

# PERSONALITY, INTERPERSONAL CONTEXT AND DEPRESSION IN COUPLES

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## ABSTRACT

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The present study had two goals: first, to determine whether neediness and self-criticism are associated with distinct marital environments and, second, to evaluate two pathways by which marital environments may be related to personality and depressive symptoms. Personality vulnerability may be more strongly associated with depressive symptoms when the spouse's behavior matches the vulnerability (i.e. a needy person's spouse is emotionally distant). Alternatively, spousal behavior may elevate levels of neediness or self-criticism, which then increases depressive symptoms. We tested these alternatives in a sample of 64 couples recruited from the community. Among men, neediness was associated with depressive symptoms only if the marriage lacked intimacy. Self-criticism in both sexes and neediness in women were linked to the interpersonal context in a different manner: self-critics tended to have partners who have many complaints about them, and needy women tended to have partners who report low levels of marital intimacy. These results demonstrate that, to some extent, an individual's self-criticism or neediness may be a realistic response to a distressing interpersonal context.

KEY WORDS • couples • depression • personality

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Depression is primarily conceptualized as an intrapsychic phenomenon. Theories about the etiology of depression emphasize individual difference variables, such as personality traits, that predispose depression. As a result, most researchers focus on the depressed person in isolation. However, intrapsychic models of depression may not be sufficiently attentive to the distressing interpersonal contexts that accompany depression (Coyne & Whiffen, 1995). There is ample evidence that depressed persons experience hostile and conflicted relations with their spouses, children and other social network members (cf. reviews by Gotlib & Hooley, 1988; Gotlib & Whiffen, 1991), and that these relations influence the course of depressive episodes (cf. review by Coiro & Gottesman, 1996). Recently, there has been a greater emphasis on understanding the interplay between intrapsychic vulnerabilities and interpersonal contexts in both theory (Gotlib & Hammen, 1992; Safran & Segal, 1990) and research (e.g. Whiffen, Kallos-Lilly, & MacDonald, 1998).

Blatt (1974; Blatt & Zuroff, 1992) proposed that there are two distinct personality styles, dependency and self-criticism, that predispose depression. Dependent persons are characterized by intense needs to be loved and cared for, and are plagued by concerns about disruptions in their interpersonal relationships. The dependent type explicitly strives to establish secure interpersonal relations. The self-critical type, however, strives to gain the approval of others through success in academic or work settings. Self-critical persons are characterized by harsh self-evaluation. Blatt argued that both types become depressed when they encounter life events that thwart their goals. Dependent individuals are thought to experience 'anaclitic' depression, involving feelings of loneliness and helplessness, when important relationships fail. Self-critical persons are thought to experience 'introjective' depression, involving feelings of guilt and worthlessness, when they fail to achieve internalized goals and standards (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992).

Researchers have investigated the social environments associated with dependency and self-criticism, and findings are generally consistent with the idea that dependency and self-criticism have distinct interpersonal correlates (Andrews, 1989). Bornstein's (1992) review of the literature concluded that dependency is associated with the interpersonal behaviors of compliance, help-seeking, yielding and suggestibility. Dependent individuals have difficulty being assertive, are easily exploited, and take too much responsibility in their relationships (Alden & Bieling, 1996; Fichman, Koestner, & Zuroff, 1994; Riley & McCranie, 1990). Finally, dependency is associated with an anxious attachment style, which is the attachment style associated with fears of abandonment (Zuroff & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Similarly, among psychiatric patients, dependency is related to fears of abandonment and loss (Blatt, Quinlan, Chevron, McDonald & Zuroff, 1982).

Different interpersonal correlates are found for self-criticism. Self-critics are too controlling in their social interactions and unsociable (Fichman et al., 1994). Self-critics report lower levels of trust and self-disclosure, less

satisfaction with their romantic partners, and a fearful-avoidant attachment style, which emphasizes ambivalence about intimacy (Zuroff & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Among psychiatric patients, self-criticism is associated with social isolation (Blatt et al., 1982). Self-criticism also is negatively related to such social skills as social acuity and sensitivity to non-verbal cues (Aube & Whiffen, 1996). Thus, while dependency is associated with concerns about losing relationships and with the inhibition of behaviors that could disrupt relationships, self-criticism is associated with poorer social skills and with comparatively distant and dissatisfying relationships.

One conceptual and methodological issue that was raised recently by several researchers is that commonly used dependency scales may pathologize healthy interest in relationships. Rude and Burnham (1995) factor analyzed the dependency items in the two most frequently used measures, Blatt's Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ; Blatt, D'Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976), and Beck's Sociotropy–Autonomy Scale (SAS; Beck, Epstein, Harrison, & Emery, 1983). They found that the dependency items in both questionnaires separated into two correlated factors that they labeled 'connectedness' and 'neediness'. While the connectedness items focus on interpersonal sensitivity and the valuing of relationships, the neediness items focus on fears of being alone and of being rejected. Furthermore, only neediness scores correlated with depressive symptoms, suggesting that future work could more usefully focus on the construct of 'neediness', rather than 'dependency'. Thus, we will use the term neediness for the remainder of this article.

