately from all the other constructs. Hence, a multiplicity of definitions (Manucia, 1967) has resulted in confusion and lack of agreement among researchers about the nature of empathy. Such confusion at the conceptual level has created problems when attempting to measure empathy empirically.

### Assessment Issues

As the concept of empathy developed, researchers like Dymond (1949) and Kerr (1954) began developing assessment measures. By the 1960s, the definition of

empathy had shifted from a theoretical base to an empirical one following the attempts to measure and study it as part of the human interaction process (Stotland et al., 1978).

Unfortunately, these attempts at creating empathy instruments gave little consideration to the multidimensionality of the concept. For example, the empathy measures of Feshbach and Roe (1968) and Hogan (1969) included both cognitive and affective items, but the responses to both types of items were combined into a single empathy score. The result was that the individual contribution of each subcategory was hidden.

Another problem of earlier empathy measures was lack of precision. Kerr's Empathy Test (1947) was an attempt to measure an individual's ability to take on the perspective of another person. However, as Davis (1980) noted, the items seemed more likely to measure the individual's general knowledge instead. In the same way, Dymond's (1949, 1950) rating scale was designed to get a single "accuracy" score, but Cronbach (1955) had shown that the results of such research were contaminated by other artificial influences.

It was only in the late sixties that more valid and reliable measures appeared. The Hogan Empathy Scale (1969) and the Mehrabian Epstein Instrument (1972) were two measures that emerged. The Hogan scale focused on the cognitive dimension of empathy, whereas the Mehrabian and Epstein scale emphasized the affective component. Gladstein (1987) stated that the validity and reliability of these instruments were much better than earlier measures.

None of these instruments, including later ones like the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980), have been applied to marital satisfaction. Hoffman (1977) notes that very few studies have looked at the relationship between empathy and



paired males and females (like marital couples) who share relationships with each other, even though empathy measures have been created.

The Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which will be used in this study, is based on the theory that empathy is a multidimensional concept and not a unitary one. The instrument attempts to measure empathy in a much more comprehensive way. A further discussion of the measure and its four subscales can be found in the next section.

### Summary

In the area of marital relationships, theories about marital satisfaction abound but no studies directly incorporate empirical assessment of empathy. That an important concept like empathy is at the periphery of marital satisfaction studies demonstrates its newness in the field of marital and communication research.

For example, Lewis and Spanier (1979) defines marital quality as the subjective evaluation of a married couple's relationship on a number of dimensions and evaluations. They state that high marital quality is associated with "good adjustment, adequate communication, a high level of marital happiness, integration, and a high degree of satisfaction with the relationship" (p. 269). However, no mention is made of empathy.

Most of the marital studies have been in the area of marital adjustment using subjects undergoing counselling or therapy (Taylor, 1967). For example, Barnes et al., (1984) have analyzed the role of positive regard in relation to marital satisfaction. The results show that positive regard is more effective in explaining variations in marital satisfaction than marital communication variables like empathy and congruence. An earlier research, by Bienvenu (1970) on marital communication, identifies a

category that he states supports or enhances the communication process. Under this broad category are a number of variables, namely the communication of affection, individuality, courtesies in conversations and empathy.

Thus, with the availability of reliable and valid instruments and lack of research between marital satisfaction and empathy, a question that comes to mind is: Does empathy have a relationship with marital satisfaction? Based on the literature indicating a relationship between marital satisfaction and communication, and communication and empathy, we would expect empathy to be a predictor of marital satisfaction.

#### Development of Hypotheses

##### An Empathy Measure

The maturation of the concept of empathy, and the historical development of the relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction were covered in the previous section. In this section, the research concerned with measuring empathy and marital satisfaction as multidimensional constructs will be examined.

Basing his research on the theoretical work of those like Barrett-Lennard (1976, 1978) and Gladstein (1970, 1977), Northouse (1981) utilized five commonly used empathy instruments to assess the empathic process in ongoing dyadic relationships and compared the results. As predicted, the finding of the study revealed that none of the instruments were strongly or moderately correlated with each other. Correlations between the measures were negligible, suggesting that the instruments were measuring different dimensions of empathy.

Davis (1980) believes that measuring empathic response as a multidimensional construct is a much more complete way of understanding its process and evaluating

its effect on behavior. He reports that the predictive superiority of a multidimensional approach to measuring empathy has already been shown (Coke, Bateson & McDavis, 1978; Iannotti, 1979). As a result, he went on to develop an instrument called the Interpersonal Reactivity Index which consists of four separate but related subscales to measure empathy as both cognitive and affective processes.

He defines the four subscales as follows: (1) the Perspective Taking (PT) scale assesses an individual's tendency to adopt the perspective or point of view of others. It means placing oneself in the shoes of another or to understand another from his or her point of view; (2) the Fantasy (FS) scale taps a respondent's tendency to transpose him or herself imaginatively into the feelings and actions of fictitious characters in books, movies and plays. Fantasy entails the ability to identify (temporarily) with the characters without losing one's own identity totally; (3) the Empathic Concern (EC) scale assesses a tendency for a respondent to experience feelings of warmth, compassion and concern for others undergoing negative experiences; (4) the Personal Distress (PD) scale measures an individual's "self-oriented" feelings of personal anxiety, discomfort and unease when witnessing negative experiences of others (Davis, 1980, 1983).

Although Davis' IRI measure is relatively new and yet to be widely used in the research field, the scales themselves are not totally new. They are based on past research work. Researchers like Hoffman (1977) and Coke et al. (1978) have identified the perspective taking, empathic concern and personal distress scales as potentially important aspects of empathy. The FS scale is based on Stotland's work on empathy, fantasy, and helping behavior (1978). Davis states that the work of other researchers like Hogan (1969), and Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) have also contributed to the development of the IRI. Although some of the items were

borrowed or adapted from other measures, the majority were created for this new instrument.

In creating the IRI measure Davis (1980) reported that the standardized alpha coefficients for fantasy, perspective taking, empathic concern and personal distress were .78 for males and .79 for females, .71 for males and .75 for females, .68 for males and .73 for females, and .77 for males and .75 for females, respectively.

He stated that internal reliability coefficients together with results of factor analysis gave strong support for the use of the four empathy subscales for both sexes as clear factors representing the four subscales that emerged. Assessment of the four subscales' reliability over time revealed that the correlation between test and retest scores for males ranged from .62 to .79, and for females from .62 to .81. Hence, for both sexes, there was satisfactory temporal stability for the empathy subscales. The mean scores for fantasy, empathic concern, perspective taking and personal distress were 17.24, 20.35, 17.37 and 10.87, respectively.

