

The Precarious Couple Effect: Verbally Inhibited Men + Critical, Disinhibited Women = Bad Chemistry

William B. Swann Jr., Peter J. Rentfrow, and Samuel D. Gosling
University of Texas at Austin

When critical, verbally disinhibited women are paired with verbally inhibited men, relationship quality suffers, rendering the relationship precarious. This effect theoretically emerges when (a) verbally disinhibited women pair with relatively inhibited men (*man-more-inhibited* couples) and (b) the disinhibition of women in man-more-inhibited couples amplifies women's criticalness and alienates men. Three studies ($Ns = 437, 300,$ and 564) provided evidence that relationship quality suffered in man-more-inhibited couples; a 4th study ($N = 168$) showed that the criticalness of women in man-more-inhibited couples did indeed undermine relationship quality. Implications for understanding the impact of gender expectations on relationships and for integrating behavioral and personological approaches to close relationships are discussed.

What is the source of the ineffable "chemistry" that some couples enjoy? This question is both fascinating and frustrating: Fascinating because of its richness and complexity; frustrating because it has proven difficult to answer. Indeed, although researchers have made significant strides in understanding why members of some couples get along better than others, many key issues remain cloaked in mystery.

Some of the most promising attempts to identify the roots of relationship harmony have focused on what goes wrong in troubled couples. Some researchers have reported that distressed marriages are often characterized by a wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern (e.g., Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993), in which women make demands because they lack power in their relationships, and men withdraw because they feel that they have nothing to gain from confrontations (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). In this same tradition, Gottman and his colleagues (e.g., Carrère & Gottman, 1999; Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 1999) have identified an interaction pattern that is highly predictive of divorce. Dubbed *stonewalling*, it occurs when husbands emotionally withdraw from their partners during conflict and say nothing.

The research on demand-withdrawal and stonewalling has suggested that some male-female qualities may combine synergistically (Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000, 2002), with certain combi-

nations being particularly toxic. But precisely what are these characteristics? In this report, we suggest that people's chronic communication styles may contribute to such synergistic reactions. More specifically, we argue that individual differences in the extent to which people inhibit their verbal responses can exert a powerful impact on how well they get along with their relationship partners.

Communication in Close Relationships

Virtually all humans possess a basic desire to connect with others and be understood by them (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2002). Nevertheless, the extent to which they use language to forge these connections varies considerably. At one end of a continuum, verbally disinhibited persons translate their every thought and feeling into words quickly and without hesitation. At the other end, verbally inhibited persons are relatively slow and reluctant to say what is on their minds. Recent research has suggested that individual differences in verbal inhibition represent a stable personality trait (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001).

In this report, we suggest that individual differences in verbal inhibition have profound consequences for communication patterns in close relationships. That is, because verbal communications tend to be relatively direct, salient, and clear, on balance people who routinely articulate what they are thinking communicate their needs far more effectively than those who routinely remain silent. Verbally disinhibited persons may thus enjoy the advantages associated with making their values and needs known.

Nevertheless, because the verbal channel tends to demand a response from one's partners, those who use it frequently may run the risk of overwhelming partners who are not inclined to reciprocate. Consider research on the interactional synchrony hypothesis. Buller and Aune (1988) showed that listeners preferred messages delivered by speakers who spoke at a speech rate similar to their own (for reviews, see Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991; Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995). This suggests that if both partners are verbally disinhibited, both will respond rapidly and effusively to one another, inducing them to feel involved and connected with

William B. Swann Jr., Peter J. Rentfrow, and Samuel D. Gosling,
Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to William B. Swann Jr., Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712. E-mail: swann@psy.utexas.edu

one another. Similarly, if partners are both verbally inhibited, they will respond in a relatively measured manner, leaving both gratified that their partner offers them “space” to think and respond at their own pace. In contrast, when people differ in level of verbal inhibition, conflict and misunderstanding may result. Just as the verbally disinhibited person may think that the paucity of responses by the verbally inhibited person reflects lack of interest in the relationship, the verbally inhibited person may be overwhelmed by a verbally disinhibited partner.

Yet if asymmetries in the level of partners’ verbal inhibition can be disruptive to relationships, some types of asymmetries may be more disruptive than others. Carli and her associates (Carli, 1990; Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995), for example, have reported that men derogate women who speak rapidly and with few hesitations—that is, verbally disinhibited women. We suspect that disliking for verbally disinhibited women may run particularly high among verbally inhibited men, because such men may be relatively easily overwhelmed or threatened by the verbal dominance of critical, disinhibited women (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Rudman & Glick, 2001). In this report, we refer to the tendency for relationships between inhibited men and relatively disinhibited women to suffer as the *man-more-inhibited* effect.

Of course, not all relationships in which the man is more inhibited than the woman may encounter difficulties. Rather, we suspect that such relationships may run into difficulty when the woman possesses undesirable personality characteristics, such as criticalness, that are amplified by the woman’s verbal disinhibition (e.g., Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Feeling as though they are drowning in a sea of criticism, verbally inhibited men may withdraw. This may cause their disinhibited partners to fear that they are losing them and attempt to draw their partners back into the interaction. Such efforts may, in turn, cause men to withdraw even further, thereby undermining the relationship satisfaction of both the man and the woman. This *precarious couple* effect is surely not an inevitable outcome of pairings in which verbally inhibited men are paired with critical, disinhibited women, but it may be a fairly common one.

Indirect support for the precarious couple effect comes from Gottman’s (1994) evidence that relationships are deeply imperiled when men who are emotionally withdrawn (seemingly verbally inhibited) are paired with women who are verbally aggressive and demanding (seemingly verbally disinhibited and critical). Similarly, an early study by Cattell and Nesselroade (1967) revealed that marital quality suffered when the wife’s scores on a measure of Extraversion substantially exceeded the husband’s. Although Extraversion embodies several qualities that are conceptually independent of verbal inhibition (e.g., warmth, gregariousness, activity level, excitement seeking, positive emotions), one facet of Extraversion (assertiveness) is closely associated with verbal disinhibition. These findings are therefore roughly consistent with the notion that a measure of individual differences that directly taps verbal inhibition should, in combination with a measure of criticalness, reveal the hypothesized precarious couple effect. To test this hypothesis, we relied on a measure of verbal inhibition that Swann and Rentfrow (2001) recently developed.