Why are neediness and self-criticism associated with problematic interpersonal contexts? Zuroff, Stotland, Sweetman, Craig, and Koestner, (1995) suggested that needy and self-critical persons create their social worlds. For example, self-critics may select unpleasant, critical people with whom to socialize, and may engage in interpersonal behaviors that evoke these reactions in others. Alternatively, Coyne and Whiffen (1995) suggested that high scores on measures of neediness and self-criticism reflect a distressing interpersonal context. Marriage provides an especially potent context. A marriage that lacks closeness and intimacy probably increases concerns about the availability and responsiveness of the spouse. Similarly, marital conflict that centers on partners' perceived inadequacies could heighten individuals' self-criticism and contribute to their low self-esteem. Thus, fears of rejection and abandonment may reflect a marriage characterized by low levels of intimacy, and excessive self-criticism may reflect an habitually critical spouse.

Rather than being mutually exclusive, the perspectives of Coyne and Whiffen (1995) and Zuroff et al. (1995) are complementary. Needy and self-critical persons may indeed play a role in creating their interpersonal environments; however, the negative behavior of significant others probably maintains and exacerbates these characteristic styles. Both perspectives suggest that it is critical to investigate the interpersonal contexts associated with neediness and self-criticism, examining not only the perceptions of targets, but also the perceptions of their partners.

Interpersonal contexts also may influence a person's vulnerability to depression. Blatt and Zuroff (1992) proposed that personality interacts with matching life events to produce depression. Specifically, needy individuals will be prone to depression if they experience interpersonal stressors, whereas self-critics will be prone to depression if they fail in an important life domain. Marital distress could be a matching stressor for both needy persons and self-critics because the former could see marital distress as threatening abandonment, whereas the latter could perceive marital distress as a failure. The matching hypothesis is a 'moderator' hypothesis because personality and life stress are proposed to interact.

Coyne and Whiffen (1995) proposed that interpersonal contexts may be linked to depression through a different pathway. They point to the substantial research literature demonstrating that the intimate relationships of depressed persons are hostile, conflicted and rejecting (cf. review by Gotlib & Whiffen, 1991), and that spousal criticism exacerbates and maintains depressive symptoms (cf. review by Coiro & Gottesman, 1996). They argue that negative spousal behavior may elevate levels of neediness and self-criticism and, thus, indirectly, increase vulnerability to depression. This hypothesis proposes that personality vulnerability mediates the association between negative spousal behavior and depression.

In a recent study, we began to explore the marital environments of needy and self-critical people and to assess the pathways linking marital environments to depression (Whiffen, Aube, Thompson, & Campbell, in press). First, we examined the association between targets' reports of neediness and self-criticism and their spouses' perceptions of the marriage. We found that self-critical women were married to men who reported being critical of and competitive with their wives. Self-critical men were married to women who reported more marital distress than did other women. Neediness was not associated with spouses' perceptions of the marriage. Next, we tested the moderating hypothesis, that personality vulnerability would interact with marital distress to produce depressive symptoms. Our data did not support this hypothesis. In this study, we did not test the mediating hypothesis described earlier.

The present study expands upon our previous work by identifying an aspect of the marriage that may match neediness, and by testing both the moderating and mediating hypotheses linking the interpersonal context to personality vulnerability and depression. First, following from Coyne and Whiffen's (1995) argument that neediness and self-criticism may reflect the effects of specific interpersonal contexts, we reasoned that complaints about one's spouse may be uniquely related to self-criticism. A spouse who has a large number of complaints about his/her partner may inflate the partner's self-criticism. Similarly, low levels of intimacy and self-disclosure in a marriage may contribute to neediness. Thus, our first hypothesis is that higher levels of neediness in targets will be associated with their partners' reports that their marriages are less intimate. Similarly, higher levels of self-criticism will be associated with higher levels of spousal complaints about the target.

Second, we assessed the two pathways by which the interpersonal behavior of spouses may influence individuals' levels of self-criticism and neediness and their vulnerability to depression. The first possibility, following from Blatt and Zuroff's (1992) position that personality interacts with life events to produce depression, is that spouses' interpersonal behavior may moderate the association between personality and depression. For instance, needy individuals may be at greater risk for depression if their emotional needs are not being met by having a close relationship with their spouse. Thus, our second hypothesis is that spousal complaints will moderate the relationship between targets' self-criticism and targets' depression, whereas spousal intimacy will moderate the relationship between targets' neediness and targets' depression.