Davis also stated that, although some association existed between what appeared to be cognitive and emotional empathic disposition, the correlations were not so strong as to imply that the scales were measuring the same constructs. Hence, the subscales were relatively independent and the scores on one subscale were not a powerful predictor of scores on the other scales.

In an attempt to determine further the validity of his instrument, Davis (1983) conducted a study in which he tested the four IRI subscales against four potentially related psychological constructs: (a) social competence/interpersonal functioning, (b) self-esteem, (c) emotionality and (d) sensitivity to others. The results established the relevant relationships between the IRI subscales and the psychological constructs. This was another important step in determining the IRI's validity.

Davis' study also compared the IRI subscales with two of the more widely used empathy instruments, namely, the Hogan Empathy Scale (cognitive), and the Mehrabian and Epstein Emotional Empathy Scale (affective). The results showed that the cognitive perspective taking scale had the highest correlation with the Hogan measure and the affective fantasy and empathic concern scales correlated the most with the Mehrabian and Epstein measure. The only minor anomaly was with the PD scale which was negatively correlated with the Hogan scale. Table 1 summarizes the results of these comparisons (Davis, 1983).

Table 1  
A Comparison of Davis' Factors with the Hogan Empathy Scale  
and Mehrabian and Epstein Emotional Empathy Scale

	PT	FS	EC	PD
Hogan Empathy Scale	$r = .40$	$r = .15$	$r = .18$	$r = -.33$
Mehrabian & Epstein Emotional Empathy Scale	$r = .20$	$r = .52$	$r = .60$	$r = .24$

When using Davis' instrument, empathy, then, becomes operationally defined as the scores on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (1980). Those who score above the mean in the PT, EC and FS subscales are categorized as high in empathy, and those who score below the mean are classified as low in empathy. On the other hand, those who score below the mean in the PD scale are categorized as high in empathy, as compared to those who score above the mean.

### A Marital Satisfaction Measure

Clearly, empathy is regarded as a multidimensional construct, and so is marital satisfaction. Spanier (1976) states that the evaluation of the quality of marital relationships and adjustment as a process recognizes the fact that marital relations are ever dynamic and changing. There is a continuum of adjustment and also movement along the continuum. What is important is that the focus of such an evaluation is not on an unchanging state, but on the characteristics and interactions of the relationship.

Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), which he developed in 1976, is one of the most widely used measures of marital satisfaction. It focuses on the communication aspect of marital relationships and consists of four categories: (1) dyadic satisfaction which measures couples marital happiness; (2) cohesion which assesses couples level of agreement on important issues; (3) affective expression which taps couples show of love for one another; (4) consensus which measures couples agreement on matters of importance.

The Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale has shown concurrent validity for assessing the present satisfaction level of couples in intimate relationships. Its coefficients alpha reliabilities are .94 for satisfaction, .86 for consensus, .73 for affective expression, and .96 for dyadic adjustment. Studies by Fitzpatrick and Best (1979) and Yelsma (1984) suggest that the content validity of the four DAS components and the total score are more than sufficient for assessing the quality of couples' dyadic adjustment in intimate relations.

This instrument was used because it was the most updated and it focused on communication related behaviors between intimate couples. Furthermore, its reliability and validity have been substantiated over the past 10 years in numerous

studies. For example, previous work by Spanier (1976), Ting-Toomey (1983) and Yelsma (1984) showed that the mean scores for marital satisfaction were 114.8, 115.4 and 113.2 respectively.

When using the DAS instrument to operationally define marital satisfaction, subjects who score above the mean are classified as maritally more satisfied, and those who score below the mean are considered maritally less satisfied.

### Theoretical Base

Several theoretical concepts have been developed to help us understand the dynamics of marital satisfaction. Each school of thought approaches the topic from a particular perspective. For example, social interactionists believe that marital satisfaction depends on couples holding common role expectations and expectations of self and other. Behaviorists, on the other hand, focus their attention on the overt behaviors of couples.

The theoretical framework that is used for this thesis, however, is that of the social exchange theory. The basic idea of exchange theory is that people seek to make choices which can be expected to minimize their costs and/or maximize their rewards (Nye, 1982). The foundations of exchange theory were first revealed in 1959 by Thibaut and Kelley. It is one of the most widely known and used theories in the area of behavioral science in recent times because of the simplicity and applicability of its general premises.

Hodgson and Lewis (1979) note a growing interest with viewing marital interaction through concepts from social exchange theory. An example is that of Lewis and Spanier's Social Exchange Typology of Marital Quality and Stability, which was published in 1979. The interesting aspect of the typology, note the researchers, is

that the three most general propositions, induced from 74 first-order empirical propositions from the marital literature, all contain exchange concepts. They then developed five propositions which they believe have great parsimony, and hence, a high power of explanation and prediction of marital interaction (Nye, 1982, p. 53):

1. The greater the dyadic rewards (cost being equal), the greater the marital quality.
2. The greater the dyadic costs (rewards being equal), the less the marital quality.
3. The greater the external rewards (outside, alternative attractions), the less the marital stability.
4. The greater the external costs of breaking up (normative constraints to remain married), the greater the marital stability.
5. The greater the marital quality, the greater the marital stability.

In terms of marital satisfaction, these propositions suggest that in the exchange process couples experience gratification, pleasure or contentment whenever needs, expectations or desires are fulfilled. Also taking an exchange theory view, Lewis and Spanier (cited in Nye, 1982) state that marital satisfaction can be defined as the perceived evaluative outcomes or profits in a marriage which are the result of reward minus costs in the marriage.

Furthermore, Murstein, Cerreto and MacDonald (1977) state that one's attitude or outlook regarding exchange may also affect the quality of interpersonal relationships. A person who is highly exchange oriented would expect reciprocal exchanges, but another person who is nonexchange oriented will not be bothered in keeping a "balance sheet." Therefore, highly exchange oriented partners may find marital relations satisfying when they see, in communicating with each other, that the reward is greater than the cost.



For the purpose of this thesis, key exchange theory concepts are defined as follows: rewards are the pleasures, satisfactions and gratifications (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) that spouses enjoy within a marriage; costs (punishments or rewards foregone) are any status, relationship, interaction, milieu or feeling disliked (Nye, 1982) by spouses; resources are those things which has an exchange value or produce the most profitable outcomes; interaction is the behavioral sequence of exchanges between spouses in a marriage.