The BLIRT: A Measure of Verbal Inhibition

Swann and Rentfrow (2001) attempted to capture individual differences in verbal inhibition (or *blirtiousness*) by developing

a scale dubbed the BLIRT (Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test). High scorers (*disinhibitors* or *high blirters*) tend to express themselves as soon as thoughts occur to them, endorsing items such as “If I have something to say, I don’t hesitate to say it,” and “I speak my mind as soon as a thought enters my head.” At the opposite end of the verbal inhibition continuum, low scorers (*inhibitors* or *low blirters*) are relatively slow in responding to others, endorsing items such as “It often takes me a while to figure out how to express myself,” and “If I disagree with someone, I tend to wait until later to say something.” The BLIRT has desirable psychometric properties, including internal consistency and temporal stability (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Scores on the BLIRT are also independent of intelligence, social desirability, and gender of the participant.

Evidence that verbal inhibitors are actively inhibiting verbal responses has come from two recent studies of blurring under the influence of alcohol (Swann & Vazire, 2003). In one study, inhibitors reported that the only context in which they were effusive was when they had consumed alcohol—which is known for its disinhibitory properties (e.g., Lang, 1983). A follow-up study suggested that these self-reports were accurate. That is, when participants made a speech after drinking alcohol, inhibitors suddenly became verbally disinhibited, actually talking slightly more than disinhibitors.

In addition, several studies have provided evidence for the convergent and discriminant validity of the BLIRT. For example, disinhibitors talked more rapidly and effusively than inhibitors whether the interaction was affectively neutral (a getting-acquainted conversation, students in a college classroom) or contentious (a confrontation with a confederate who either disrupted the experiment by continuing to talk on her cell phone or insulted the participant and pummeled him with wads of paper). Moreover, when antagonized, inhibitors’ lack of verbal responding was accompanied by indications of physiological arousal (i.e., elevated blood pressure). Correlations with components of the Big Five (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999) reveal that verbal inhibition is a blend of Extraversion and Neuroticism (for further details regarding the relation of verbal inhibition to Big Five facets, see Study 2 below). Assessments of the predictive validity of the BLIRT revealed that its specific focus on verbal inhibition allowed it to outperform competing predictors (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Whereas BLIRT scores predicted key outcome variables when associated Big Five variables (e.g., Extraversion, Neuroticism) and facets of the Big Five (e.g., assertiveness) were partialled out, the reverse was not true (for a similar argument about the predictive utility of measuring specific components of the Big Five, see Paunonen & Jackson, 2000).

Verbal inhibition is broader than emotional expressiveness, because disinhibitors are just as quick and loquacious in expressing their beliefs and opinions about abstract ideas as they are in expressing their emotions (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Verbal inhibition also differs from responsiveness as that construct is typically construed. That is, whereas past workers (e.g., Gottman, 1982; Stern, 1977) have restricted the use of responsiveness to responses that are both positive and contingent (e.g., reacting in ways that are appropriate given the context), blurring may include responses that are negative (e.g., verbally abusive remarks) or unprovoked (e.g., inappropriate comments). Finally, verbal inhibition is narrower than psychological reticence, which consists of

six components such as shyness, withdrawal, and fear of negative evaluations, according to Kelly et al. (2002).

In short, disinhibitors, as compared with inhibitors, quickly and extensively verbalize what they are thinking and feeling to their interaction partners. This means that verbal inhibition tends to amplify people's traits and other characteristics. For example, Swann and Rentfrow (2001) reported that in brief interactions, observers were better able to discern several qualities of disinhibitors as compared with inhibitors, including (a) several traits related to sociability, (b) intelligence, (c) emotional reactions, and (d) extraversion. Moreover, although other potential amplifiers (e.g., extraversion, assertiveness, shyness, etc.) did not serve an amplifier function when the BLIRT was partialled out, the BLIRT displayed amplifier effects no matter what other variables were partialled out.

Overview of Studies

We conducted four investigations of people who were involved in romantic relationships. The first three studies were designed to establish the generality of the man-more-inhibited effect (i.e., partners in relationships in which verbally disinhibited women were paired with relatively inhibited men would experience dissatisfaction). Specifically, Study 1 tested this hypothesis in a large international sample of Internet respondents who completed the BLIRT and a measure of relationship quality and estimated their partner's BLIRT score. Study 2 tested several competing explanations of the man-more-inhibited effect by examining the relative utility of the BLIRT and correlated facets of the Big Five in predicting this effect. Study 3 addressed another competing explanation of the man-more-inhibited effect that is based on attachment theory and tested the possibility that these reactions would manifest themselves on a nonverbal measure of relationship quality. Study 4 tested the precarious couple effect. That is, we tested the idea that dissatisfaction would emerge most dramatically when inhibited men were paired with women who were both critical and verbally disinhibited, with women's verbal disinhibition amplifying their unsympathetic character and thus alienating their partner. In this study, both members of married couples participated. Also, to determine if the man-more-inhibited effect persisted over time, we contacted participants roughly 2.5 years after the initial phase of the study and reassessed their satisfaction with the relationship.

Study 1

Study 1 was designed to determine if pairings in which wives scored substantially higher on the BLIRT than husbands were less intimate than pairings in which husbands were equal to or higher than wives on the BLIRT. To ensure that this effect was not limited to a particular geographic region, we recruited participants from all over the world via the Internet. Also, to determine if the hypothesized man-more-inhibited effect required that people be in the relationship for some time, we measured how long couples had been in the relationship. Participants also completed the BLIRT, a measure of intimacy, and estimates of their partners' BLIRT score.

Method

Participants. A total of 437 heterosexuals (123 women and 56 men in relationships with unmarried life partners and 158 women and 100 men in married relationships) volunteered to complete a survey through an inter-

active World Wide Web site. The Web site (www.outofservice.com) hosts several psychological surveys. Participants provided demographic information about themselves, such as their sex, age, ethnicity, nationality, education level, and personal income, but divulged no personally identifying information, such as their name or telephone number. The sample was diverse in terms of age ($M = 33.6$ years, $SD = 10.2$; range = 21–74), ethnicity (4.7% Asian, 3.0% Black, 82.2% Caucasian, 3.5% Chicano/Latino, 2.3% Middle Eastern, 4.3% other), and nationality (58.9% from the United States, 41.1% from countries other than the United States). We assessed socioeconomic status by asking participants to report their level of education (4.9% less than 12 years, 13.9% high school, 31.1% some college, 27.8% college graduate, 22.3% graduate or advanced degree) and class (13.7% working class, 16.9% lower middle class, 43.4% middle class, 21.1% upper middle class, and 1.2% upper class; 3.7% chose not to report their personal income level).

