RE-EVALUATING THE MICROANALYTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
REASSURANCE SEEKING AND REJECTION IN MARRIAGE

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Abstract

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The behavior of a depressed person is thought to produce changes in others’ behavior that depresses the dysphoric person further (Coyne, 1976). One behavior that produces changes in others’ behavior is excessive reassurance seeking. The existing literature on reassurance seeking suggests that this behavior leads to interpersonal rejection (Joiner, Alfano, & Metalsky, 1992; Joiner & Metalsky, 1995). This investigation employed multiple methods to measure reassurance seeking and rejection, allowing for the examination of reassurance seeking and rejection on the microanalytic level. This study broadened the conceptualization of reassurance seeking and narrowed the conceptualization of rejection. The sample was comprised of married couples, including non-depressed and clinically depressed people. Observed reassurance seeking was associated with observed rejection by spouses in both depressed and non-depressed husbands and wives. Husbands’ depressive severity moderated the relationship between husbands’ observed reassurance seeking and wives’ rejection of husbands. Implications
for the conceptualization of excessive reassurance seeking and for future research are discussed.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ..........................................................................................................iv

Chapter 1: Introduction ....................................................................................................1
1.1. Reassurance Seeking ............................................................................................2
   1.1.1. Motives for Reassurance Seeking ...............................................................2
   1.1.2. Empirical Background ................................................................................3
1.2. Limitations to Reassurance Seeking Research .....................................................5
1.3. Reassurance Seeking in Romantic Relationships ..................................................7
1.4. Rejection in Married Couples ..............................................................................9
   1.4.1. Avoidance ....................................................................................................10
   1.4.2. Withdrawal ..................................................................................................10
   1.4.3. Dismissal .....................................................................................................11
   1.4.4. Negative Feedback ......................................................................................11
1.5. Summary and Limitations of Previous Research ................................................12
1.6. Present Investigation ............................................................................................13
1.7. Hypotheses ..........................................................................................................16

Chapter 2: Methods .......................................................................................................17
2.1. Participants ...........................................................................................................17
2.2. Diagnostic Procedure ..........................................................................................17
2.3. Questionnaire Measures ......................................................................................18
   2.3.1. Depression ..................................................................................................18
   2.3.2. Marital Adjustment .....................................................................................19
   2.3.3. Reassurance Seeking ..................................................................................19
2.4. Observational Measures ......................................................................................20
   2.4.1. Reassurance Seeking ..................................................................................20
   2.4.2. Rejection ....................................................................................................21
2.5. Procedures ..........................................................................................................23

Chapter 3: Results .........................................................................................................25
3.1. Descriptive Statistics ...........................................................................................25
   3.1.1. Demographic Variables ..............................................................................25
   3.1.2. Self-Report/Diagnostic Variables ...............................................................26
3.1.3. Observational Variables…………………………………………………27
3.2. Correlates of Observational and Self-Reported Reassurance Seeking……32

3.3. Tests of Hypotheses 1-5……………………………………………………35
3.4. Test of Hypothesis 6…………………………………………………………37
3.5. Test of Hypothesis 7…………………………………………………………37
3.6. Tests of Supplemental Hypotheses……………………………..……………38

Chapter 4: Discussion………………………………………………………………41
4.1. Limitations……………………………………………………………………47
4.2. Conclusions and Future Research…………………………………………….48

References…………………………………………………………………………49

Appendix A: DIRI…………………………………………………………………………53
Appendix B: DAS…………………………………………………………………………54
Appendix C: BDI-2………………………………………………………………………..56
Appendix D: Non-Focus Rating Sheet……………………………………………….58
Appendix E: Reassurance Seeking Video Coding………………………………….59
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

“Am I good enough for you?” and the apocryphal “Do I look fat in this?” are common bids for reassurance experienced by spouses. Beyond these, there are more extreme expressions of reassurance seeking such as “Do you really care about me?” and “Tell me how you truly feel about me”, which are more frequently verbalized by people with depressive symptoms than by non-depressed people (Metalsky, Joiner, Pothoff, Pacha, Alfano, & Hardin, 1991; Coyne, 1976). Though most people seek reassurance from time to time, Coyne’s (1976) interpersonal theory of depression implies that reassurance seeking is most common in those suffering from depression.

According to Coyne’s interpersonal theory of depression (1976), the behavior of a depressed person produces changes in other peoples’ behavior that is further depressing to the already dysphoric person. One aversive interpersonal behavior that produces changes in others’ behavior is excessive reassurance seeking. Coyne (1976) suggested that depressed people engage their environment in a way that causes others to validate their negative self-concepts and results in further alienation and depression. Since the development of Coyne’s interpersonal theory, various researchers have sought to establish excessive reassurance seeking as a behavior which engages the depressed person’s environment in a way which results in changes in others’ behaviors (Joiner,
1995; Joiner, Alfano, & Metalsky, 1992; Joiner & Metalsky, 1995). Additional investigations have found that excessive reassurance seeking is specific to depression (Burns, Brown, Plant, Sachs-Ericsson, & Joiner, 2006; Davila, 2001; Joiner & Metalsky, 2001; Joiner, Metalsky, Katz, & Beach, 1999). For instance, Joiner and Metalsky (2001) found that depressives engaged in more excessive reassurance seeking than psychiatric inpatients, people with severe anxiety disorders, and people with schizophrenia.

1.1. Reassurance Seeking

Excessive reassurance seeking is defined as “the tendency to ask other people excessively for reassurance of worth” (Joiner et al., 1999). In contrast to excessive range reassurance seeking, reassurance seeking in the non-excessive range will be referred to as “ordinary reassurance seeking.” Before describing empirical studies of excessive reassurance seeking, motives proposed to account for reassurance seeking will be discussed.

1.1.1. Motives for Reassurance Seeking

Because depressed people are afraid of losing their interpersonal relationships, they are especially prone to reevaluate these relationships by excessively checking the value their partners place on them (Coyne, 1976). However, because reassurance is solicited, whether the reassurance given is authentic or whether it is given only as a result of the request for reassurance is ambiguous to the depressive. In turn, uncertainty about others’ sincerity creates a need for further reassurance. Repetitive reassurance seeking
cycles like this harm the relationship, as the genuineness of the relationship itself is implicitly being called into question.

Coyne (1976) also suggests that close others begin to participate in the “manipulation” as well, in an effort to alleviate their own guilt over being unable to relieve the distress of the depressive and in an effort to reduce the depressive’s reassurance seeking behavior. This response by others may take the form of ignoring bids for reassurance, offering reassurance and support (genuine or not), withholding desired reassurance, or interpersonal distancing. Outside of reassurance and support, any of these responses could be perceived by a depressed person as rejection. Any such interpersonal rejection by others confirms the depressed person’s fear of losing interpersonal relationships. Coyne described rejection occurring at two levels: the microanalytic level and the macroanalytic level. Coyne posited that only indirect rejection occurs at the microanalytic level, as is the case when close others offer reassurance but lack appropriate affect. At the broader, macroanalytic, level reassurance seeking leads to more general rejection in the form of interpersonal distancing.

1.1.2. Empirical Background

Joiner and colleagues have conducted a substantial amount of research on excessive reassurance seeking and how the reassurance seeker and close others are affected by the process. Joiner and Metalsky (2001) found that asymptomatic college students who were high in excessive reassurance seeking at the beginning of the study exhibited depressive symptoms ten weeks later. In addition, Joiner and Metalsky found that the longitudinal association between excessive reassurance seeking and depressive
symptoms was especially strong for those who were rejected by their roommate. In another study, mildly depressed college students who were low in self esteem and high in excessive reassurance seeking were more likely to be rejected by their roommates than college students with higher self-esteem and lower reassurance seeking (Joiner et al., 1992). Excessive reassurance seeking behavior appears to be a significant vulnerability factor for depression. In addition to being a vulnerability factor, Joiner et al. (1999) contend that because it further disrupts the depressed person’s environment, excessive reassurance seeking also serves to maintain depression.