### Hypotheses

From the above discussion, it is clear that the social exchange theory can be readily applied to Davis' multidimensional approach to empathy. Empathic ability is a resource that one may use in the exchange process. In the interaction between spouses, empathy may contribute to greater satisfaction of the relationship. The overall experience may be a rewarding one. The lack of empathic ability, on the other hand, may act as a cost and contribute to the decrease in marital satisfaction. In general, then, the first hypothesis can be stated as follows:

H1. Subjects who score higher on three of the four IRI scales will have significantly higher marital satisfaction than subjects who score lower.

More specifically, in the daily interaction between spouses, the ability to take the perspective of one's spouse may lead to greater understanding and tolerance. Similarly, the ability to respond affectively toward one's spouse or to feel for him or her may draw both partners closer together. Hence, understanding the world from the point of view of and feeling for one's spouse, especially when these are reciprocated, may lead to a much greater sense of satisfaction within that

relationship. The second and third hypotheses can now be formulated:

H2. Subjects who score higher on the perspective taking scale will have significantly higher marital satisfaction than subjects who score lower.

H3. Subjects who score higher on the empathic concern scale will have significantly higher marital satisfaction than those who score lower.

As described above, social exchange theory bases interpersonal relationships on equity of exchanges. Individuals possess qualities and behaviors, like that of empathy, for exchange in social interaction, and the gain or loss from a relationship determines communication between intimate couples (Galvin & Brommel, 1986; Yelsma 1986).

On the other hand, the inability to empathize with the negative experiences of one's spouse due to self-oriented feelings of personal anxiety and unease will be a cost to both partners. It will be a cost to the partner having a negative experience because there will be no comfort forthcoming and no elevation of that negative feeling. This may depress that partner even more. The situation will also be a cost to the partner who is unable or unwilling to empathize because it may cause misunderstandings and frustrations, especially if negative feelings are thrown back and forth in a spiral of anger. The fourth hypothesis can now be stated.

H4. Subjects who score lower on the personal distress scale will have significantly higher marital satisfaction than those who score higher.

In studying individual differences in empathy, Stotland (1978) found that the Fantasy-Empathy (F-E) scale, adapted from Elms (1966), was a valid and reliable measure of empathy. Elms had hypothesized that the use of one's imagination was

a fundamental process in facilitating empathy. What it did was make one's experience of another's situation more vivid.

For example, the emotional charge in plays and movies like "Death of a Salesman" and "Love Story" evoke empathic responses from people in the audience and often bring tears to their eyes. The more one is able to identify with fictitious characters in books, novels and movies, the more empathic one may be. It may very well be that one's ability to identify with fictitious characters in books, novels and movies may also indicate one's ability to identify with one's own spouse. Hence, the fifth hypothesis can now be formulated.

H5. Subjects who score higher on the fantasy scale will have significantly higher marital satisfaction than those who score lower.

#### Secondary Questions

An important question that will also be looked at concerns the issue of the use of paired scores in marital studies. As we have seen in the discussion of marital relations, the sharing of two lives in a marriage implies the notion of interaction. Systems theory (Sieburg, 1985) advocates the view that marital relationships are interactional and dynamic.

Traditionally, scores have been based on individuals as units of analysis. However, since marital relationships involve two persons sharing their lives together, should researchers not use couples' scores  $(H+W/2)$  instead of individuals scores? One would expect that couples' scores would be more relevant and powerful, and indeed, Spanier (1980) believes that marital research should move in this direction of using paired scores. Hence, a primary concern of this study is to investigate the feasibility of using paired scores in marital studies.

Other questions related to the study of empathy will also be looked at during the course of this research. First, there is the question of empathy and sex differences. Although a study by Eisenberg and Lennon (1983) has provided inconsistent results and proved inconclusive, other studies by Dymond (1949) and Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) have shown that females scored higher than males in empathy measurements.

Hoffman (1977) found that, in 16 out of 16 independent studies, females were more empathic than males, especially in the affective area. However, only a few of the differences were significant. Hence, one of the questions of this study will be directed at seeing whether there will be any significant difference in empathy scores between males and females.

Another question is the relationship between empathy and birth order. If there are individual differences in empathy, could birth order be a contributing factor? First and only born children, especially males, tend to be more task oriented than later born children. One reason could be that parents looked to them to be future supporters of the family. Stotland (1971) states that birth order has been demonstrated to be a powerful predictor of adult behavior. Hence, are later born children more empathic than first and only born ones?

A third question that will be asked is do empathy scores correlate with the number of years married. As marital partners grow in familiarity with each other over time, will they become more or less empathic?

Finally, this study, like previous ones, is concerned with age married (e.g., Bahr, Chappell & Leigh, 1983; Booth & Edwards, 1985; Rollins & Galligan, 1978) and marital satisfaction. It is generally agreed that early marriages tend to lead to greater marital dissatisfaction than later marriages. Therefore, in addition to testing the four primary

hypotheses, five questions concerning paired scores, sex, birth order, number of years married and age married will also be explored and discussed.

## CHAPTER II

### DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### Subjects

For this study, 108 subjects were selected from Kalamazoo and the surrounding area. They had to meet three criteria in order to be eligible to participate in the study. Subjects had to be:

1. Heterosexuals.
2. Currently married to each other for at least 1 year.
3. Living in this country for at least 2 years.

The target group chosen was that of heterosexual married couples. Although other types of relationships exist (e.g., homosexuals and cohabitating), heterosexual couples form the bulk of mainstream family life. With that in mind, and taking into account the nature of the study and the time frame, these subjects were selected for analysis purposes.

Ensuring that subjects have been living in the United States for at least two years was a precaution against assessing couples who have just immigrated from another country. Adjustments to a new culture and way of life have the potential of contaminating this study because of cultural, language and experiential differences.

#### Methods and Procedures

Twelve people served as contact persons to help identify married couples willing to participate in this study. These contact persons represented different areas of work and social economic positions. The contact persons consisted of students,

secretaries, homemakers, people in management, communication, business, and the helping professions. They were told to identify and ask married couples (friends, colleagues, church people, etc.) whether or not they would be willing to voluntarily complete a self-report questionnaire. Instructions to contact persons were given both verbally and in written form (see appendix A). The names of those willing to be a part of this study were then given to the researcher so that they could be contacted and arrangements could be made to meet them for their participation.