Procedure. Participants accessed the Web site via its Web address, through a link from another Web site, or through a search engine. On arriving at the Web site, participants indicated whether or not they were in a romantic relationship and if so, how long they had been involved with the partner. Participants also rated themselves on the BLIRT (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001) and then rated their partner on each of the eight BLIRT items. In addition, participants completed Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon's (1994) measure of intimacy. The intimacy measure consisted of five items on 9-point scales that focused on both affective (i.e., relationship satisfaction) and behavioral (i.e., time spent doing things together, time spent talking to each other, discussion of problems or worries, exclusive sharing of personal matters) components of intimacy. As in previous research, responses to the five items were closely associated with one another ($\alpha = .87$) and were therefore combined into a composite measure of intimacy. The scores on the intimacy measure (averaged over the five items) ranged from 2.0 to 9.0 ($M = 7.2$, $SD = 1.7$).

In this study and all studies included in this article, participants were thanked and debriefed once they completed the measures. To guard against the possibility that participants would complete the questionnaire more than once, if an Internet protocol (IP) address appeared twice or more within a 1-hr period, the responses were deleted. This occurred in 7.7% of the cases. We also followed this procedure in Study 3.¹

Identifying man-more-inhibited couples. Theoretically, in man-more-inhibited couples the woman's BLIRT scores must exceed the man's by a substantial margin. To identify couples who met this criterion, in this and all studies in this report we computed differences between the man's and woman's scores (estimated or actual scores) and used these differences as a basis for dividing participants into three groups: man-more-inhibited

¹ To cross-validate our method for dealing with repeat responders, we attempted using an alternate strategy that has been used by other researchers (e.g., Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003). Specifically, we eliminated repeated responses from the same individual at an IP address by matching responses from the same IP address on gender, age, and ethnicity and using only the first response when a match was detected. This demographic rule deleted only a few participants who were not deleted by the 1-hr rule (3 additional participants from Study 1 and 5 additional participants from Study 3). Not surprisingly, then, when we re-ran the gender asymmetry analyses for both Studies 1 and 3, they were still significant ($p < .05$) in both instances. To be doubly conservative, we ran an additional set of analyses that deleted participants on the basis of our 1-hr rule and the demographic rule. Once again, the gender-asymmetry effects were significant for both men and women. We prefer the 1-hr rule for two reasons. First, the demographic rule might erroneously include participants who changed their demographic information to see if doing so would influence the feedback that they received. Second, the demographic rule would erroneously exclude people who happened to have the same IP address (e.g., if they were in the same computer lab as another respondent) and demographic information.

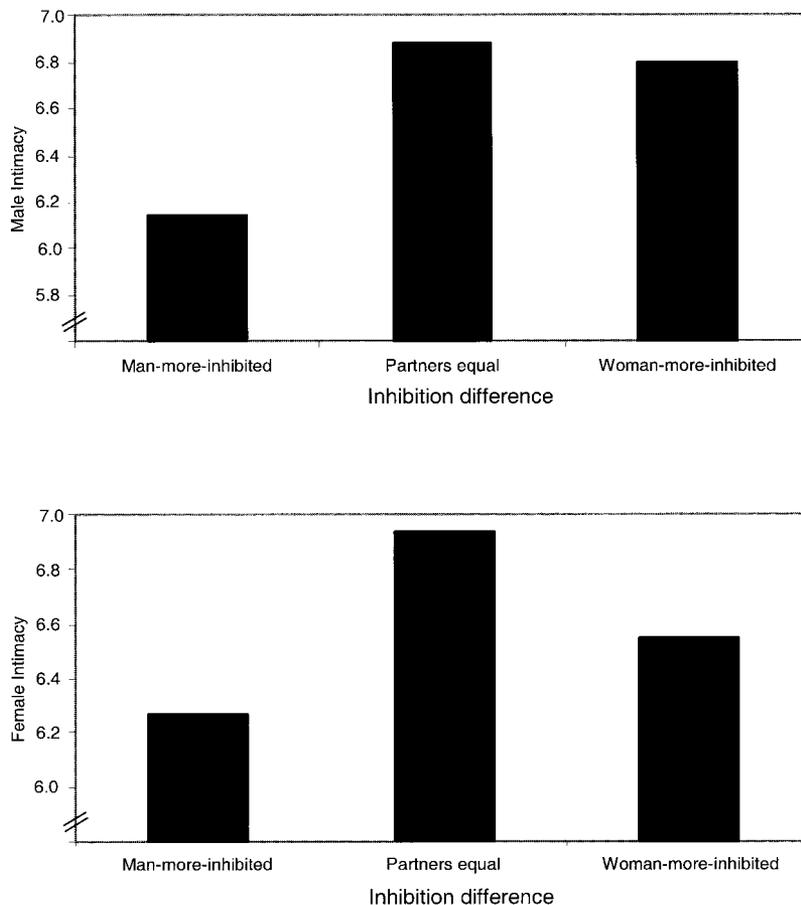


Figure 1. Man-more-inhibited effects in Study 1. Top panel: Average male intimacy by inhibition difference. Bottom panel: Average female intimacy by inhibition difference.

(those in which the BLIRT discrepancy favoring the woman placed the couple in the lower 20th percentile), *woman-more-inhibited* (those in which the BLIRT discrepancy favoring the man placed the couple in the upper 20th percentile), and partners equal (those between the 20th and 80th percentiles).²

Results

We predicted a man-more-inhibited effect, such that verbally disinhibited women paired with inhibited men would display less intimacy than any other group. Just such a pattern of data emerged. As can be seen in Figure 1, intimacy scores were lower for men in the man-more-inhibited group than in the other two groups, $F(1, 155) = 5.43, p < .01$. Similarly, intimacy scores were lower for women in the man-more-inhibited group than in the other two groups, $F(1, 280) = 5.72, p < .05$. For this and all subsequent studies, the cell means are displayed in Table 1, and the zero-order correlations are shown in Table 2.

Moreover, in this study and the remaining three studies, there was no evidence that relationship length moderated the man-more-inhibited effect. For example, when we repeated the analyses after adding relationship length as an independent variable (short vs. long), it did not interact with the man-more-inhibited main effect. Apparently, the man-more-inhibited effect emerges relatively early in relationships and does not change in size thereafter.