Excessive reassurance seeking is not only detrimental to the reassurance seekers themselves but is also harmful for reassurance givers. In a study of mildly depressed college students and their roommates, Joiner (1994) found that roommates of students who were high in reassurance seeking experienced more depressive symptoms themselves than did roommates of students who were low in reassurance seeking. Additionally, Joiner and Metalsky (1995) propose that the presence of depression or depressive symptoms in a high excessive reassurance seeking person is perhaps what makes excessive reassurance seeking behavior so aversive to others. In the presence of depression, there is an element of desperation that may invoke feelings of guilt for the reassurance giver because they cannot relieve their loved one’s pain. This element of desperation may also eventually emotionally drain the reassurance because they have to offer reassurance so frequently and because they feel that it is their responsibility to make the depressed person feel better.
1.2. Limitations to Reassurance Seeking Research

Though Joiner’s investigations have shed much light on the effects of excessive reassurance seeking in interpersonal relationships, Joiner’s studies suffer from several limitations that may restrict generalization of results and complicate interpretability. First, and possibly foremost, Joiner’s research is primarily based on the use of his four-item measure, the Depressive Interpersonal Relationships Inventory-Reassurance Seeking subscale (Metalsky et al., 1991; see Appendix A). Although the validity and internal consistency of the DIRI have been examined (Joiner et al., 1992; Metalsky et al., 1991) and one small investigation suggested a significant relationship between self-reported and observed excessive reassurance seeking (Joiner & Metalsky, 2001), the measure is still potentially limited by its self-report nature. That is, using a self-report measure of excessive reassurance seeking implies that people are aware of and have insight into their excessive reassurance seeking behavior, when this may not be the case. Benazon and Coyne (1999) have also questioned the usefulness of the DIRI-RS, noting that the measure does not quantify reassurance seeking in the broad sense, but instead comprises complex items that require strong endorsement in order to be meaningful. Interpreting moderate endorsement of items on the DIRI-RS is difficult because the meaning of an item endorsed at the midpoint is unclear. That is, when a person endorses an item at the midpoint it may mean that reassurance seeking is present but not excessive or that excessive reassurance seeking is present but it does not seem to affect key interpersonal relationships. Social desirability may also cause biased responding on this instrument as excessive reassurance seekers may recognize that their behavior is aversive. Knowledge that this behavior is aversive may prevent people from disclosing that they engage in
excessive reassurance seeking or may cause people to downplay the extent to which they engage in reassurance seeking.

In the same way that studies of excessive reassurance seeking have been overly dependent on a self-report measure of reassurance seeking, Joiner’s research has relied on self-report measures of rejection. Rejection in these studies was quantified through a modified self-esteem questionnaire, a desire to change roommates questionnaire, and/or a measure of willingness to interact with the depressed person in the future (Joiner et al., 1992; Joiner & Metalsky, 1995; Joiner & Metalsky, 2001). In addition to potential discrepancies between self-reported and actual behaviors due to lack of insight into rejection or socially desirable responding, these measures limit studies to the examination of the relationship between excessive reassurance seeking and rejection on the macroanalytic level. Therefore, it is unclear whether reassurance seeking directly results in rejection on the microanalytic level.

It is worth noting that the samples of previous macroanalytic investigations were not comprised of participants ranging in depressive severity. That is, investigations to date have focused on subclinically depressed samples without non-depressed and clinically depressed groups for comparison. Therefore, it is unclear if the relationship between depression and reassurance seeking would hold in the clinically depressed population.

Although Coyne’s (1976) interpersonal theory of depression suggests that aversive interpersonal behaviors such as reassurance seeking can result in rejection on both microanalytic and macroanalytic levels, Joiner and colleagues’ research has examined only the macroanalytic level of the relationship between reassurance seeking
and rejection, leaving the microanalytic level of the relationship yet to be examined. This is an important limitation because it is this direct, microanalytic relationship between reassurance seeking and rejection that is most noticeable to depressed people themselves and it is at this level where change can be most optimally effected. This study proposes that direct verbal rejection occurs at the microanalytic level. It may be unclear to a depressed person that their reassurance seeking behavior produces rejection if that rejection is delayed, such as when their roommate chooses not to live with them again. The relationship between reassurance seeking and rejection becomes clearer, however, when a depressed person seeks reassurance and others respond immediately by avoiding them. Finally, therapeutic intervention at the point of reassurance seeking and rejection can help depressed people find more appropriate ways of expressing their negative self-concepts and can assist close others in finding responses that are neither encouraging of the behavior nor rejecting of the person. Therefore, extension of empirical work to the microanalytic level is potentially quite valuable.

1.3. Reassurance Seeking in Romantic Relationships

The reassurance seeking literature takes as its primary fuel people’s close personal relationships. For many people, depressed or not, marriage is the closest, most intimate relationship in their lives. Indeed, an unhappy marriage is the single biggest risk factor for major depression, with people in unhappy marriages being up to 25 times more likely to become depressed than people who are happily married (Weissman, 1987; Young, Weinberger, & Beck, 2001). In a meta-analysis of 26 studies of non-depressed people, Whisman (2001) found that marital dissatisfaction accounted for 16% of the
variance in husbands’ and wives’ depressive symptoms. When studies of clinical depressives were analyzed, the variance accounted for by degree of marital dissatisfaction increased to 44%. It stands to reason that if marital quality and depression are related, and reassurance seeking and depression are related, then reassurance seeking and marital quality will also be related. At present, a handful of studies have examined the relationships between reassurance seeking and depression in marital and dating relationships. Some of these studies have focused on the outcomes of reassurance seeking for reassurance seekers and others have examined the outcomes of reassurance seeking for those who give reassurance.

Insofar as outcomes for reassurance seekers are concerned, reassurance seeking appears to function as a moderator of the relationship between partner devaluation (rejection in the form of a negative evaluation of one’s partner’s worth as a person) and increased emotional distress in college-age dating women (Katz, Beach, & Joiner, 1998). Insofar as outcomes for reassurance givers are concerned, Shahar, Joiner, Zuroff, and Blatt (2004) examined the relationship between excessive reassurance seeking and stress, finding that excessive reassurance seeking behavior predicted life stress for spouses but did not predict stress for the reassurance seekers themselves. Benazon and Coyne (2000) examined the effects of one partner’s depression on the other partner, discovering that wives whose husbands were depressed experienced significantly more depressed mood, although this effect disappeared when spouse burden was taken into account. Here, spouse burden referred to objective burden and subjective burden. Objective burden is defined as disruptions to the family’s routine due to the spouse’s depression. Subjective burden is defined as the perceived emotional burden of the spouse’s depression on other
family members. In sum, when the husband was the depressed spouse, wives experienced more objective and subjective burden, and in turn experienced more depressive symptoms as a result of these burdens. When the wife was the depressed spouse, husbands also experienced burden but less so than did wives of depressed husbands, and as a result these husbands experienced less depressive symptoms as a result of burden than did wives of depressed husbands. Swann and Bosson (1999) proposed that repeatedly having to offer reassurance calls into question the credibility of a person’s reassurance thus causing that person to feel powerless. It can also decrease the intimacy partners feel toward their depressed spouses. A partner can respond to reassurance seeking behavior in any number of ways, but when a partner feels powerless or exhausted due to their spouse’s excessive reassurance seeking behavior, interpersonal rejection might result.

1.4. Rejection in Married Couples

Among the many possible responses to reassurance seeking - offering reassurance, ignoring or avoiding the request, withdrawing, verbally dismissing the spouse, or offering negative feedback to the spouse – the marital literature supports a particular focus on rejection. In the marital literature rejection is seen as responding to a request for reassurance with avoidance, withdrawal, dismissal, or negative feedback. Though researchers have not investigated the direct relationship between depression and forms of rejection, the literature on the general effects of rejection in marriage informs how its possible effects on depression are understood. Avoidance, withdrawal, dismissal, and negative feedback have all received attention from marital researchers.
1.4.1. Avoidance

Avoidance can be conceptualized as any attempt by a partner to change the subject of the discussion, distract oneself from the discussion, or withhold intimacy in response to reassurance seeking. Fincham, Beach, and Davila (2004) found that husbands’ avoidance predicted wives’ reports of ineffective conflict resolution. This suggests that when a husband uses avoidance to terminate a conflict or to stay out of the conflict altogether, the wife is left feeling uncertain because the conflict remains unresolved. In the context of depression and a marked need for reassurance, this lack of resolution could lead to further distress. In addition, lack of conflict resolution could also prompt further reassurance seeking.

1.4.2. Withdrawal.

Withdrawal is defined as one partner’s expression of silence, quietness, acquiescence, or weariness (Smith, Vivian, & O’Leary, 1990). Withdrawal by either spouse in a problem-solving interaction is associated with concurrent distress in both husbands and wives (Roberts, 2000). Roberts and Krokoff (1990) found that husband withdrawal predicted wife hostility in distressed marriages, but not in non-distressed marriages. In a longitudinal study of marriage, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) found that husband withdrawal predicts decreases in wives’ marital satisfaction over time. Weger (2005) found that feeling understood fully mediated the relationship between marital satisfaction and partner withdrawal in husbands and partially mediated the same relationship in wives. Additionally, but not surprisingly, Weger found that wives felt less understood in interactions in which their husbands withdrew. Therefore, when rejected in
this way, the spouse is left feeling unheard, uncared for, and misunderstood: essentially, feelings that are not reassuring.