Each couple was met separately at a time and place of their convenience. The couple received two identical questionnaires, each containing an informed consent sheet, an instruction sheet, the Lewis Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale, the Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), biographical questions, and a return envelope (see appendix B). At the top right hand corner of the first page of each couple's questionnaires were identification numbers that were later used to match husband's responses with wife's responses.

The Spanier (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale consisted of four subscales: dyadic satisfaction, dyadic consensus, dyadic cohesion, and dyadic affective expression. The scores in each section were added to form a total marital satisfaction score for each individual. For couples, the average scores of husbands and wives were used for both instruments.

The Davis IRI Instrument was developed to measure global empathy of interpersonal relations. Hence, the nature of it was rather broad and general. For the purpose of this project, a few alterations were made to the instrument. It was not possible to alter the Fantasy scale without rendering it meaningless, and so it was left in its original form. However, the wordings of the items in three of the subscales (perspective taking, empathic concern, personal distress) were adapted to make

them fit with the specific target group being studied, marital couples, and their satisfaction with their spouses.

The Davis (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index was a 28-item multidimensional approach to measuring empathy (appendix B). This self-report measure has four 7-item subscales (perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress). Each subscale tapped an aspect of the construct of empathy. Since the original formulation of the IRI was designed to measure the global concept of empathy, the wordings of three of the subscales (PT, EC, and PD) were adapted to cater to the target group (married couples) of this study. Examples of the items are: "I try to look at my *spouse's* side of a disagreement before I make a decision," and "I am often quite touched by things that I see happening to *my spouse*" (italics added by researcher).

It is reasonable to assume that, if these subscales measure empathy in a global way, adapting them to measure a specific group will enhance its measuring capacity. Again, for each couple, the average score of each subscale was used.

Couples were asked to read the informed consent and instruction sheets to see if the assessment procedure was clearly understood. Any questions that the couples had were answered. Finally, they were reminded not to consult their spouses when completing the questionnaires, to answer every question on each page, to return the completed forms as soon as possible or within one week, and all information would be kept confidential. The importance of mailing in the questionnaires was emphasized, and the subjects were thanked for their participation. The returned questionnaires were sorted into matched couples and the data entered into a data file for analysis.



Subjects were treated in two ways: as individuals and as couples. Traditionally, marital studies have usually used individual scores for analysis. However, a marriage consists not just of two individuals but two persons interacting on an intimate basis. Using individuals as units of analysis means that the interactive process of the spouses is left out. However, using couples as units of analysis may help eradicate this shortcoming. As Spanier (1980) notes, the trend in marital studies is to look at couples since marriage involves the sharing of two lives. For the purpose of this study, the traditional method of using individuals' scores will be the basis for testing the hypotheses. Couples' scores will also be computed and the results compared with those from individuals' scores to explore the possible advantages of taking couples as units of analysis.

The two instruments utilized in this study were self-report questionnaires. Self-report instruments tend to be rather subjective and rely upon the participants' sense of honesty and fair-mindedness. However, because of the nature of privacy in marriage and long term relationships, one of the continued means of collecting data is to have each spouse respond to self-report questionnaires. Also, self-report questionnaires tell researchers certain things that direct observations cannot.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the nature of the relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction, using Davis' empathy factors (perspective taking, empathic concern, personal distress and fantasy) and Spanier's marital satisfaction questionnaire. Pearson product moment correlations, multiple correlation, regression analysis and stepwise regression were used to analyze the scores. The multiple correlation and stepwise regression were conducted to help us better understand the nature of the relationships between the four empathy factors and marital satisfaction, and to determine the predictive value of these measures.

Altogether, 108 questionnaires were delivered to subjects who had volunteered to participate in this study. Seventy-five questionnaires were returned, seventy-two were completed, three were incomplete and had to be discarded. The response rate of all subjects who were administered the questionnaire was 66.67 percent.

The results are organized into five subsections. The first subsection provides the descriptive information about the subjects. The second subsection deals with the results concerning the four hypotheses. In the third subsection, the results are organized around the secondary questions. Findings using paired scores make up the fourth subsection, and the fifth subsection shows a comparison of the results of the two units of analysis.

### Descriptive Data

There were 34 males and 38 female subjects. Subjects' mean age, number of years married, and age married were 39.4, 14.4 and 24.9 years, respectively. The occupations of the subjects consisted of scientists, lecturers, students, homemakers, salespersons, physicians, consultants, stockbrokers, administrators, social workers and psychologists. Subjects' mean educational level was above that of a bachelors degree. On the average, they were the second born child in their family and attended church services 30 times a year.

Subjects' mean scores for fantasy, empathic concern, perspective taking and personal distress were 14.78, 22.68, 17.85 and 10.58 respectively. The mean score for marital satisfaction was 114.56.

### Hypotheses

The first hypothesis focused on the overall relationship between empathy as a multidimensional construct and marital satisfaction. It was anticipated that there would be a relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction and that the relationship would be positive. The multiple correlation between the four empathy subscores and marital satisfaction was significant ( $r = .7270$ ). Multiple regression revealed that there was a significant predictive relationship between the two major variables, with empathy accounting for 53% of the variance in predicting marital satisfaction ( $F = 24.80$ ;  $df = 3/68$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

Hypothesis two was set up to investigate the relationship between perspective taking and marital satisfaction. It was predicted that perspective taking would be positively related to marital satisfaction. Regression analysis revealed that

perspective taking accounted for 16% of the variance in predicting marital satisfaction which was significant ( $F = 13.61$ ;  $df = 1/70$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Please see table 2 for the relevant statistical value. Although perspective taking by itself was a significant predictor of marital satisfaction, it was not a variable that entered into the stepwise regression (see Table 3).

Table 2  
Regression Analysis of Four Measures of Empathy  
Predicting Marital Satisfaction (Individuals)

	Marital Satisfaction			
	r	R Square	F Ratio	p
Fantasy	.0644	.0042	.2916	.5909
Empathic Concern	.6977	.4868	66.41	.0000
Perspective Taking	.4035	.1628	13.61	.0004
Personal Distress	.1021	.0104	.7376	.3934

The third hypothesis stated that empathic concern would be positively related to marital satisfaction. The results revealed that empathic concern was predictive of marital satisfaction. The regression analysis revealed that empathic concern accounted for 49% of the variance in marital satisfaction ( $F = 66.41$ ;  $df = 1/70$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In the stepwise regression empathic concern combined with fantasy to account for 52% of the variance in marital satisfaction (see Table 3).