Study 2

The first study provided initial evidence for the man-more-inhibited effect. Nevertheless, in light of Cattell and Nesselrode's (1967) evidence of a similar effect using scores on a general measure of Extraversion rather than a measure specifically designed to tap verbal inhibition, the specificity of our man-more-inhibited effect remains unclear. To address this issue, we conducted a two-phase study. Phase 1 was designed to determine the precise relation between verbal inhibition and the components underlying rival variables such as Extraversion. To this end, we correlated the BLIRT with a personality inventory designed to assess all of the facets of the Big Five (i.e., the Revised NEO Personality Inventory [NEO-PI-R]; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Phase

² Although difference scores can certainly be problematic under some conditions (e.g., Edwards, 1994a, 1994b; Johns, 1981), there are many circumstances under which they are perfectly appropriate and are even preferable because they offer a relatively direct, intuitive test of the question at hand. Furthermore, the concerns with difference scores can be directly assessed in a particular data set to determine whether they pose a problem for those data (Tisak & Smith, 1994). See the Appendix for an analysis of potential problems and their applicability to our data sets.

Table 1
Summary of Intimacy Means by Verbal Inhibition Difference
Across Studies

Study	Intimacy	Inhibition difference		
		M > F	F = M	F > M
1	M	6.14 _a	6.88 _b	6.80 _b
	F	6.27 _a	6.94 _b	6.55 _{a,b}
2	M	6.45 _a	7.29 _b	6.90 _{a,b}
	F	6.74 _a	7.09 _{a,b}	7.37 _b
3	M	4.08 _a	4.82 _b	4.81 _b
	F	3.95 _a	4.21 _{a,b}	4.48 _b
4	M	6.03 _a	7.28 _b	7.06 _b
	F	6.40 _a	7.73 _b	7.20 _{a,b}
Omnibus test		6.27 _a	6.77 _b	6.61 _b

Note. Within rows, means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$. Intimacy in Studies 1, 2, and 4 was measured with Swann et al.'s (1994) intimacy measure; intimacy in Study 3 was measured with Aron et al.'s (1992) Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale. M = male; F = female.

2 asked if any of the facets identified as strongly related to the BLIRT in Phase 1 might underlie the man-more-inhibited effect.

Method

Participants. For Phase 1, 203 undergraduates (135 women, 67 men, and 1 person who failed to indicate gender) volunteered in exchange for partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course requirement. The average age of participants was 18.7 years ($SD = 1.9$). For Phase 2, a

subsample of 93 of the original participants and 31 new participants volunteered. The new participants completed all of the measures filled out by the original participants except that they completed only the assertiveness facet of the NEO-PI-R instead of the entire inventory.

Procedure. We began by assessing participants' personalities using the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and the BLIRT (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). The NEO-PI-R is a 240-item measure of the Big Five personality dimensions. Unlike other measures of the Big Five, the NEO-PI-R permits differentiated measurement of each dimension in terms of six specific facets per dimension. The NEO-PI-R facets display substantial internal consistency, temporal stability, and convergent and discriminant validity. Each of the 240 items was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The correlations between the BLIRT and the facets of the Big Five revealed a large correlation between the BLIRT and only one other variable: the assertiveness facet of Extraversion. We accordingly sought to determine if assertiveness, rather than verbal disinhibition, underlies the man-more-inhibited effect. Approximately 4 weeks after Phase 1, a subsample of the participants who had completed the NEO-PI-R and BLIRT were invited to participate in a related study on intimate relationships. Specifically, participants who reported being in an intimate relationship at the time of the study were asked to rate their dating partner on the assertiveness facet of the Extraversion dimension and the BLIRT. The items for assertiveness and the BLIRT were rephrased to read in a third-person format (sample items include "He/she is dominant, forceful, and assertive" and "If he/she has something to say, he/she doesn't hesitate to say it" for assertiveness and verbal disinhibition, respectively). All items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). To assess relationship quality, participants completed Swann et al.'s (1994) measure of intimacy.

Table 2
Zero-Order Correlations

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
Study 1 ($N = 437$)						
1. Self-BLIRT	—					
2. Estimated partner BLIRT	-.16**	—				
3. Intimacy	.21**	.02	—			
Study 2 ($N = 124$)						
1. Self-BLIRT	—					
2. Estimated partner BLIRT	-.04	—				
3. Intimacy	.20*	-.05	—			
Study 3 ($N = 564$)						
1. Self-BLIRT	—					
2. Estimated partner BLIRT	-.03	—				
3. Intimacy	.07	.09*	—			
4. Anxious ambivalence	-.14**	-.04	-.17**	—		
5. Avoidance	-.13**	.07	-.19**	.15**	—	
Study 4 ($N = 84$)						
1. Male BLIRT	—					
2. Female BLIRT	-.07	—				
3. Male intimacy	.27*	-.10	—			
4. Female intimacy	.17	-.02	.53**	—		
5. Male criticalness	-.13	-.21	.15	.10	—	
6. Female criticalness	.02	.24*	.12	.13	.06	—

Note. BLIRT = Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Results

Phase 1: Relation of the BLIRT to facets of the Big Five. What was the relation between verbal inhibition and potentially related constructs? The results in Table 3 indicate a large correlation between the BLIRT and the Assertiveness facet of the Extraversion scale, $r(201) = .61$, as well as more modest correlations with other scales such as Neuroticism. The facet analysis also pointed to some differences between assertiveness and verbal inhibition: Assertiveness was associated with several Conscientiousness facets (Organized, Careful, Achievement Strivings, Self-Discipline) that were unrelated to the BLIRT (see second data column of Table 3). Assertiveness thus appears to have an achievement component in addition to a verbal inhibition component.

Phase 2: Man-more-inhibited effect. As in the first study, men's intimacy scores were lower in the man-more-inhibited group than in the other two groups, $F(1, 43) = 7.89, p < .05$. The overall test of the man-more-inhibited effect among women was also significant, $F(1, 81) = 4.28, p < .05$, and participants in the man-more-inhibited group were less intimate than participants in

the woman-more-inhibited group. The difference between the man-more-inhibited and partners-equal groups merely approached significance, however. The relevant means can be found in Table 1.

Given the strong correlation between assertiveness and verbal disinhibition, we conducted additional analyses to determine if assertiveness was responsible for man-more-inhibited reactions. We divided participants into three groups using the same criteria that we used to form the BLIRT-based groups in Study 1: those in which men's assertiveness scores exceeded women's, those in which men's and women's scores were equivalent, and those in which women exceeded men. The results revealed no differences in intimacy between the three groups ($M_s = 6.9, 7.0, \text{ and } 7.0$ for man-more-unassertive, partners-equal, and woman-more-unassertive groups, respectively); $F(1, 123) = .62, ns$. Furthermore, when the tests of the man-more-inhibited effect described in the preceding paragraph were run controlling for differences in assertiveness, the man-more-inhibited effect remained significant, $F(1, 123) = 4.99, p < .05$. In sum, the reduced satisfaction experienced by man-more-inhibited couples appears to be driven by verbal disinhibition rather than assertiveness.