1.4.3. Dismissal

Dismissal, another form of rejection, might be conceptualized as a partner disqualifying what their spouse says, agreeing sarcastically, or brushing off their spouse in response to the spouse’s request for reassurance. Little research has been done on dismissal, though some investigators such as Sillars and Wilmot (1994) have considered such evasive remarks as part of avoidance. It is possible that this form of rejection has a unique effect on reassurance seekers’ emotions and comes across as especially invalidating because it implies that the depressed spouse is not worth listening to. Such blatant invalidation would be expected to cause further distress in already depressed spouses.

1.4.4. Negative Feedback

A final form of rejection is negative feedback. Negative feedback might be conceptualized as a partner responding to a bid for reassurance from their spouse with a negative statement about the spouse or with agreement with the spouse’s negative feedback seeking statement. In a study of self-verifying feedback, Swann, Hixon, and dela Ronde (1992) found that people were more committed to their spouses when the feedback they received from their spouses was self-verifying of how they felt about themselves. Though this study did not examine depression, it is possible that even when depressed people seek reassurance and receive rejection in return, depressed people may
remain very committed to their rejecting spouses because negative feedback is consistent with and confirms their negative self-views. Alternatively, it is possible that depressed people are not more committed to their spouses who offer negative feedback and that negative feedback results in bad outcomes in this population.

Some studies of avoidance, withdrawal, dismissal, and negative feedback suffer from the same limitations as reassurance seeking studies, namely reliance on self-report measures, macroanalytic analysis of the marital relationship, and non-depressed samples. Because of these limitations, it is not clear how avoidance, withdrawal, dismissal, and negative feedback following reassurance seeking directly affect clinically depressed married people.

1.5. Summary and Limitations of Previous Research

The interpersonal theory of depression explains reassurance seeking behavior as a way in which depressed people engage their environments in an effort to protect their relationships (Coyne, 1976). Such reassurance seeking can result in interpersonal rejection by close others, can make people more vulnerable to depression, and can also play a role in the maintenance of depression (Joiner et al., 1992; Joiner & Metalsky, 2001; Joiner et al., 1999). In addition, reassurance seeking can result in depressive symptoms and life stress for close others (Joiner, 1994; Benazon & Coyne, 2000; Shahar et al., 2004). When rejection does occur in marriage, its negative consequences might include feelings of ineffective conflict resolution (Fincham et al., 2004), distress (Roberts, 2000), and decreased marital satisfaction (Gotmann & Kroff, 1990).
Several limitations of the existing literature on reassurance seeking and rejection are evident. Of greatest importance are limitations owing to: a) excessive reliance on self-report measures for reassurance seeking behavior and rejection, b) examining only the macroanalytic level of the relationship between reassurance seeking and rejection, c) narrowly defining reassurance seeking and broadly defining rejection, d) using only non-clinically depressed samples, and e) using only college-aged and dating couples.

1.6. Present Investigation

In light of these limitations, a study which addresses these issues is proposed. First, the present investigation employs multiple methods to measure reassurance seeking and rejection, including observational methods. Second, the present investigation examines reassurance seeking and rejection on the microanalytic level. Third, the present investigation broadens the conceptualization of reassurance seeking to include ordinary range reassurance seeking behavior. Fourth, a narrower conceptualization of rejection which focuses on avoidance, withdrawal, dismissal, and negative feedback was adopted. Fifth, the present investigation includes participants that range from non-depressed to clinically depressed. Sixth, the present investigation used married couples as opposed to dating couples.

Three different methods of measurement were used in this investigation: self-report questionnaires, self-report of momentary thoughts and feelings, and observational ratings. This multi-method approach enables examination of the construct validity of the three measures as well as the ability to see reassurance seeking and rejection in a person’s self-reports and in their behavior. The observational approach also allows the direct
relationship between reassurance seeking and rejection to be seen. An observational design, in combination with records of participants’ thoughts and feelings during an interaction, allows for examination of whether the partner of the reassurance seeker is thinking, feeling, and behaving in consistent ways. Observational data also reveals whether a partner’s negative evaluations of and rejecting thoughts about their spouse are expressed verbally or whether the partner conceals their negative feelings. By using observational data, it is possible to verify that a person who endorses reassurance seeking behavior on a questionnaire actually exhibits that behavior.

The existing macroanalytic literature suggests that reassurance seeking almost necessarily results in rejection at the microanalytic level, however, this may not be the case. Perhaps global questionnaires do not allow for resolution of the sequence of interpersonal behaviors and skew researchers’ impressions of reassurance seekers and those who reject them. In questionnaire data, the range of reassurance seeking behavior and the range of rejecting behavior that can be assessed are limited. Because of this, it is only known that one person’s general predisposition to seek reassurance is associated with another person’s general predisposition toward rejecting them, but it is not possible to see the sequence in which reassurance seeking and rejection occur, nor is it possible to see the processes that underlie the decision to reject the depressed person. With questionnaire data it is not clear if the rejection only occurs after reassurance is sought or even if rejection is the only response given to reassurance seeking behavior. With observational data, it can be seen whether a bid for reassurance is directly followed by rejection or is sometimes followed by reassurance, other times followed by avoidance, and yet other times followed by dismissal. Observational data will also reveal partners
who respond to reassurance seeking with rejection at some points and reassurance at other points. By examining reassurance seeking and rejection on the microanalytic level, a better understanding of how direct rejection comes about and how that rejection affects a depressed person is gained.

Additionally, this investigation broadens the definition of reassurance seeking, permitting this behavior to range from subtle, implied requests for reassurance to explicit, excessive requests for reassurance. In doing so, it is possible to investigate whether rejection results in cases of subtle reassurance seeking behavior in addition to cases of explicit requests for reassurance. This investigation also narrows the definition of rejection, moving from a decreased “willingness to interact” conceptualization to a behavioral conceptualization that classifies rejection in the forms of avoidance, withdrawal, dismissal, and negative feedback.

In this study, reassurance seeking was examined in a community sample of married couples. Such a sample is more representative of the general population than a college student population and also contains a wider spectrum of depressive disorders. Therefore, reassurance seeking and rejection can be studied in the context of various levels of depression. Using a married sample reveals how reassurance seeking and rejection occur in close long-term, committed, and established romantic relationships.

In sum, this investigation moves beyond the hypothetical, macroanalytic, and self-reported relationships between reassurance seeking and rejection into the real-world microanalytic level of this relationship, revealing the dynamic that exists in the everyday lives of those struggling with depression and those who care about them.
The specific purpose of this investigation was to explore the relationship between reassurance seeking behavior in one spouse and rejecting behavior in their partner. The following hypotheses were proposed:

1.7. Hypotheses

1. Self-reported reassurance seeking should be positively related to observed rejection.

2. Observed reassurance seeking behavior should be positively related to overall observed partner rejection.

3. Observed reassurance seeking behavior should be negatively related to marital satisfaction.

4. Observed reassurance seeking behavior should be positively related to concurrent partner rejecting thoughts and feelings.

5. Observed reassurance seeking behavior should be positively associated with level of depression.

6. The association between subtle reassurance seeking and partner rejection should be significantly different than the association between direct reassurance seeking and partner rejection.

7. Observed partner rejection should moderate the relationship between reassurance seekers’ marital adjustment and reassurance seeking behavior.
2.1. Participants

One hundred married couples from a mid-sized Midwestern town participated in this study. The sample included participants who were recruited either to participate in a “communication study” through newspaper advertisements or were recruited to participate in a “study on depression and marriage” through information booths and fliers at mental health centers and churches. Participants in this study were treated in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association.

2.2. Diagnostic Procedure

The Non-Patient Edition of the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV (SCID) was used to diagnose participants (First, Gibbon, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001). This diagnostic interview was primarily used to identify participants who were currently depressed, participants who were not currently depressed and do not have other excluding mental illnesses, and participants who were suffering from other mental illnesses which made them ineligible for the study. Participants were excluded from the study if they are acutely suicidal, had experienced substance abuse or dependence in the past twelve months, had experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the past two years, had experienced Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in the past two years, or had ever been
diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder or any form of psychosis. In a study of SCID reliability, kappas for inter-rater agreement ranged from .60 to .80 (Williams, Gibbon, First, Spitzer, Davies, et al., 1992). Diagnostic agreement in this study was evaluated by comparing two raters’ diagnoses for eighty randomly chosen participants. Based on high agreement between raters on these participants’ diagnoses, only one rater was used for further diagnostic purposes.