Table 3  
Stepwise Regression of Empathy Variables  
Predicting Marital Satisfaction

Order of Entry of Variables	r	R Square	T-Value	p
Empathic Concern	.6977	.4868	8.149	.0000
Fantasy	.7176	.5150	-2.001	.0493
Perspective Taking			1.034	.3046
Personal Distress			-0.960	.3407

The fourth hypothesis focused on the relationship between personal distress and marital satisfaction. It was revealed that personal distress was not significantly related with marital satisfaction (see Table 2). Stepwise and regression analyses both revealed that personal distress by itself was not a predictor of marital satisfaction, nor did it combine with any of the other variables in the stepwise regression.

In the fifth hypothesis, it was expected that fantasy would be significantly related to marital satisfaction. The results revealed that fantasy was not significantly correlated with marital satisfaction. No significant findings occurred in regression analysis. However, stepwise regression revealed that fantasy was significantly related with marital satisfaction ( $t = -2.001$ ;  $df = 1/70$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Please see tables 2 and 3.

### Secondary Questions

Independent t-tests revealed no significant differences between Davis' empathy measure and that of sex or birth order. The number of years married was negatively correlated with marital satisfaction ( $r = -.3828$ ) and empathic concern ( $r = -.3650$ ). Regression analysis showed that the number of years married was a significant predictor of lower marital satisfaction, accounting for 15% of the variance in marital satisfaction, ( $F = 12.02$ ;  $df = 1/70$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Length of marriage was also a significant predictor of empathic concern, accounting for 13% of variance ( $F = 10.76$ ;  $df = 1/70$ ;  $p < .01$ ). No other significant relations were found for length of marriage.

The age married was significantly correlated with marital satisfaction ( $r = .3389$ ), empathic concern ( $r = .2740$ ) and perspective taking ( $r = .2293$ ). Similarly, regression analysis showed that age married was a significant predictor of marital satisfaction ( $F = 9.085$ ;  $df = 1/70$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and empathic concern ( $F = 5.683$ ;  $df = 1/70$ ;  $p < .05$ ), accounting for 12% and 8% of variance in marital satisfaction, respectively.

### Couples as Units of Analysis

#### Subjects

There were altogether 33 matched couples of the 72 subjects considered in the study. As expected, the relevant descriptive statistics, average DAS, and IRI scores for the couples were identical to those of the subjects taken as individuals. Using the same hypotheses generated for individuals' scores, the analysis from paired scores were determined for this study.

### Hypotheses

Using couples' scores to test the first hypothesis, the results revealed that the correlation between empathy and marital satisfaction was significant ( $r = .7928$ ). Multiple regression for the paired scores revealed that empathy accounted for 63% of the variance in marital satisfaction ( $F = 16.22$ ;  $df = 3/29$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

In hypothesis two, it was anticipated that perspective taking would be significantly related to marital satisfaction. When regression analysis was performed it was discovered that perspective taking accounted for 27% of the variance in marital satisfaction ( $F = 11.29$ ;  $df = 1/31$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Please see table 4. However, it was not a variable that entered into the stepwise regression (see Table 5).

The third hypothesis investigated the relationship between empathic concern and marital satisfaction. The results revealed that empathic concern was significantly related with marital satisfaction ( $r = .7710$ ). Regression analysis and stepwise regression revealed that empathic concern had a significant relationship with marital satisfaction, accounting for 59% of the variance in marital satisfaction ( $F = 45.43$ ;  $df = 1/31$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Please see tables 4 and 5 for the statistical values.

Table 4  
Regression Analysis of Four IRI Empathy Variables  
Predicting Marital Satisfaction (Couples)

	Marital Satisfaction			
	r	R Square	F Ratio	p
Fantasy	.1004	.0101	.3153	.5785
Empathic Concern	.7710	.5944	45.43	.0000
Perspective Taking	.5167	.2670	11.29	.0021
Personal Distress	.0142	.0002	.0063	.9374

Table 5  
Stepwise Regression of Davis' Factors  
Predicting Marital Satisfaction

	Marital Satisfaction			
	r	R Square	T-Value	p
Empathic Concern	.7710	.5944	6.740	.0000
Fantasy			-1.361	.1836
Perspective Taking			.857	.3984
Personal Distress			-.833	.4117



The fourth hypothesis concerning the relationship between personal distress and marital satisfaction was not supported.

In the fifth hypothesis for couples' scores, it was anticipated that fantasy would be significantly related with marital satisfaction, but it was not supported when regression analysis was performed.

### Secondary Questions

Independent t-tests for couples' scores revealed that sex and birth order were not significantly related to fantasy, perspective taking, empathic concern, or personal distress. The length of marriage was significantly related with marital satisfaction and empathic concern ( $r = .4146$  and  $.4115$  respectively)

Regression analysis revealed that number of years married was significantly related with marital satisfaction, ( $F = 6.434$ ;  $df = 1/31$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and empathic concern, ( $F = 6.320$ ;  $df = 1/31$ ;  $p < .05$ ), accounting for 17% of variance in marital satisfaction in each case.

Age married was significantly correlated with only perspective taking ( $r = .3131$ ), and the regression analysis for age married revealed no significant relationships.

### Comparison of Individuals and Couples as Units of Analysis

A comparison of results based on individuals and couples as units of analysis revealed several differences. When couples were the units of analysis, the fantasy subscale did not show a significant relationship with marital satisfaction in the stepwise regression as it did when individuals were the units of analysis. This finding may be due to the number of subjects (72 individuals compared with only 33 couples) which affected the level of significance when performing the statistical analysis.

Other contrasting findings can be found in tables 6, 7 and 8. Table 6 looks at the correlation values of marital satisfaction and number of years married with empathic concern perspective taking. In table 7 we have the comparison of percentage change in variance for marital satisfaction and number of years married with empathic concern and perspective taking. The results from tables 7 and 8 reveal that when couples scores were used in this study, the value of the correlation coefficients and percentage change in variance increased.

Table 8 compares the correlation coefficients of age married with marital satisfaction and empathic concern when individual and paired scores were used. Although the couples results are not significant, the correlation coefficients are still rather high and the probability values are near the level of significance.