Table 3
Correlations Between the BLIRT and the NEO-PI-R in Study 2
($N = 203$)

NEO-PI-R	BLIRT	Assertiveness
Neuroticism	-.31**	-.30**
Anxiety (tense)	-.28**	-.25**
Anger (hostility)	-.04	-.02
Depression	-.30**	-.29**
Self-conscious	-.37**	-.34**
Impulsive (moody)	-.07	-.08
Vulnerability (low self-confidence)	-.30**	-.38**
Extraversion	.45**	.68**
Warm	.22**	.39**
Gregariousness	.29**	.32**
Assertiveness	.61**	—
Activity level	.29**	.52**
Excitement seeking	.27**	.28**
Positive emotions	.24**	.36**
Openness	.18*	.14*
Fantasy	.06	-.08
Aesthetics	.09	.13
Feelings	.19**	.30**
Wide interests (actions)	.17*	.12
Ideas (curious)	.13	.12
Values (unconventional)	.11	.02
Agreeableness	-.18*	-.13
Trusting	.13	.17*
Compliance (not stubborn)	-.12	-.18*
Altruism	-.03	.08
Straightforwardness	-.40**	-.28**
Modesty	-.34**	-.37**
Sympathetic	.02	.05
Conscientiousness	.15*	.33**
Competence	.27**	.42**
Order (organized)	.09	.20**
Dutifulness (careful)	.09	.21**
Achievement striving	.14	.34**
Self-discipline	.14	.31**
Deliberation	-.06	.04

Note. NEO-PI-R facets are indented. BLIRT = Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001); NEO-PI-R = NEO Personality Inventory, Revised (Costa & McCrae, 1992). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Study 3

Encouraged by the results of Studies 1 and 2, we sought to establish further the specificity and generality of the man-more-inhibited effect. Regarding the specificity issue, critics might argue that our measure of verbal inhibition might be systematically related to a variable already known to influence relationship quality—adult attachment classification. That is, recent work has suggested that individuals who have avoidant attachment styles withdraw from conflict and avoid potentially stressful interactions with intimate others. As such, one might expect avoidant persons to score lower on the BLIRT than people who are securely attached (e.g., Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995; Simpson, Ickes, & Oriña, 2001). Also, because attachment classification is known to be associated with relationship quality, it seems possible that attachment quality rather than verbal inhibition might be responsible for the man-more-inhibited effect. We tested this possibility in Study 3.

With regard to the generality of the man-more-inhibited effect, critics might also point out that both our predictor variables (BLIRT scores) and criterion variable (intimacy) were verbal in nature. This raises the possibility that our effects might be restricted to the verbal domain. To determine if our findings would generalize to a criterion variable that was nonverbal in nature, we assessed relationship quality using a pictorial measure of intimacy developed by Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992).

Method

Participants. A total of 564 heterosexuals (410 women and 154 men in married relationships) completed a survey through the same Web site used in Study 1. As in Study 1, the sample was diverse in terms of age, nationality, level of education, and class.

Procedure. On arriving at the Web site, participants rated themselves and then their romantic relationship partner on the BLIRT (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Participants also completed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996) as a measure of attachment orientation. The AAQ consists of 17 items that measure how individuals relate to romantic partners. Individuals respond to each item using a 7-point Likert scale with endpoints at 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7

(*strongly agree*). The AAQ features two dimensions. The first reflects the extent to which individuals avoid or withdraw from intimate relationships, and the second reflects the extent to which individuals ruminate over issues of abandonment and their partner's level of commitment. Persons who are secure tend to be low on both of these dimensions (Simpson et al., 1996).

The primary criterion variable in this study was Aron et al.'s (1992) Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS). The IOS is a single-item pictorial measure of relationship closeness that is designed to tap the degree to which each partner feels connected to his or her romantic partner. Research by Aron et al. (1992) has indicated that the IOS has strong convergent validity with other measures of interpersonal closeness and intimacy. Participants also completed Swann et al.'s (1994) measure of intimacy.

Results

The man-more-inhibited effect. As expected, men's scores on the IOS were lower in the man-more-inhibited group than in the other two groups, $F(1, 153) = 4.32, p < .01$. The overall test of the man-more-inhibited effect was significant among women, $F(1, 409) = 4.80, p < .01$, and women in the man-more-inhibited group displayed less closeness on the IOS than women in the woman-more-inhibited group. The difference between the man-more-inhibited and partners-equal groups merely approached significance, however.³ The means are displayed in Table 1.

Did attachment style account for man-more-inhibited reactions? Attachment style was weakly but significantly associated with the BLIRT, such that disinhibitors tended to score low on both the Avoidance scale, $r(562) = -.14, p < .01$, and the Anxious Ambivalence scale, $r(562) = -.13, p < .01$. Moreover, attachment style predicted intimacy for both men and women, such that intimacy was higher for participants who were securely attached as compared with avoidant, $r(562) = -.17, p < .02$, or anxious ambivalent, $r(562) = -.19, p < .01$. Nevertheless, controlling for attachment style did not eliminate the man-more-inhibited effect (F s ranged from 5.58 to 6.43, $ps < .05$; dfs for men = 1, 152; dfs for women = 1, 408), even though attachment style was a significant covariate for both men and women.⁴

Study 4

The first three studies provided converging evidence for the robustness of the man-more-inhibited effect. Nevertheless, critics could question three aspects of our findings. First, although our findings make it clear that something is amiss in man-more-inhibited couples, they stop short of testing directly the precarious couple hypothesis, which suggests that the cause of difficulties in man-more-inhibited couples is that the woman in such relationships is critical as well as relatively disinhibited. Second, in all of the studies, participants estimated how their partners would respond on the BLIRT, a concern because the accuracy of these estimates has not been established. Third, it is unknown whether the effects we demonstrated are limited to a single slice of time or whether they are lasting.

Study 4 was designed to address each of these issues. Specifically, we (a) attempted to replicate the man-more-inhibited effect once again, (b) tested the hypothesis that the precarious couple effect occurs when verbal disinhibition amplifies the criticalness of women in man-more-inhibited relationships, (c) examined the actual scores of both members of couples (i.e., rather than using estimated scores), and (d) reassessed the quality of participants'

relationships approximately 2.5 years after they initially completed our measures.