2.3. Questionnaire Measures

2.3.1. Depression

The Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) was used as a self-report measure of depression severity (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996; see Appendix C). This 21-item measure comprises forced-choice questions such as: “Sadness- I do not feel sad (0); I feel sad much of the time (1); I am sad all of the time (2); I am so sad or unhappy that I can’t stand it (3).” Respondents endorse items on a scale of 0 to 3, with higher scores corresponding to higher levels of depression. The BDI-II is correlated .93 with the original BDI. Arnau, Meagher, Norris, and Bramson (2001) found the BDI-II to have high internal consistency with an alpha coefficient of .94 and item-total correlations ranging from .54 to .74. Convergent and criterion-related validity are also impressive for the BDI-II. Mahalik and Kivlighan (1988) found a correlation of .72 between the BDI and the Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire (Hollon & Kendall, 1980) which measures negative thoughts associated with depression.
2.3.2. Marital Adjustment

Marital adjustment was quantified using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976; see Appendix B). This self-report measure comprises 32 items measuring each partner’s dyadic satisfaction, dyadic consensus, affectional expression, and dyadic cohesion. Lower scores on the DAS correspond to poorer marital adjustment. The DAS includes items such as “How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation or terminating your relationship?” The DAS correlated .86 in married respondents and .88 in divorced respondents with the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (Locke & Wallace, 1959). Heyman, Sayers, and Bellack (1994) found a correlation of .87 between the DAS and the Relationship Satisfaction Questionnaire (Burns & Sayers, 1992). The overall internal consistency reliability of the DAS was found to be .96 (Sharpley & Cross, 1982; Spanier, 1976). DAS items were found to discriminate well between high and low marital adjustment groups (Sharpley & Cross, 1982).

2.3.3. Reassurance Seeking

Reassurance seeking was measured through both self-report and observational coding. Self-reported reassurance seeking was quantified with the reassurance-seeking subscale of the Depressive Interpersonal Relationships Inventory (DIRI-RS; Joiner et al., 1992; see Appendix A). Joiner and colleagues established that the 4-item reassurance seeking subscale has an internal consistency alpha of .88. DIRI-RS items are rated on 7-point Likert scales, anchored with “no, not at all” (1) and “yes, very much” (7), with higher scores corresponding to higher levels of reassurance-seeking. One DIRI-RS
question is “In general, do you find yourself often asking the people you feel close to how they truly feel about you?”

2.4. Observational Measures

In order to examine reassurance seeking observationally, each couple participated in a 10-minute marital interaction task. In this task, one member of each couple was chosen to be the focus of the discussion. The focus spouse was chosen randomly in couples in which neither spouse was depressed. In couples with one depressed spouse, the depressed spouse was deemed the focus spouse. After the focus spouse was identified, each spouse made a list of five things they would like the focus spouse to work on or change about themselves. Both spouses then ranked their lists in order of importance from 1, most important, to 5, least important. The investigator then chose the highest overlapping ranked item to be the discussion topic. Couples were instructed to discuss the topic for ten minutes as they would at home.

2.4.1. Reassurance Seeking

Each couple’s marital interaction was videotaped and later coded by independent raters for subtle and direct forms of observed reassurance seeking. Raters tallied the number of times participants engage in subtle forms of reassurance seeking, such as statements in which it seems the person is looking for reassurance, such as “I guess I’m just not very funny.” This type of self-deprecating statement often causes other people to respond with reassurance such as “Of course you are funny!” Raters also tally the frequency of more direct forms of reassurance seeking, such as “Don’t you think I’ve
improved?” and the more extreme “Do you really love me?” These direct forms of reassurance seeking are usually in question form and clearly request reassurance from another person. Each rater watched the marital interaction and made a tally of how many times the focus and non-focus spouses sought reassurance in both subtle and direct forms (see Appendix E).

2.4.2. Rejection

Rejecting behaviors (viz. avoidance, withdrawal, negative feedback, dismissal) were coded both observationally and through subjects’ video recall data. Initially, avoidance and withdrawal of the interaction as a whole were coded using an adapted form of the Couples Interaction Rating System (CIRS; Heavey, Gill, & Christensen, unpublished manuscript). The complete CIRS rating system comprises 19 behavioral characteristics. Because the focus of this study was limited to withdrawal and avoidance, only the withdrawal and avoidance scales were used (see Appendix E). Verhofstadt, Buysse, De Clercq, and Goodwin (2005) calculated an inter-observer alpha of .93 for the withdrawal item, and .96 for the avoidance item. In this study, trained raters coded the total marital interaction for avoidance and withdrawal using a 9-point Likert Scale that ranges from 1, “Not at All”, to 9 “A Lot”, with higher scores on the avoidance item representing a greater frequency or intensity of avoidance in direct response to reassurance seeking, and higher scores on the withdrawal item representing a greater frequency or intensity of withdrawal in direct response to reassurance seeking. Unfortunately, these withdrawal and avoidance scales were not used in analysis, because of low inter-rater reliability as measured using intraclass correlation. In wives, an
intraclass correlation coefficient of .151 was found for withdrawal and .101 for avoidance. In husbands, an intraclass correlation coefficient of .502 was found for withdrawal and .204 for avoidance.

At the interval level, avoidance and/or withdrawal were coded as “no response” by raters. Because these constructs are exhibited in a person’s silence or as the absence of other behaviors, such as reassurance, dismissal, and negative feedback, “no response” was used to indicate a lack of response that might represent an instance of spousal avoidance or withdrawal. However, “no response” was not a pure measure of withdrawal and avoidance, because spousal responses to reassurance seeking that were neutral in content (not responding directly to the reassurance seeking) were also coded in this category.

Raters were also trained in observational coding of dismissal, making a tally of the number of times a partner responded to reassurance seeking by brushing off and invalidating the bid for reassurance with a comment such as “Okay, whatever” or “Fine” (see Appendix E). Negative feedback was also coded using a tally system, with raters tracking the number of times a partner responds to reassurance seeking with negative statements about their spouse (see Appendix E). For example, when a spouse seeks reassurance by saying “I guess I’m just not very funny” their partner might respond with “No, you’re not very funny”, or more extremely with “No, your sense of humor is stupid.” Lastly, raters coded the marital interactions for reassurance given (see Appendix E). Raters tallied the frequency with which partners respond to reassurance seeking behavior with actual reassurance.
After completing the discussion, participants watched their 10-minute marital interaction video and rated what they were thinking and feeling during each of twenty 30-second intervals (see Appendix D for a full rating sheet). These video recall sheets were also coded for dismissal, negative feedback, reassurance, and no response. In this case, no response in writing was used to indicate any written response by a spouse that was not a direct response to reassurance seeking.

2.5. Procedures

Both spouses gave written informed consent prior to beginning the study. Each spouse then participated in a diagnostic interview (SCID). While one spouse was completing the diagnostic interview, the other spouse completed a speech sample task (unrelated to this study) and filled out the BDI-II, DAS, and DIRI-RS. Other questionnaires were also completed at this time for purposes of another study.

Upon completion of the marital interaction task discussed previously, spouses were taken to separate rooms where they were placed in front of a television and given headphones. Participants then listened to and watched an instructional video on how to complete the rating sheets. After the instructional video was complete, each spouse listened to and watched a video of their ten-minute discussion. The video was paused at thirty second intervals, synchronized between the two spouses so that each spouse could write down what they were thinking and feeling during that thirty second segment of the discussion (see Appendix D).

After watching the video, couples were debriefed and each spouse completed a debriefing questionnaire. Upon completion of the study participants were compensated
for their participation. The first one-hundred couples in the study were given fifty dollars for their participation. Couples that participated after that point were given one hundred dollars for their participation in the study, as this amount was necessary to recruit depressed participants and to obtain a socio-economically diverse sample. The final sample of 100 one-hundred couples, after exclusion, included both couples who were paid fifty dollars and couples who were paid one hundred dollars. Each couple also received referral information in case they desired therapy in the future.
3.1. Descriptive Statistics

3.1.1. Demographic Variables

Husbands in the sample ranged in age from 19 to 79, with a mean age of 41.61 years ($SD = 13.74$). Wives ranged in age from 18 to 77, with a mean age of 39.66 years ($SD = 13.13$). The racial identification of husbands in the study was 83.9% Caucasian, 10.7% African American, 4.0% Hispanic, and 1.3% of other racial identification. The sample of wives in the study was 82.1% Caucasian, 7.3% African American, 4.6% Hispanic, and 6% of other racial identification. On average, couples were married 12.19 years ($SD = 13.52$). Marriages ranged in length from 3 months to 55.33 years.