Table 6  
Pearson Product Moment Correlations  
Comparing Individuals and Couples Scores

	Marital Satisfaction Individuals	Couples	Number of Years Married Individuals	Couples
Empathic Concern	.6977*	.7710*	-.3650**	-.4115**
Perspective Taking	.4035*	.5167**		
Number of Years Married	-.3828*	-.4146**		

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

Table 7

Percentage of Variance in Regression Analysis for  
Individuals and Couples Scores

	Marital Satisfaction		Number of Years Married	
	Individual	Couples	Individuals	Couples
Empathic Concern	.4868	.5944	.1332	.1694
Perspective Taking	.1628	.2670		
Number of Years Married	.1466	.1719		

Table 8

Pearson Product Moment Correlations Comparing Individual and Paired Scores  
of Age Married with Marital Satisfaction and Empathic Concern

	Age Married	
	Individuals	Couples
Marital Satisfaction	.3389*	.2702
Empathic Concern	.2740**	.2732

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

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study, as mentioned earlier, were based on the traditional method of using individual scores as units of analysis. Those results were compared with results based on paired scores. The order of discussion will be an analysis of individuals' results first followed by an analysis of couples' results next.

Rogers' statement about the nature of empathy is one of several important theoretical perspectives for this study. Rogers (1951) stated that empathic identification requires the ability to feel and understand the attitudes expressed by the other and to catch every nuance of his or her changing nature.

Such a focus touches upon the very core of the communication process. Marital researchers, like Nye (1982), Spanler (1980) and Sieburg (1985), agree that communication is the key to developing effective marital relationships. One important element of communication often mentioned but not empirically tested is empathy. That is, empathy has not been at the center of marital studies and its relationship with marital satisfaction has not been empirically demonstrated. Thus, the purpose of this thesis was to test the relationship between marital satisfaction and empathy.

In this study of empathy as a multidimensional construct, the results reveal that empathy is related to marital satisfaction. Hypotheses two and three, specifically, were supported. Empathic concern was the factor that was most strongly related with marital satisfaction, and being the best predictor, accounting for the most variance in marital satisfaction. This indicates that spouses who respond to their partners feelings in an empathic (affective) manner are more satisfied in their

marriage.

The results also reveal that perspective taking is related to marital satisfaction. Again, we would expect this to be so since spouses ability to understand their partners from their point of view is an important factor in contributing to the overall intimacy and happiness of a marriage.

These two subscales tap both the cognitive and affective spheres of empathic response, adding further significance to the findings that empathy is, indeed, a multidimensional construct and should be approached as such. When we look at both the relationships between empathic concern and perspective taking with regards to marital satisfaction, we see that the relationship involving empathic concern is the stronger one. The percentage of variance of marital satisfaction accounted for by empathic concern is almost three times that of perspective taking for individuals' scores.

Empathic concern, compared with perspective taking, was also the more dominant subscale of Davis' empathy measure. In both the correlation and regression analyses, it was found to be significantly related with marital satisfaction, number of years married and age married. Perspective taking was significantly related with marital satisfaction and age married.

Hence, we may say that in marital relationships the affective domain of empathy plays a more prominent role than the cognitive area. It must be remembered, though, that both dimensions should be taken into consideration in order for us to have a more complete picture of the empathic process.

The results also indicate that, although a multidimensional approach to empathy is more complex, the results generated are rich and beneficial, giving greater insights into the empathic processes being studied. Instead of having only

composite scores of unitary constructs, we have several scores from several subscales that give us a more complete picture of empathy. A single dimensional assessment of empathy hides the true nature of the concept and does not reflect the complexity of the process.

The results from this study, however, reveal that the fantasy dimension of empathy is not related to marital satisfaction. However, in the stepwise regression analysis, fantasy was a significant variable in relation to marital satisfaction. One reason could be the moderate correlation between empathic concern and perspective taking ( $r = .4550$ ) which allowed the fantasy scale to emerge as a significant factor. However, the percentage of variance accounted for by fantasy as a predictor of marital satisfaction was only about three percent. It could be that the inability to adjust and reword the fantasy scale to the specific target group of married couples made it a rather weak subscale.

Even though the personal distress subscale had been adjusted to fit into this project, no significant relationships occurred. One reason for the low predictive association may lie in the use of the term "emergencies" in several items. This term may be too ambiguous. On the one hand, certain types of emergencies may evoke empathic response, whereas other types of emergency situations may cause one to retreat into a self-oriented posture.

Furthermore, unlike the other three subscales, this subscale attempted to measure empathy inversely in which low personal distress would indicate high empathy. Future research which rewords the items on the fantasy and personal distress subscales may reveal important dimensions when measuring empathy in marital studies.

As for the secondary questions, such as sex, birth order, length of marriage and age married, it was found that sex was not associated with empathy. No significant difference was found between males and females empathic response in all four subscales. Hoffman (1977) had reported that, although many studies showed differences in empathy levels between males and females, only a few of the studies were significant. It could be that sex roles, as opposed to gender, would be a more useful classification to adopt in measuring communication related constructs.

Similarly, the results revealed that there was no significant differences between birth order and any of the empathy subscales. The results are in line with Stotland's et al (1971, 1978) findings that birth order is not related to fantasy or overall empathy measures, although it may be a determinant of the social situations (e.g. perceived similarity) in which a person empathizes. Although birth order per se may not be a significant variable associated with empathy, it may still be an important classification to use in relation to other social contexts.

Results from this study support the findings of previous studies which indicate that the level of marital satisfaction decreases over the length of a marriage. Empathic concern was found to also decrease over the number of years married. Since empathic concern is strongly correlated with marital satisfaction, we would expect this to be so. Studies of marital satisfaction over the life cycle may throw further light on this question.

Several earlier researchers (Blood, 1967; Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Pineo, 1961) found that marital satisfaction gradually decreased over the life cycle, with the lowest satisfaction scores occurring just before the launching of children.

However, a study by Burr (1970) reveals that marital satisfaction does not just decrease in a linear manner over time. It is more of a curvilinear relationship which

increased, then decreased and eventually increase again. His findings reveal that the lowest period of satisfaction is during the children's preschool stage to school stage where there is a discernible drop for both husbands and wives in overall marital satisfaction. He cautions against the conclusion that marital satisfaction simply decreases throughout the life cycle.