Method

Participants. A total of 84 heterosexual married couples ($N = 168$ participants) volunteered for this study. To increase the diversity of the sample, we used two distinct recruitment strategies. Slightly over half of the couples ($N = 51$) were patrons of a Central Texas restaurant (The Salt Lick). The restaurant featured notoriously long waiting lines, and couples were delighted to earn \$8 to complete our questionnaires while they awaited a table. The other couples responded to advertisements placed in two local newspapers. We paid these couples \$20 to compensate for their time and a trip to the university where they completed the study. The average age of participants was 39.4 years ($SD = 10.1$) in both samples. Couples had dated for an average of 2.8 years prior to getting married and had been married for an average of 10.4 years. Preliminary analyses revealed no main or interactive effects of sample (restaurant vs. newspaper) on any of our key variables (e.g., intimacy, verbal inhibition). We accordingly collapsed across samples in all analyses.

Materials and procedure. The experimenter explained that participants would be completing a series of questionnaires as part of an investigation of the relation between personality and close relationships. To maximize honesty of responding, the experimenter physically separated participants from their spouses and assured both partners that their responses would remain completely confidential. Participants first completed some background information and measures of self and relationship orientation. They then completed the BLIRT, Swann et al.'s (1994) measure of intimacy, and a measure of criticalness taken from Murray, Holmes, and Griffin's (1996) Interpersonal Qualities Scale. Nine items were included in the Criticalness scale: "critical and judgmental," "complaining," "moody," "controlling and dominant," "tolerant and accepting," "kind and affectionate," "warm," "patient," and "witty and humorous" (the last five items were reverse coded). We dubbed this scale Criticalness because principal-components analysis revealed that "critical and judgmental" had the highest factor loading. The scale was internally consistent (α s = .71 and .69 for women and men, respectively).

Follow-up. To determine if the precarious couple effect was lasting, approximately 2.5 years after the original experiment the experimenter telephoned the homes of all couples. We were successful in reaching 57 of the original 84 couples (31 wives and 26 husbands, whoever answered the phone). The experimenter explained that she was calling in reference to a study they had participated in a couple of years earlier, and asked if she could ask a question or two about the respondent's relationship. All respondents remembered participating in the study and were willing to answer questions. The first question was whether or not the participants were still married. If the couple was still married, the experimenter also asked the participant to indicate how satisfied he or she currently was in the relationship on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*). If they were divorced, the experimenter thanked the participant and ended the call (divorce was not related to our predictor variables, probably because it

³ As expected, scores on Aron et al.'s (1992) IOS were closely related to scores on Swann et al.'s (1994) measure of intimacy for both women, $r(409) = .63$, and men, $r(151) = .61$. Also, as in Studies 1 and 2, a significant man-more-inhibited couple effect emerged on the measure of intimacy.

⁴ We also wondered if attachment styles might predict people's preferences for inhibitors versus disinhibitors. There was some evidence that avoidant persons were particularly comfortable with inhibitors. Specifically, for both men and women, high avoidant individuals reported feeling more intimate and satisfied in relationships with partners who were inhibitors, whereas securely attached individuals reported feeling more intimate with disinhibitors, $R^2\Delta F(1, 405) = 9.49, p < .005$, and $F(1, 147) = 5.04, p < .05$, women and men, respectively.

occurred in only four cases). No attempt was made to contact the other member of the couple.

Results

The man-more-inhibited effect. As can be seen in Table 1, intimacy scores for both sexes were lower in the man-more-inhibited group than in the other two groups, $F_s(1, 82) = 9.32$ and 11.25 (for women and men, respectively), $p_s < .005$. The man-more-inhibited effect also emerged when we averaged the intimacy scores of participants within couples, $F(1, 82) = 12.23$, $p < .001$.

Omnibus man-more-inhibited effect (pooled over Studies 1–4). As can be seen in the bottom row of Table 1, when we pooled the data from all four studies together (averaged over sex), intimacy scores were lower for the man-more-inhibited group than for the other two groups, $F(2, 1460) = 9.60$, $p < .01$. Also as predicted, pairwise comparisons indicated that the man-more-inhibited group was significantly different from both the partners-equal and woman-more-inhibited groups ($p_s < .001$ and $.01$, respectively), and the partners-equal and woman-more-inhibited groups were not significantly different from one another ($p = .17$).

The precarious couple effect: Verbal inhibition as an amplifier of criticalness. What was the mechanism underlying the man-more-inhibited effect? On the basis of Swann and Rentfrow's (2001) earlier work, we reasoned that verbal inhibition might amplify qualities that were disruptive to the relationship. Specifically, we hypothesized that the verbal disinhibition of women might serve to amplify the presence of criticalness.

To test this possibility, we conducted a multiple regression with BLIRT difference scores (woman–man) and criticalness as predictors and men's intimacy as the criterion. As can be seen in the upper panel of Figure 2, an interaction emerged, $R^2\Delta F(1, 79) = 3.84$, $p = .05$, such that when women were more disinhibited than their partners and were critical, men were less intimate. Inspection of the relevant correlations indicates that within the man-more-inhibited groups, the higher the woman's criticalness, the lower the man's intimacy, $r(14) = -.50$, $p < .05$, but that within the woman-more-inhibited and partners-equal conditions, woman's criticalness was unrelated to the man's intimacy, $r(66) = .03$, *ns*. Also as expected, the parallel phenomenon did not emerge when we examined the relation of female intimacy to male criticalness. Indeed, as can be seen in the lower panel of Figure 2, there was a main effect of men's BLIRT scores, $t(79) = 2.49$, $p < .05$, such that (critical as well as noncritical) disinhibited men fostered somewhat higher levels of intimacy in women than did inhibited men.