Participants’ current marriage was the husbands’ first marriage for 73.2% of the sample, and the wives’ first marriage for 69.3% of the sample. Couples’ number of children ranged from 0 to 11, with a mean of 2.12 ($SD = 1.72$). Husbands had completed from 4 to 24 years of education, on average completing 14.03 years ($SD = 2.93$). Wives had completed from 4 to 30 years of education, on average completing 14.11 years ($SD = 3.06$). Husbands’ annual income ranged from $650 to $150,000, averaging $47,767 ($SD = 25$).
Wives’ annual income ranged from $0 to $150,000, averaging $42,926 ($SD = 28,233).

3.1.2. Self-Report/Diagnostic Variables

Husbands’ BDI-2 scores ranged from 0 to 47, with a mean of 12.15 ($SD = 9.47). Thus, on average, husbands’ depressive severity was mild, according to cut-offs defined by Beck, Steer, and Brown (1996). Wives’ BDI-2 scores ranged from 0 to 55, with a mean of 17.29 ($SD = 13.67). Thus, on average, wives’ depressive severity was moderate.

In this sample, the BDI-2 was highly internally consistent with a Cronbach’s alpha of .95. Husbands’ DAS scores ranged from 25 to 143, with a mean of 104.34 ($SD = 21.17). Wives’ DAS scores ranged from 6 to 142, with a mean of 100.18 ($SD = 23.86). Spanier (1976) suggested a cut-off of less than or equal to 101 as a benchmark for relational distress. Thus, on average, husbands were just above the cut-off and thus not considered relationally distressed, while wives were just under the cut-off and thus considered slightly relationally distressed. In this sample, the DAS was internally consistent with a Cronbach’s alpha of .97. Husbands’ DIRI-RS scores ranged from 4 to 26, with a mean of 10.26 ($SD = 5.49). Wives’ DIRI-RS scores ranged from 4 to 28 (the full range), with a mean of 11.99 ($SD = 6.51). In this sample, the DIRI-RS had adequate internal consistency reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .83. On average, participants in this study endorsed a moderate level of excessive reassurance seeking.

Couples in which at least one spouse was diagnosed with substance abuse or dependence, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, psychosis, or acute suicidality were excluded. Thus, the final sample size for the
purpose of couples’ analyses was 100 couples. Of the participants remaining after exclusion criteria were applied to the sample, 11 husbands and 23 wives were clinically depressed as diagnosed using the SCID. One hundred twenty-eight husbands were non-depressed; of these, 24 had been clinically depressed in the past. One hundred eleven wives were non-depressed; of these, 30 had been previously clinically depressed. Interrater reliability for the SCID, calculated using Cohen’s kappa, was .82.

Pearson product moment correlation was used to examine the associations between self-report variables (see Table 1). Consistent with previous research (Davila, 2001; Joiner, 1994; Joiner, Alfano, & Metalsky, 1992), the DIRI-RS and BDI-II were associated in both husbands, $r = .456, p < .001$, and wives, $r = .363, p < .001$. Similarly, the BDI-II and DAS were negatively associated in husbands, $r = -.382, p < .001$, and wives, $r = -.171, p < .05$. Finally, wives’ DAS scores and husbands’ DIRI-RS scores were negatively associated, $r = -.292, p < .001$, as were husbands’ DAS scores and wives’ DIRI-RS scores, $r = -.215, p < .01$.

3.1.3. Observational Variables

Wives’ reassurance seeking ranged from 0 to 13 bids for reassurance per interaction, with a mean of 1.41 ($SD = 2.46$). In 51% of the interactions, wives sought no reassurance. Upon examination of reassurance seeking when it did occur, wives sought reassurance in subtle ways in 45% of the interactions and sought reassurance directly in 15% of the interactions. Husbands’ reassurance seeking ranged from 0 to 11 bids for reassurance per interaction, with a mean of 0.65 ($SD = 1.57$). In 72% of the interactions, husbands sought no reassurance. More specifically, husbands sought reassurance subtly
in only 25% of the interactions and sought reassurance directly in only 9% of the
interactions.

Wives gave reassurance verbally between 0 and 10 times per interaction, with an
average of .32 times ($SD = 1.15$) per interaction. Wives gave reassurance in writing
between 0 and 3 times per interaction, with an average of .10 times ($SD = .44$) per
interaction. Wives gave no verbal reassurance in 83% of interactions and no written
reassurance in 94% of interactions. Husbands gave reassurance verbally between 0 and
11 times per interaction, with an average of .77 times ($SD = 1.71$) per interaction.
Husbands gave written reassurance between 0 and 3 times per interaction, with an
average of .19 times ($SD = .55$) per interaction. Overall, wives responded to husbands’
reassurance seeking with reassurance 51.6% percent of the time and husbands responded
to wives’ reassurance seeking with reassurance 55.8% of the time.

Wives gave rejecting responses (dismissal or negative comments) to husbands’
reassurance seeking an average of .14 times ($SD = .53$) per interaction. More specifically,
wives responded to husbands’ reassurance seeking with verbal dismissal from 0 to 1
times per interaction ($M = .02; SD = .14$) and with written dismissal from 0 to 2 times per
interaction ($M = .06; SD = .28$). Wives responded verbally with negative comments from
0 to 3 times per interaction ($M = .12; SD = .46$) and responded with negative comments in
writing from 0 to 3 times per interaction ($M = .13; SD = .44$). Overall, wives responded
with rejection in 8% of the interactions. Husbands gave rejecting responses to
reassurance seeking an average of .18 times ($SD = .59$) per interaction. In particular,
husbands gave verbal dismissal from 0 to 4 times per interaction ($M = .08; SD = .44$) and
written dismissal from 0 to 2 times per interaction ($M = .10; SD = .36$). Husbands
commented negatively to their wives from 0 to 3 times per interaction ($M = .10; SD = .41$) and commented negatively in writing from 0 to 3 times per interaction ($M = .13;$
# TABLE 1

**INTERCORRELATIONS BETWEEN OBSERVED AND SELF-REPORT VARIABLES**

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<td>-.026</td>
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<td>.699**</td>
<td>.237*</td>
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<td>-.110</td>
<td>-.114</td>
<td>.302**</td>
<td>-.052</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

M                | 11.99  | 10.26  | 17.29  | 12.15  | 100.18 | 104.34 | 1.41   | 0.65   | 0.14   | 0.18   | 0.09   | 0.11   |
SD               | 6.51   | 5.49   | 13.67  | 9.47   | 23.86  | 21.17  | 2.46   | 1.57   | 0.53   | 0.59   | 0.36   | 0.41   |

**NOTE:** * Indicates significance at the .05 level. ** Indicates significance at the .01 level.
Overall, husbands responded with rejection in 12% of the interactions. Wives responded to reassurance seeking with rejection 22.6% of the time and husbands responded with rejection 13% of the time.

Husbands gave no verbal response to reassurance seeking from 0 to 4 times per interaction, with a mean of .43 times ($SD = .90$) per interaction. Husbands also gave no written response to reassurance seeking from 0 to 7 times per interaction, with an average of .75 times ($SD = 1.37$) per interaction. Overall, husbands did not respond in 31% of the interactions. Wives gave no verbal response to reassurance seeking from 0 to 3 times per interaction, with a mean of .16 times ($SD = .51$) per interaction. Additionally, wives gave no written response to reassurance seeking from 0 to 4 times per interaction, with an average of .26 times ($SD = .63$) per interaction. In total, wives did not respond in 15% of the interactions. In interactions in which reassurance seeking did occur, wives did not respond 25.8% of the time and husbands did not respond 31.1% of the time.

As illustrated in the high percentages of zeros coded (Table 2) and the sample agreement matrix (Table 3), the observational data were skewed due to extremely low base rates of the observed variables. In this situation, typical reliability analyses such as intra-class correlation were not appropriate because there was so little variance in observed reassurance seeking. The most suitable measure of agreement in this case is percent agreement between raters because this method of describing agreement is not affected by low base rates of reassurance seeking or the small amount of variance. Percent agreement illustrates how often raters were in agreement, even though the great majority of the time they were agreeing on the lack of reassurance seeking they observed. In light of the generally large percentages of agreement seen in Table 1, the data was analyzed despite low base rates. First, exploratory analyses were performed in order to
investigate the correlates of reassurance seeking in this sample and to get an idea of reassurance seeking as it exists in actual interpersonal relationships.