Many factors may account for the decrease or increase of marital satisfaction of spouses such as the handling of financial matters, sex, doing shared activities, spending leisure time together, offsprings, companionship and task related activities. Now we have some evidence suggesting that, as empathy decreases, so does marital satisfaction. Although the results of this study show a simple negative relationship between length of marriage and marital satisfaction, it should be kept in mind that numerous factors may contribute to marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

The results of this study reveal that the age subjects married each other is positively correlated with marital satisfaction. Weed (1974) and Schoen (1975) state that early marriages have deleterious effects, increasing marital instability. Many reasons have been proposed to explain this relationship between spouses age when married and marital satisfaction, like that of immaturity and the desire to escape the parental home.

Lee (1977) suggests that people who marry earlier lack preparation for marital role performance. Poor role performance from spouses decreases marital satisfaction which eventually leads to marital instability. His study (on role performance) and that of Booth and Edwards (1985) give some support to their argument. It is possible that poor role performance may also lead to misunderstandings, frustrations and an overall lack of empathic identification.



Other reasons explaining lack of empathy may be found in exchange theory. Younger married couples have a higher comparison level of alternatives. Since the alternatives to their current marriage are more abundant, they may be less tolerant of differences and conflict. Such intolerance may undermine the process of empathy for both partners. Second, there may be an absence of external pressure like the approval of significant others. Parental approval may be lacking, and friends, especially those not commonly shared by the spouses, may act as forces pulling the couple apart.

#### Couples Results

As can be seen from the result section, analyses of data were performed on two classifications of the subjects. A very interesting pattern emerges when the results using paired scores are compared with those using individuals' scores. For individuals' scores, the correlation between Davis' four empathy factors and marital satisfaction is .7270, whereas the correlation for couples' scores is .7928. The correlation coefficients for empathic concern and perspective taking and that of marital satisfaction are .6977 and .4035 respectively for individual scores. When couples are the unit of analysis, the correlation coefficients are .7710 and .5167.

As one can see from the same table (Table 6), the difference in correlation values are rather large. Differences also occur for number of years married and that of marital satisfaction ( $r = -0.3828$  vs  $-0.4146$ ) and empathic concern ( $r = -0.3650$  vs  $-0.4115$ ). Although the differences here are not as large, they follow the same pattern of increase and deserve to be noted.

We see, then, that the results for couples' scores are higher than those for individuals' scores. This pattern of increase is also seen in the multiple regression and

regression analysis of couples scores. In terms of percentage of variance of marital satisfaction accounted for by empathic concern and perspective taking, there was a clear 10% increase in each case when couples were the unit of analysis. In the multiple regression for individuals scores, empathy accounted for 53% of the variance in marital satisfaction, whereas for paired scores, the figure climbed to 63%.

For individuals, 49% of variance of marital satisfaction was accounted for by empathic concern and 16% by perspective taking. When couple's scores were analyzed, 59% of variance was accounted for by empathic concern and 27% by perspective taking (Table 7).

The reason for the differences between individuals and couples scores may lie in the fact that marital relations are not comprised of merely two separate individuals but two *interacting* persons sharing deep human ties. This is in accordance with systems theory that views marital relationships as always dynamic and in a state of tension (Sieburg, 1985). Thus, there appears to be more predictability of identifying marital satisfaction when couples scores are utilized than when individual scores are used in the analysis.

At the center of marital relations is the communication process involving two persons. This is especially true for empathy. One cannot empathize all by one's self. Empathic response by its very nature necessitates the interaction of at least two persons. It is only in relationship with another person that one may be able to feel for and understand another from his or her viewpoint.

Hence, the differences between the results of the two units of analysis may reflect the possibility that couples scores taken together are more effective assessments than those of individuals. Just as the concepts of marital satisfaction and empathy are more complex than unitary constructs, so too marital relations are

more than two separate people existing side by side with each other.

However, we see that for individuals' scores, age married is significantly correlated with marital satisfaction, empathic concern and perspective taking. When couples' scores are used, no significant correlations are found for age married with that of marital satisfaction and empathic concern. Notice, however, that the correlation coefficients are almost significant (Table 8). In the stepwise regression, the fantasy scale which was significant in individuals' results revealed no significance in couples' results.

One of the main reasons for these findings probably lies in the number of subjects in the two analyses. The number of subjects for couples as units of analysis was 33 as compared to 72 for that of individuals. The number of subjects affect the level of significance of a study. In other words, the correlation coefficients will have to be higher for paired scores if they are to attain a significance level of at least .05. A study with a larger number of couples would eliminate this problem.

There is relatively strong evidence in this study to support the argument that using couples as units of analysis with communication behavior may be more appropriate and effective than using individuals' scores. The impact of using paired scores is greater than that of individuals' scores because it is more representative of a systems approach which actually exists in marriage. In other words, since the extreme scores are discarded, the mean scores used have much less variance, and the correlation coefficients, then, increase in strength.

Similarly, for the regression analysis, the average scores of couples lie much closer to the regression line than the scores of individuals. Since the mean scores are nearer the regression line, the amount of unexplained variance drops and the percentage of variance accounted for by the independent variable increases.

This greater impact of using couples scores is reflected in stronger correlation coefficients and substantial increase in percentage of variance accounted for in regression analyses. Furthermore, the loss of significant relationship in a few of the variables, as mentioned earlier, is probably due to the number of couples in this study. The results show that the correlation coefficients, although insignificant, were relatively strong, and a greater number of couples would probably have resulted in significant correlations for those variables.

#### Future Directions

Where do we go from here? There are different kinds of marriages, for example, Cuber and Haroff (1965) list five types: (1) devitalized marriage; (2) habituated marriage; (3) passive congenial marriage; (4) vital marriage; (5) total marriage. It would be interesting to see where couples, in different types of marriages, stand in relation to empathy and marital satisfaction.

Another area of investigation could lie in the relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction over the family life cycle. Knowing where and in which areas empathy parallels the satisfaction curve may provide useful information for spouses understanding of each other. For example, it has been shown that husbands' satisfaction level decreases before the arrival of children, whereas wives satisfaction dips with the oncoming of children. If empathy studies reveal a parallel curve with that of marital satisfaction, then, it may be possible to sensitize couples to this general trend in marriage and help them be more attentive to empathy in marital relationships.

Hence, studies in marital relations over a life cycle with empathic concern as one variable may be important because it holds out the possibility that increasing

spouses empathy at any stage in marital life (e.g. in child rearing years, periods of conflict) may help increase the overall level of marital satisfaction, and hence, marital quality of couples.