The foregoing precarious couple effect presumably reflects a tendency for preexisting levels of women's criticalness and disinhibition to undermine relationships with inhibited men (i.e., criticalness caused dissatisfaction). Alternatively, it could be that women in precarious couples become increasingly critical over time (criticalness was an effect of dissatisfaction). If criticalness was an effect of satisfaction, then one would expect the precarious couple effect to have been stronger the longer the couple had been together. Contrary to this possibility, when we added relationship length to the regression that tested the precarious couple effect, the three-way interaction was not significant, $R^2\Delta F(1, 77) = 1.68$, *ns*. Furthermore, if female criticalness was an effect rather than cause of male intimacy, then one must ask why a parallel phenomenon

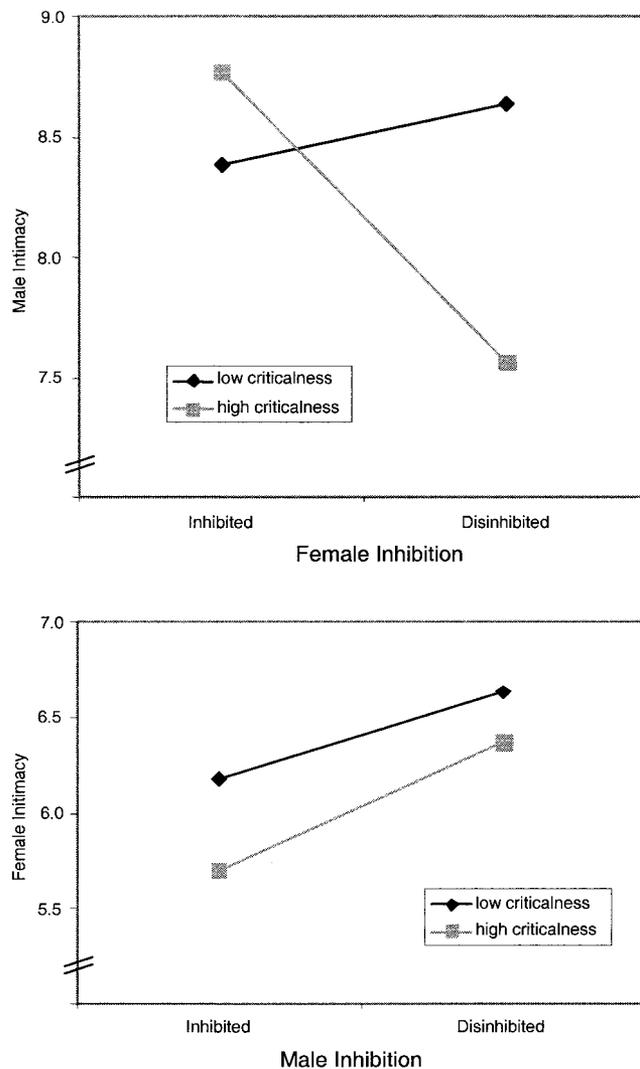


Figure 2. Criticalness as moderator of the precarious couple effect in Study 4. Regression lines are plotted at 1 standard deviation above and below the means.

did not emerge for male criticalness (i.e., why in woman-more-inhibited groups the criticalness of men was not correlated with the intimacy of women; $p > .33$). Having said this, it would clearly be useful for future research to examine these issues further.

Follow-up. Did the man-more-inhibited effect persist over time? It did for men. The 9 men in the man-more-inhibited group displayed less satisfaction than the men in the other two groups, $F(1, 25) = 8.30$, $p < .01$, but there was no such pattern for the 13 women in the man-more-inhibited group, $F(1, 30) < 1$, *ns*. Conceivably, insofar as verbally inhibited men in precarious couples kept their dissatisfaction to themselves, eventually their wives concluded that all was well and grew more satisfied with the relationship. Alternatively, perhaps women were uncomfortable divulging their relationship dissatisfaction on the phone (whereas they were willing to do so on the questionnaires they completed during the study proper). In any event, the fact that the man-more-inhibited effect disappeared for women argues against an artifactual interpretation of the persistence of men's intimacy scores.

That is, if men's scores simply carried over from the initial assessment period, then women's scores should have persisted as well, and they did not.

General Discussion

Relationship-specific dynamics are manifestations of enduring individual differences in underlying personality traits. The thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that occur within the context of a relationship are not generated entirely through dyadic, interactional processes, but rather individuals create the micro-interactional processes that characterize healthy and unhealthy relationships. People bring histories to relationships, and these histories are captured in part by stable personality traits. (Robins et al., 2002)

However intuitively appealing it may be, the notion that the personality traits of people govern relationship quality has received remarkably little support from the research literature. To be sure, there is ample evidence that people are more attracted to attitudinally similar partners (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Condon & Crano, 1988) and report being more compatible with partners who have similar role preferences, leisure interests (Houts, Huston, & Robins, 1996), and sex-role orientations (Ickes & Barnes, 1978). Moreover, people are more apt to pair with partners who are similar on measures of attitudes and intelligence (e.g., Plomin, Chipuer, & Loehlin, 1990). Yet efforts to extend the similarity principle to traditional personality constructs have been disappointing (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998). In fact, Klohnen and Mendelson (1998) recently concluded that empirical support for the personality-similarity hypothesis has been so scant that researchers have been tempted to "throw in the towel, to conclude that personality does not systematically and importantly influence partner selection" (p. 269).

Our findings suggest that the personalities of people in relationships do indeed matter, but one must adopt a relatively nuanced perspective to determine how they matter. Our first three studies established that participants displayed a man-more-inhibited effect. That is, couples in which the woman was more verbally disinhibited than the man were less intimate and satisfied than other couples. Study 4 traced these man-more-inhibited reactions to the tendency for relationship quality to suffer in couples in which critical, verbally disinhibited women were paired with verbally inhibited men.

At first blush, the fact that couples in which critical, verbally disinhibited women were paired with inhibited men experienced disharmony may not be surprising. After all, someone who is unremittingly critical might well try the patience of a saint. Yet there were two configurations in which spouses who were both critical and disinhibited enjoyed relationships that were satisfying to both partners: (a) critical, disinhibited wives paired with disinhibited men and (b) critical, disinhibited husbands paired with verbally inhibited wives. One task for future researchers will be to determine precisely why some configurations prove to be toxic to relationships whereas others do not. Identifying the part played by gender-role expectations in such phenomena promises to be an especially intriguing and potentially important issue to address.

This brings us to a more general question: Why did the fit of the personality characteristics of our participants matter despite the discouraging results of previous explorations of this phenomenon (see Klohnen & Mendelson, 1998)? Perhaps the key was that we

simultaneously explored a personality characteristic (verbal inhibition) and gender roles. In the tradition of Cattell and Nesselrode (1967), we discovered that men rejected verbally disinhibited and critical wives, but women were relatively accepting of verbally disinhibited and critical husbands. Apparently, although personality matters to relationships, it matters in a manner that is nuanced by gender-role expectations and, presumably, other expectations that people have about the behavior of members of our society. The precise nature and consequences of these gender-role expectations merit further scrutiny.