3.2. Correlates of Observational and Self-Reported Reassurance Seeking

Spearman’s rho correlation was used for all correlational analyses involving observational variables. This non-parametric form of correlation was chosen because it does not require that frequency distributions be normal. First, correlation was used to examine the relationships between reassurance seeking, reassurance given, and spouses’ not responding (see Table 4).
### TABLE 2

**PERCENT AGREEMENT AND PERCENT ZEROS BETWEEN JUDGES**

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<tr>
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<td>90.0</td>
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<td>Wife Reassurance: Written</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wife No Response: Written</td>
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### TABLE 3

**SAMPLE OF RATER AGREEMENT: OBSERVED HUSBAND DISMISSAL**

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33
TABLE 4
INTERCORRELATIONS AMONG STUDY VARIABLES

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<td>10. Neg. Comment</td>
<td>0.240</td>
<td>-0.241*</td>
<td>-0.039</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.112</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>1.000</td>
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<td>11. Reassurance</td>
<td>0.719**</td>
<td>0.573**</td>
<td>-0.094</td>
<td>-0.194</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>-0.115</td>
<td>-0.144</td>
<td>0.140</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. No Response</td>
<td>0.718**</td>
<td>0.289**</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>-0.091</td>
<td>-0.074</td>
<td>-0.126</td>
<td>-0.161</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.066</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: * Denotes significance at the .05 level. ** Denotes significance at the .01 level.
Tests of the associations between reassurance seeking and rejection are discussed in later results. Wives’ reassurance seeking was associated with husbands’ reassurance given ($\rho = .783, p < .001$) and husbands’ reassurance seeking was associated with wives’ reassurance given ($\rho = .728, p < .001$). Additionally, wives’ reassurance seeking was associated with husbands’ lack of response ($\rho = .678, p < .001$) and husbands’ reassurance seeking was associated with wives’ lack of response ($\rho = .601, p < .001$). Subtle and direct observed reassurance seeking were significantly associated with each other for both husbands’ ($\rho = .322, p < .001$) and wives’ ($\rho = .362, p < .001$), suggesting that the observational measure of reassurance seeking is reliable, though it was not possible to quantify inter-rater reliability due to low base rates of reassurance seeking.

We also examined the association between the self-report measure of excessive reassurance seeking and the observational measures of subtle and direct reassurance seeking (see Table 4). These analyses revealed that neither husbands’ ($\rho = .169, p = .12$) nor wives’ subtle reassurance seeking ($\rho = .121, p = .27$) were associated with the self-report measure of excessive reassurance seeking. Similarly, neither husbands’ ($\rho = .023, p = .83$) nor wives’ ($\rho = .134, p = .22$) direct reassurance seeking was associated with the self-report measure of excessive reassurance seeking.

3.3. Tests of Hypotheses 1-5

Spearman’s rho correlation was again used to test the hypothesized associations between study variables (Table 4). Hypothesis 1 stated that self-reported reassurance seeking in one spouse would be positively related to observed rejection in the other spouse. This hypothesis was not supported in husbands or wives. However, support was found for hypothesis 2 which stated
that observed reassurance seeking would be positively related to observed partner rejection. Wives’ observed reassurance seeking was associated with husbands’ observed rejection ($\rho = .360, p < .001$). More specifically, wives’ observed reassurance seeking was associated with husbands’ observed dismissal ($p < .05$) and husbands’ observed negative comments ($p < .01$). Using partial correlation, analysis revealed that the relationship between wives’ observed reassurance seeking and husbands’ observed rejection remained significant even after controlling for wives’ depressive severity, $\rho = .309, p < .05$. Husbands’ observed reassurance seeking was associated with wives’ observed rejection ($\rho = .530, p < .001$). More specifically, both wives’ observed dismissal ($p < .01$) and observed negative comments ($p < .001$) were associated with husbands’ observed reassurance seeking. Again, using partial correlation, analyses revealed that the relationship between husbands’ observed reassurance seeking and wives’ observed rejection remained significant even after controlling for depressive severity, $\rho = .531, p < .001$.

According to hypothesis 3, observed reassurance seeking behavior should be negatively related to marital adjustment. This hypothesis was not supported in husbands or wives. That is, husbands’ observed reassurance seeking was not associated with wives’ dyadic adjustment nor was wives’ observed reassurance seeking associated with husbands’ dyadic adjustment. Results supported hypothesis 4, according to which, observed reassurance seeking behavior should be positively related to concurrent partner rejecting thoughts and feelings. Wives’ observed reassurance seeking was positively associated with husbands’ video recall rejection ($\rho = .464, p < .001$), including both written dismissal ($p < .001$) and written negative comments ($p < .001$). Husbands’ observed reassurance seeking was also positively associated with wives’ video recall rejection ($\rho = .684, p < .001$), including written dismissal ($p < .001$) and written negative comments ($p < .001$). Finally, according to hypothesis 5, observed reassurance seeking behavior
should be positively associated with level of depression. Support for this hypothesis was found in husbands ($\rho = .246, p < .05$), but not in wives ($\rho = .050, p = .62$).

3.4. Test of Hypothesis 6

Olkin & Finn’s (1995) method was used to test for a significant difference between two correlations: the correlation between subtle reassurance seeking and observed rejection and the correlation between direct reassurance seeking and observed rejection. Hypothesis 6 predicted that the association between subtle reassurance seeking and rejection would be less than that between direct reassurance seeking and rejection. Results showed that there was a significant difference between the correlations (CI: .016 to .238), yet the correlation between subtle reassurance seeking and rejection was of greater magnitude than that between direct reassurance seeking and rejection. Thus, this finding was not consistent with hypothesis 6.

3.5. Test of Hypothesis 7

According to hypothesis 7, observed partner rejection should moderate the relationship between reassurance seeking and reassurance seekers’ marital adjustment. Moderated multiple regression was used to test the significance of the statistical interaction between reassurance seeking and observed partner rejection. Findings were not consistent with hypothesis 7. Wives’ rejection did not moderate the relationship between husbands’ reassurance seeking and husbands’ marital adjustment, $R^2 \text{Change} (1,95) = .005, p = .50$. Similarly, husbands’ rejection did not moderate the relationship between wives’ reassurance seeking and wives’ marital adjustment, $R^2 \text{Change} (1,94) = .002, p = .71$. 
3.6. Tests of Supplemental Hypotheses

Moderated multiple regression was used to test whether severity of depression moderated the relationship between reassurance seeking and partner rejection. Wives’ depressive severity did not moderate the relationship between self-reported reassurance seeking and partner rejection, $R^2 \text{ Change} (1, 96) = .024, p = .12$, nor did it moderate the relationship between observed reassurance seeking and partner rejection, $R^2 \text{ Change} (1, 96) = .016, p = .16$. In contrast, husbands’ depressive severity did not moderate the relationship between self-reported reassurance seeking and partner rejection, $R^2 \text{ Change} (1, 95) = .035, p = .06$, but did moderate the relationship between observed reassurance seeking and partner rejection, $R^2 \text{ Change} (1, 95) = .174, p < .001$.

Independent t-tests were used to test for group differences in self-reported excessive reassurance seeking and for group differences in observed reassurance seeking, comparing clinically depressed and non-depressed participants. Results showed no difference between clinically depressed and non-depressed wives in self-reported excessive reassurance seeking, $t(131) = -.501, p = .62$. However, there was a difference in self-reported excessive reassurance seeking between clinically depressed and non-depressed husbands, $t(136) = -2.495, p < .05$, with clinically depressed husbands reporting significantly more excessive reassurance seeking than non-depressed husbands. Results showed no difference in observed reassurance seeking between groups of wives, $t(96) = -.489, p = .63$, or husbands $t(97) = -.658, p = .51$). Additionally, the non-depressed group was divided into two groups: those who previously had a major depressive episode and those who have never been clinically depressed. Using independent t-tests, no differences between previously depressed, and never depressed wives, $t (77) = -.815, p = .42$, or husbands, $t (89) = -.594, p = .55$ were found in observed reassurance seeking. Nor was there a
difference between previously depressed and never depressed wives self-reported excessive reassurance seeking, $t(108) = -1.695, p = .09$). There was a significant difference between previously depressed and never depressed husbands in self-reported excessive reassurance seeking, $t(125) = -2.799, p < .01$, with previously depressed husbands endorsing significantly more excessive reassurance seeking than never depressed husbands.

A one-way ANOVA was used to test for group differences in observed rejection, allowing for an examination of whether there were differences in partner rejection between diagnostic groups. To account for unequal cell sizes, the Brown-Forsythe modification was used (Brown & Forsythe, 1974). In comparing observed rejection by partners in the clinically depressed, previously clinically depressed, and never clinically depressed groups, analyses revealed no difference between the three groups in observed rejection of wives, $F(2,51.01) = .477, p = .62$, or husbands, $F(2,22.13) = .651, p = .53$.