It follows from the above point that developing a program for couples that teaches empathic ability may be an important tool. Such a program should not simply teach a fixed set of behaviors but allow each couple the opportunity to discover in what ways they may show empathy and how they may perceive the empathic responses of their spouses. It is only when the characteristics and needs of each couple are known that teaching empathy can be useful.

Other areas of study may include that of age married in relation to marital satisfaction and stability. Our society is continually changing and at a more rapid pace. More people are putting off marriage till a later age as they pursue educational and career goals, and some may choose not to have any children. As society changes with the flow of new technologies and lifestyles, role performance and expectations of marriage change. All these changes may lead to greater conflict and disparities in role expectations associated with marriage. In what way do these factors affect marital relations?

Further research in empathy needs to be conducted in the area of sex and sex roles. Although sex was not a significant variable in measuring empathy, it would be useful to determine if sex roles may be important factors. In other words, how do masculinity, femininity and androgyny relate to the different dimensions of empathy? Some studies have shown that females are more empathic than males. However, today, sex roles are changing and we know that males and females may be either masculine, feminine or androgynous. The study of empathy in relation to sex roles may help dispel gender stereotypes that divide people and promote biases.

Next, if empathy helps to bridge differences between people, can it be a significant factor in decreasing aggressive or antisocial behavior? In their study Ceka et al. (1978) found that empathic ability was a stepping stone to altruistic behavior. If that is the case, then it seems logical that inculcating empathic ability may be an important step in helping curb antisocial behavior. For example, do empathic couples raise children who have fewer antisocial problems in school and the community?

Finally, from the results comparing the use of individuals and couples as units of analysis, the move toward the utilization of couples' scores need to be further studied and substantiated. Spanier (1980) suggests that future studies in the field of marital relationships should consider couples as units of analysis. Given the results from this study, it makes sense since couples scores are more consistent and compact. The results of this study give relatively strong support to the use of paired scores in marital studies. However, the studies need to consider the effects of the number of couples and ensure that sufficient couples participate.

## Appendices

Appendix A

Contact Person's Letter



December 4, 1987

Dear Contact Person:

I am conducting a project on marital relationships and communication processes. You and your spouse can be a part of this project by asking your friends and others if they would be willing to participate in the study. It entails filling out a questionnaire that should take about twenty minutes to complete.

Individuals will complete the questionnaires in their homes. All I ask is to be able to hand the questionnaires to the participants at their place of residence. I will then leave and return to collect the completed forms on another day. Alternatively, couples may choose to mail the questionnaires back to me. Envelopes will be provided.

As soon as you have collected the names and phone numbers of those who wish to participate, contact me or send the list to the address below. Please note that, even if the people you ask do not wish to participate, they could help by being contact persons for you.

There are several requirements that volunteers need to fulfill in order to be able to participate in the study. They must be:

1. Heterosexuals.
2. Married for at least 1 year.
3. Living in this country for at least 2 years.

I am very grateful for your help. Please accept my heartfelt appreciation for your time and effort. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Benny Chee  
Graduate Student  
Communication Department  
Western Michigan University

## Participants

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.# \_\_\_\_\_
2. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.# \_\_\_\_\_
3. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.# \_\_\_\_\_
4. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.# \_\_\_\_\_
5. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.# \_\_\_\_\_
6. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.# \_\_\_\_\_
7. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.# \_\_\_\_\_
8. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.# \_\_\_\_\_

Please contact or return to:

Benny Chee  
100 Western Ave.  
Apt. L-9  
Kalamazoo, MI 49008

Phone #: Home 343-5062 / Office 383-4035

If on campus:

Mallbox is on 3rd floor  
of Sprau Tower.

Appendix B

Questionnaire

## Informed Consent

Dear Participant:

This research is concerned with the ways people in marital relationships communicate with each other. The questionnaires will measure : empathy and issues regarding marital satisfaction.

Participation in the study is VOLUNTARY and CONFIDENTIAL. Do not write your name on the questionnaire. Your identity will not, in any way, be associated with the answers you give unless you choose to reveal that information. The number at the top right-hand corner of the questionnaire is just for matching purposes. Only summary data will be used and no individual scores will be reported. No personal scores will be available. You should recognize that your partner may answer these questions either the same or different from the way you do or not at all.

For the purpose of this research, please do not discuss your response to the questionnaire before or while you are completing the items. Some controversy could arise, if you and your partner have not discussed these issues in the past, and if you choose to discuss your individual responses to these questions. If you decide to participate by filling out the questionnaire, but for any reason, in process, decide you do not care to proceed, you may stop.

I am deeply indebted to your honest and accurate responses to the questionnaire.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Benny Chee  
Graduate Student  
Communication Department  
Western Michigan University

## DIRECTIONS

1. The word PARTNER refers to the person to whom you are presently married.
2. Please do not consult your partner while completing this inventory.
3. Please be as frank and as honest as possible so that this information will be of research value. Remember, all answers are confidential.
4. Please circle the appropriate response on the right which indicates how the question applies to you.
5. Notice that the NUMBERS FOR RESPONSES ON EACH SCALE CHANGE:  
1=Always AGREE,      1=ALL the time,      1=Never or  
1=Extremely UNhappy etc.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

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These consist of pages:

Appendix B

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**U·M·I**

## Biographical Data

1. Your age in years: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Number of years married: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Your age when married: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Sex:            1 = Male    2 = Female
5. Number of marriages prior to your current marriage?
 

1=None	2=One	3=Two
4=Three times	5=Four times or more	
6. Please indicate your birth order:
 

1=Only born	2=1st born	3=2nd born	4=3rd born
5=4th born		6=5th born or more	
7. Your highest attained level of education:
 

1 Less than high school diploma	2 High school diploma	3 One year of college
4 Two years of college	5 Three years of college	6 Bachelors degree
7 Masters degree	8 Masters degree plus course work	
9 Doctoral degree		
8. Your occupation: \_\_\_\_\_
9. How often do you attend church (per year)?
 

1=50 times or more	2=25-50 times	3=10-25 times
4=5-10 times	5=1-5 times	6=Never
10. Your yearly income:
 

1=\$100,000 or more	2=\$99,000-\$41,000	3=\$40,000-\$21,000
4=\$20,000-\$12,000	5=\$11,000 or less	

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