Another factor that could have contributed to our success was our focus on a highly specific trait, verbal inhibition. In contrast, past researchers have focused on multifaceted traits, such as Extraversion. Because Extraversion has many components (e.g., warmth, gregariousness, activity level, excitement seeking, positive emotions, etc.), people may be matched on the higher level trait but not on its specific components, and these matches on specific components may prove to have an important impact on relationship satisfaction. Finally, our success in relating verbal inhibition to relationship quality may have reflected the nature of verbal inhibition itself. Because the verbal channel is critically important to regulating power and mutual influence, people may be particularly sensitive to their partner's position on this dimension.

If our analysis of the reactions of women and men to asymmetries in verbal inhibition is viable, then the gender-specific expectancies of both women and men may trigger an interpersonal phenomenon that Gottman and colleagues (e.g., Carré & Gottman, 1999; Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 1999) have dubbed *stonewalling*. That is, verbally disinhibited women may worry that their verbally inhibited partner is uninvolved in the relationship. This concern may prompt such women to attempt to draw their partners out. Men may perceive such attempts as intrusive and react by further withdrawing from the relationship. This, in turn, may cause women to intensify their efforts to engage their partners, which may cause their partners to become even more remote (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 1999).

Whatever its cause, the psychological withdrawal of inhibitors from their relationships could have devastating effects (cf. Gottman, 1994). That is, the act of suppressing the expression of negative feelings virtually guarantees that the interpersonal events that produced them will not be brought to the attention of the relationship partner. The result may be that inhibitors privately "convict" their disinhibited partners of "crimes" that their partners do not even know that they have committed.

Future Directions

The striking similarity of the results of Studies 1–3, in which participants estimated the BLIRT scores of their partners, and Study 4, in which we actually measured the BLIRT scores of their partners, suggests that participants in the first three studies were fairly accurate in estimating their partners' BLIRT scores. This evidence that people can readily identify their partner's level of verbal inhibition raises a paradox: If participants knew in advance what they were getting into, why then did they fail to avoid systematically those pairings that were apt to prove problematic?

At least two possibilities seem viable. First, people may simply be unable to predict their own affective reactions to partners who

are low or high in verbal inhibition (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). Alternatively, early in relationships people may desire the very qualities in their partner that ultimately prove to be problematic. For example, verbally inhibited men may welcome the tendency for verbally disinhibited women to take over the interaction early in the relationship but feel different once the relationship is established and they are less apprehensive about behaving in a socially appropriate manner. Also, it may be that in the early phases of relationships, highly critical disinhibited women mute their criticalness until they feel confident of the man's reaction.

Perhaps one of the most obvious goals of future research will be to explore the links between our findings and those of previous researchers such as Christensen and Heavey (1990), Gottman (1994), and attachment researchers (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson et al., 1996). For example, is verbal inhibition configuration associated with the demand-withdraw pattern and stonewalling? Similarly, in what ways might verbal inhibition interact with attachment styles?

Conclusion

One of our culture's most cherished ideas is that when it comes to communication in relationships, more is better. Although this is surely true in some relationships, our findings suggest that it by no means characterizes all or even most of them. In fact, our results suggest that for male inhibitors, relentless talking may be aversive, particularly if it is critical in nature. From this vantage point, some people need more psychological space than others, and when these needs are not met, relationships may suffer.

More generally, our demonstration of synergistic effects of personality characteristics in close relationships simultaneously vindicates both personological and social-psychological approaches to relationships. That is, personological approaches are supported by our evidence of the importance of individual differences in verbal inhibition and criticalness. Social-psychological approaches are supported by our evidence of the significance of gender roles and also by the fact that the verbal inhibition of people's relationship partners—a property of the social situation—interacted with the person's level of verbal inhibition in determining relationship quality.

Now that researchers have provided some fairly clear insights into the interactional patterns that characterize troubled relationships, we believe that it is time to identify the personal and interpersonal processes that underlie and mediate these patterns. Our findings illustrate how understanding the personality characteristics of people involved in relationships can illuminate the psychological function of behaviors that might otherwise seem oddly inappropriate or self-destructive. Such findings may thus allow a move beyond merely descriptive accounts of the roots of relationship harmony and disharmony to probe the antecedents of these phenomena. In the end, this research strategy may enable construction of an empirical integration of the personological and interpersonal approaches. Even more important, however, this integrative approach may produce a conceptual synthesis that incorporates the most penetrating assumptions of each approach into a coherent theoretical model.

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(Appendix follows)

Appendix

Applicability of Critiques of Difference Scores

In what follows, we consider several potential problems and evaluate their applicability to our data sets.

1. *Using two components with different questions or using different scales can create problems for difference scores.* Our within-couple difference scores relied on the same items from the same scale.

2. *Differing levels of variance across the component variables can create problems for difference scores.* This does not apply. Using Levene's Test for equality of variances, in all four studies there was no difference in the variances associated with the components of our difference scores ($F_s < 1$).

3. *The possibility of low reliability among component measures or difference scores can create problems.* This concern grows out of the fact that profile variables, which integrate differences along multiple dimensions, can lose meaning if the dimensions are unrelated. In our case, we used the average of absolute differences across eight items that were substantially interrelated. That is, the BLIRT scores of husbands and wives met or exceeded conventional levels of reliability. Also, evidence for the reliability of the difference scores themselves was quite respectable ($\alpha_s = .80, .79, .84, \text{ and } .78$, Studies 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively). Finally, were our difference scores unreliable, one would not have expected our findings to replicate so nicely in four independent samples.

4. *Large differences between the proportions of positive versus negative scores can create problems for absolute difference scores.* There was no

difference in the BLIRT scores and estimated scores in Studies 1–3 or in the actual BLIRT scores of husbands and wives in Study 4.

5. *People who tend to use the midpoints of the scale will tend to have lower difference scores; thus, the "center-hugging" people will have the lowest difference scores so that difference scores reflect a scale usage issue, not a substantive issue.* If our findings were purely an artifact of this phenomenon, "woman-more-inhibited" differences should have been just as precarious as man-more-inhibited differences, and they were not. Also, there is no theoretical reason to believe that center-hugging people should enjoy more relationship satisfaction than non-center-hugging people.

6. *The relation of the difference scores to the criterion variable may reflect only one of the variables that constitute the difference score.* To test this idea, we ran a series of two parallel regressions to determine the effect of male and then female BLIRT scores on the intimacy of the partner. First, we entered male BLIRT squared predicting female intimacy and female BLIRT squared predicting male intimacy. The results of these analyses indicated that self BLIRT had relatively little effect on the level of satisfaction among partners ($\beta = .17, -.12$); $t(154 \text{ for men}; 280 \text{ for women}) = 1.6 \text{ and } -1.1, p_s > .1$, men and women, respectively.

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