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the extent to which dismissive rejection and rejection in the form of negative comments affected dyadic adjustment. Neither dismissal, $F(1,96) = .022, p = .88$, or negative feedback, $F(1,96) = .564, p = .46$, from husbands was a significant predictor of wives’ dyadic adjustment. Similarly, neither dismissal, $F(1,97) = .456, p = .50$, or negative feedback, $F(1,97) = .210, p = .65$, from wives was a significant predictor of husbands’ dyadic adjustment.

To investigate how reassurance seeking processes differ when viewed in new marriages as compared to more established marriages, length of marriage in years was tested as a moderator in the relationship between observed reassurance seeking and observed partner rejection using moderated multiple regression. Length of marriage, in years, did not moderate the relationship between wives’ observed reassurance seeking and husbands’ rejection, $R^2\text{Change}$
\( (1,81) = .020, p = .15 \). However, years married did moderate the relationship between husbands’ observed reassurance seeking and wives’ rejection, \( R^2 \text{ Change} (1,81) = .102, p < .001 \) (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Length of Marriage as a Moderator of Husbands’ Observed Reassurance Seeking and Wives’ Observed Rejection.](image)

Stepwise multiple regression was used to examine the effects of observed reassurance seeking over the ten-minute interaction in the prediction of observed rejection. Wives’ observed reassurance seeking became and remained a significant predictor of husbands’ rejection at interval 4, after 1 minute and 30 seconds. Husbands’ observed reassurance seeking became and remained a significant predictor of wives’ rejection at interval 6, after 2 minutes and 30 seconds. Interval means for reassurance seeking ranged from .01 and .12 bids per interval in husbands and from .03 to .13 bids per interval in wives. This small range indicates stability of reassurance seeking across the interaction.
CHAPTER 4:
DISCUSSION

This study employed a multi-method approach in the examination of reassurance seeking and rejection. In this investigation, unique trends were discovered in the manifestation of reassurance seeking and rejection in both depressed and non-depressed people. Most interestingly, reassurance seeking did not occur or occurred infrequently in many couples’ interactions. Yet, previous researchers and theorists have suggested that reassurance seeking is more excessive in people with depressive symptoms. The low base rate of reassurance seeking found in this study raises questions about the conceptualization of excessive reassurance seeking. In essence, what is it that defines excessive reassurance seeking as excessive?

As previously mentioned, Joiner and colleagues (1999) have defined excessive reassurance seeking “the tendency to ask other people excessively for reassurance of worth.” This conceptualization is vague in that a person who seeks reassurance twice might technically be considered excessive, yet this hardly seems an accurate description. If the construct is defined as it is conceptualized in the measure used to quantify the behavior, the DIRI-RS (Metalsky et al., 1991), it seems that excessive reassurance seekers should not only seek reassurance repeatedly but should specifically ask whether others truly love them and care about them. Therefore, excessive reassurance seeking can be defined in two possible ways. First, excessive
reassurance seeking can be defined in reference to the magnitude of the behavior. In this study, seeking reassurance of one’s worth, as described by Metalsky and colleagues (1991), was classified as one type of “direct” reassurance seeking. Although direct reassurance seeking did occur in this study, albeit in less than ten percent of interactions, rarely if ever did a participant ask whether their spouse truly loved them or cared about them. This is not to say that questions of this nature are never asked, just that the frequency of such questions seems to be extremely low. Therefore, if magnitude of the behavior is used to define it as *excessive*, the findings of this study directly challenge whether reassurance seekers truly are excessive. Alternatively, the content of the reassurance seeking can be used to define it as excessive: the reassurance seeker seeks assurance of who they are broadly as a person as opposed to assurance in any specific domain. In light of this definition of excessive reassurance seeking, the low base rate of reassurance seeking found in this study is not necessarily meaningful. That is, if magnitude is not important, a person only has to seek reassurance specifically regarding their value as a person or whether they are truly loved and cared for once for it to be perceived by others as excessive. Finally, if the term excessive is considered as it is defined in the dictionary, reassurance seeking would be described as excessive when it “exceeds what is usual, proper, necessary, or normal” (Merriam Webster, 2007). Interestingly, this definition implies that some type or level of reassurance seeking is normal, but does not clarify whether the excessive nature of something is due to the magnitude or due to the type of reassurance sought.

Regardless of the interpretation of the term excessive, reassurance seeking occurred infrequently in this study. In fact, the observational data showed that reassurance seeking was low in both the non-depressed and depressed groups. But, what does it mean that the base rate of reassurance seeking was very low? If the magnitude of reassurance seeking is the defining factor,
then the low base rate suggests that describing reassurance seeking as “excessive” may not be accurate. Indeed, self-reported excessive reassurance seeking was not associated with observed reassurance seeking. This interpretation of the low base-rate finding also calls into question the construct validity of the DIRI-RS (Metalsky et al., 1991). Perhaps the DIRI-RS is actually measuring peoples’ perceptions of their reassurance seeking or peoples’ perceptions of how aversive their own behavior is rather than the magnitude of their reassurance seeking. However, if the content or type of reassurance being sought is considered to be the defining characteristic of excessive reassurance seeking, as opposed to the magnitude, then the low base rate in non-depressed and depressed participants is again not meaningful. Perhaps the difference between the two groups actually lies in what non-depressed and depressed people are seeking reassurance of. That is, perhaps the groups’ reassurance seeking is qualitatively different. Additionally, the lack of a significant association between observed reassurance seeking and self-reported excessive reassurance seeking supports the possibility that the reassurance seeking that occurred in this study was qualitatively different than that quantified by the self-report measure.

In spite of the low base rate, an association was found between husbands’ observed reassurance seeking and self-reported depressive symptoms. This suggests that reassurance seeking, though not occurring at high rates, is still associated with depressive severity in men. Thus, the more depressed men are the more they will seek reassurance. Yet, even depressed men were not seeking reassurance at a very high rate. Interestingly, there was a difference between clinically depressed and non-depressed husbands in self-reported excessive reassurance seeking, but not in observed reassurance seeking. Because on average, husbands were actually lower than wives in self-reported and observed reassurance seeking and the frequency of reassurance seeking was low in both spouses, this finding could suggest that depressed husbands might
perceive their reassurance seeking as excessive in magnitude, though in reality their reassurance seeking only seems excessive in comparison to the low level of reassurance seeking they engage in when not depressed. Alternatively, husbands may experience a true shift in their reassurance seeking behavior: when non-depressed, husbands rarely seek reassurance, but when depressed, husbands begin seeking reassurance of value or worth (excessively).

The low base rate of observed reassurance seeking in addition to the relatively small number of clinically depressed participants may explain why there was no difference between clinically depressed and non-depressed wives in level of observed reassurance seeking or self-reported excessive reassurance seeking. However, a significant difference in self-reported excessive reassurance seeking was still found between clinically depressed and non-depressed husbands despite having a relatively small number of clinically depressed husbands. Thus, it is more plausible that the lack of group differences in wives is a result of women seeking the same amount reassurance regardless of whether or not they are experiencing depressive symptoms rather than the result of this study having a low number of clinically depressed female participants.

If excessive reassurance seeking is conceptualized with magnitude as the defining feature, and thus, reassurance seeking was not excessive in this study, what does this mean for the relationship between reassurance seeking and rejection? The data suggest that interpersonal rejection occurs even when reassurance seeking is subtle and non-excessive in magnitude. This implies that it is not the magnitude of reassurance seeking that promotes rejection. If excessive reassurance seeking is instead conceptualized with type of content as the defining feature, then the reassurance seeking that occurred in this study was, on occasion, excessive. Yet, even subtle, non-excessive, bids for reassurance were often met with rejection. This implies that it is not the
type of reassurance seeking that promotes rejection. Thus, regardless of whether or not a person’s reassurance seeking is excessive, either in magnitude or type, interpersonal rejection often occurs as a result. Overall, the data in this study suggest that although reassurance seeking can be considered excessive from a few different perspectives, it is not likely that the excessive nature of the behavior is the cause of interpersonal problems.

Joiner and Metalsky (1995) and Coyne (1976) theorized that distress in combination with reassurance seeking is what causes interpersonal rejection. Consistent with Coyne’s theory, distress shown by a reassurance seeker in this study made reassurance seeking especially aversive. Depressive severity moderated the strength of the relationship between husbands’ observed reassurance seeking and observed rejection. Depressive severity did not moderate the relationship in wives. Additionally, length of marriage moderated the relationship between reassurance seeking and rejection in husbands, but not in wives. Although findings of this and other previous investigations support the idea that women engage in more reassurance seeking than men, the findings of this study suggest that men who engage in reassurance seeking over the course of a marriage experience more rejection than women. These findings are consistent with roommate studies in which males seeking reassurance experienced more rejection than females (Joiner et al., 1992). These data support Joiner and Metalsky’s (1995) argument that reassurance seeking within the context of depression is especially aversive. If it is the case that women, regardless of depressive severity, engage in more reassurance seeking than men, perhaps husbands are more accustomed to, and thus less rejecting of, wives’ reassurance seeking over time. Perhaps because men generally engage in less reassurance seeking than women, wives are more rejecting when their husbands engage in more reassurance seeking or a different type of reassurance seeking upon becoming depressed. Acknowledging that: 1) Length of marriage
moderates the relationship between husbands’ reassurance seeking and wives’ rejection of husbands and 2) That the relationship between husbands’ reassurance seeking and wives’ rejection of husbands became significant later in the interaction than the relationship between wives’ reassurance seeking and husbands’ rejection of wives did, suggests that in the case of reassurance seeking, it is as if wives are slow to anger and slow to forget, while husbands are quick to anger and quick to forget.

Analyses revealed that the most frequent response to reassurance seeking was assurance from the spouse. This finding is consistent with Coyne’s (1976) Interpersonal Theory of Depression. Coyne suggested that close others primarily give reassurance to appease the depressed person. As such, Coyne’s theory implied that at the microanalytic level outward, direct, rejection is suppressed and assurance is given to the reassurance seeker. Giving assurance and trying to deny annoyance or rejection are superficial responses meant to comfort the already distressed reassurance seeker. Coyne also posited that rejection occurred at the macroanalytic level through interpersonal distancing. This study expands on existing theory by illustrating that both reassurance and rejection occur at the microanalytic level, even in response to low levels of reassurance seeking. Indeed, not only did rejection sometimes occur immediately in spouses’ thoughts, but that spouses also rejected their partners verbally in direct response to reassurance seeking. On many other occasions, spouses gave no response to reassurance seeking. Unfortunately, it remains unclear whether spouses who did not respond to reassurance seeking did this purposefully as a way of avoiding or withdrawing and thus communicating their dislike for the behavior or whether spouses simply did not realize that reassurance was being sought.
4.1. Limitations

One limitation of this investigation is the bias resulting from the relatively low number of clinically depressed participants. Despite using statistical methods to correct for this imbalance, the power and generalizability of this study would be improved by having a larger group of clinically depressed participants. Thus, the relatively small number of depressed participants limits how easily these findings can be generalized to clinical populations. In addition, this study is limited by a lack of racial diversity. Though the sample in this study was somewhat diverse, this diversity was not fully representative of the community from which it came.

The cross-sectional design of the current investigation is also limiting. Without multiple measurements of depressive severity, reassurance seeking, or rejection, it was not possible to explore how these variables inter-relate over time. Although rejection and reassurance were investigated as direct outcomes of reassurance seeking, and length of marriage was co-varied to explore how the relationship between reassurance seeking and rejection changes over time, the design of this study prevents decisive statements from being made about the changes in these phenomena over time. In addition, the design of this study involved a ten minute interaction task during which the couple discussed an area of life in which one spouse could improve. It is possible that the type of topic chosen for the discussion was not optimal for reassurance seeking and rejection. However, if anything, the interaction would be biased in the direction of a greater than normal amount of reassurance seeking, because focusing on a spouse’s areas for growth might cause them to seek reassurance more than they would in other sorts of conversation. If this was the case, and a very low base rate of reassurance seeking was still found, this only serves to support the argument that the aversive nature of reassurance seeking is not due to its magnitude.
The most substantial finding of the current study was the low base rate of reassurance seeking. This unanticipated finding is primarily a limitation of analysis. That is, it is possible that the skewed distributions of reassurance seeking variables may have limited how easily significance could be detected. However, at the same time, the low base rate was the most important finding of this study because it promotes a critical analysis of the existing conceptualization of reassurance seeking.

4.2. Conclusions and Future Directions

Overall, this study offers important new insight into the understanding of reassurance seeking. First, this investigation questions the current conceptualization of excessive reassurance seeking. As a result, further research should focus on replicating this observational study in order to confirm the low base rate of reassurance seeking. Second, future studies should clarify the conceptualization of excessive reassurance seeking and assess whether defining the behavior as excessive adds to the understanding of the behavior and its outcomes. Observing reassurance seeking would also enable researchers to further study the contexts in which reassurance seeking and rejection occur. Exploring these contexts would inform how peoples’ need for reassurance is understood and how this need might be otherwise met. Third, further research should focus on gender differences in the manifestation of reassurance seeking and its interpersonal outcomes. Based on this investigation, it seems that reassurance seeking is especially aversive in males, despite their lower engagement in the behavior. This interesting finding suggests that gender role may affect the relationship between males’ reassurance seeking and interpersonal rejection.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

DIRI

Directions: For the following questions, please circle the number most appropriate to you, using the following scale:

1 = No, not at all
2 = No, hardly ever
3 = Not really
4 = I'm not sure
5 = Yes, somewhat
6 = Yes, quite often
7 = Yes, very much

1. In general, do you find yourself often asking the people you feel close to how they truly feel about you?

   1 = no, not at all  2 = no, hardly ever  3 = not really  4 = I'm not sure  5 = yes, somewhat  6 = yes, quite often  7 = yes, very much

2. In general, do you frequently seek reassurance from the people you feel close to as to whether they really care about you?

   1 = no, not at all  2 = no, hardly ever  3 = not really  4 = I'm not sure  5 = yes, somewhat  6 = yes, quite often  7 = yes, very much

3. In general, do the people you feel close to sometimes become irritated with you for seeking reassurance from them about whether they really care about you?

   1 = no, not at all  2 = no, hardly ever  3 = not really  4 = I'm not sure  5 = yes, somewhat  6 = yes, quite often  7 = yes, very much

4. In general, do the people you feel close to sometimes get "fed up" with you for seeking reassurance from them about whether they really care about you?

   1 = no, not at all  2 = no, hardly ever  3 = not really  4 = I'm not sure  5 = yes, somewhat  6 = yes, quite often  7 = yes, very much
### Dyadic Adjustment Scale

**Check 0 or Fill • appropriate circles.**

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<th>Almost Agree</th>
<th>Occasionally Disagree</th>
<th>Frequently Disagree</th>
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**INSTRUCTIONS:** Most people have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

- Handling family finances
- Matters of recreation
- Religious matters
- Demonstrations of affection
- Friends
- Sex relations
- Conventionality (correct or proper behavior)
- Philosophy of life
- Ways of dealing with parents or in-laws
- Aims, goals, and things believed important
- Amount of time spent together
- Making major decisions
- Household tasks
- Leisure-time interests and activities
- Career decisions

16. How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?
17. How often do you or your mate leave the house after a fight?
18. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?
19. Do you conflict in your mate?
20. Do you ever regret that you married? (or lived together)
21. How often do you and your partner quarrel?
22. How often do you and your mate get on each other’s nerves?

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<th>Almost Every Day</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
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23. Do you kiss your mate?
24. Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?

**How often would you say the following events occur between you and your mate?**

- Have a stimulating exchange of ideas
- Laugh together
- Calmly discuss something
- Work together on a project

25. [Check list of options]
26. [Check list of options]
27. [Check list of options]
28. [Check list of options]
29. [Check list of options]
30. [Check list of options]

These are some things about which couples sometimes agree and sometimes disagree. Indicate if either item below caused differences of opinions or were problems in your relationship during the past few weeks (check yes or no).

29. [Check list of options]
30. [Check list of options]

31. The numbers on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy," represents the degree of happiness most relationships. Please fill in the circle that best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

Fill in a circle

32. Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the future of your relationship?

- [Check list of options]
- [Check list of options]
- [Check list of options]
- [Check list of options]
- [Check list of options]
- [Check list of options]

32. [Check list of options]
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<th>Clip Start Time</th>
<th>Describe Your Thoughts and/or Feelings</th>
<th>Were you being positive, negative, or neutral towards your partner?</th>
<th>How critical were you intending to be of your partner?</th>
<th>Describe Your Partner's Thoughts and/or Feelings</th>
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### Reassurance Seeking Video Coding

**EA______**

Focus = _______  Non-Focus = _______

Coder _______

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<th>Focus Direct RS</th>
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**Husband**

- None
- Somewhat
- A Lot

**Wife**

- None
- Somewhat
- A Lot

Withdraws:

- Withdraws

Avoids:

- Avoids

9

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