Alternatively, following from Coyne and Whiffen's (1995) analysis, spousal behavior may influence depression indirectly through personality. For instance, a spouse who has a large number of complaints about his or her partner may elevate the partner's self-criticism, which would then put the partner at greater risk for depression. Thus, our third hypothesis is that participants' self-criticism will mediate the relationship between spousal complaints and targets' depression, whereas targets' neediness will mediate the relationship between spousal intimacy and targets' depression. We tested these hypotheses in a sample of couples recruited from the community.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

We advertised in a community newspaper for couples interested in a study about relationships. Individuals were invited to telephone for further information about the study, and they were screened over the phone for the following criteria: (i) married or cohabitating for at least 6 months, (ii) both partners willing to participate and (iii) both partners between the ages of 18 and 65. Eligible couples who expressed interest in the study were sent an envelope containing two sets of questionnaires to be completed independently by the partners. Individuals returned their questionnaires in separate, postage-paid envelopes. Couples were paid \$10 for their participation after both partners' questionnaires were returned. Of the 91 sets of questionnaires that were mailed out, 64 (68%) were returned by both partners.

### Measures

**Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ).** The DEQ (Blatt et al., 1976) is a self-report inventory measuring dependency and self-criticism. The scale contains 66 items representing experiences often reported by clinically depressed individuals, but that are not symptoms of depression. Blatt et al. (1976) factor analyzed the items and obtained three dimensions that they labeled Dependency, Self-criticism and Efficacy. The latter component reflects a general sense of well-being that is negatively correlated with measures of depressive symptoms (Blatt et al., 1982): this scale was not used in the present study. The DEQ demonstrates high test-retest reliability in samples of male

and female college students (Zuroff, Moskowitz, Wielgus, Powers, & Franko, 1983) and acceptable construct validity (Blatt et al., 1982).

The majority of researchers scored the DEQ using the factor weight method proposed by Blatt et al. (1976). We adopted this method to ensure comparability with other research. Self-criticism scores were calculated using Blatt's factor weights. Because of the methodological concerns raised about Blatt's dependency items, we used the factor weights that Rude and Burnham (1995) obtained in their analyses of the DEQ to score neediness. In our previous study, the neediness subscale showed acceptable construct validity (Whiffen et al., in press).

Scores on all of the individual items were first converted to *z*-scores, then multiplied by the appropriate factor weights and summed. As a result of using orthogonal factor weights, the mean for the self-criticism and neediness subscales is approximately 0, and the standard deviation is approximately 1. All DEQ items were used to score both subscales. The alpha coefficients for the DEQ in this sample were .76 for wives and .70 for husbands.

**Miller Social Intimacy Scale (MSIS).** The MSIS (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982) is a 17-item questionnaire assessing the extent to which the participant is self-disclosing and seeks intimacy in a specific relationship. Participants were asked to rate themselves in interaction with their spouses. Items are rated on a 10-point scale, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of intimacy. Six items are rated in terms of frequency (i.e. 'How often do you confide very personal information to him/her?' is rated from 'very rarely' to 'almost always'); and 11 items are rated in terms of intensity (i.e. 'How close do you feel to him/her most of the time?' is rated from 'not much' to 'a great deal'). Test-retest reliability over a 2-month interval was reported at  $r = .96$  (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982). There also is evidence of discriminant validity in that scores discriminated close from casual friends and happily married from distressed couples (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982). The alpha coefficients for the MSIS were .86 for wives and .88 for husbands in our sample.

**Comprehensive Areas of Change Questionnaire (CAC).** The CAC (Mead, Vatcher, Wyne, & Roberts, 1990) is an 82-item inventory designed to assess marital complaints in 29 categories. In the present study, we used this questionnaire to operationalize the construct of 'spousal complaints', because it was designed to assess the degree to which spouses want changes in their partner's behavior. The CAC asks spouses to indicate which among a list of behaviors they would like their partners to change. Each item follows the stem question, 'I want my partner to . . .', for example, 'prepare meals on time'. The CAC shows high test-retest reliability, and differentiates maritally distressed from non-distressed couples (Mead et al., 1990). The alpha coefficients for wives' complaints about their husbands and for husbands' complaints about their wives were .95 and .94, respectively, in this sample.

**Beck Depression Inventory (BDI).** The BDI (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979) is a frequently used self-report measure of the severity of depressive symptoms. The BDI has demonstrated good convergent validity with psychiatric ratings of depressive symptoms in both clinical and community samples (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988). The alpha coefficient for the BDI in this sample was .90 for both husbands and wives.

## Results

**Participant characteristics**

In Table 1 we report the participants' demographic characteristics, separately for women and men. On average, the couples were in their early 30s and had been married or cohabiting for 8 years. Thirty-six percent of the women and 13 percent of the men were not employed outside their homes. The occupational status score reported in Table 1 combines information about the average salary and education level of individuals occupying various jobs into a single score (Blisshen, Carroll, & Moore, 1987). The average status score for working participants corresponded to that for white collar, middle management occupations. The majority of men and women had at least some post-secondary education. Half of the couples reported an annual family income that was near the median for Canadian families. Thus, this sample was well-educated and of middle socioeconomic status.

In Table 1, we also report the means and standard deviations for the husbands and wives on the study variables. Husbands' and wives' scores on these variables were compared using paired group *t*-tests. These analyses showed that the women perceived themselves to be more intimate with their husbands than did the husbands with their wives. Wives also reported more complaints about their spouses. We did not find a sex difference in depressive symptom levels.

**Do self-criticism and neediness have distinct interpersonal correlates?**

The correlations among the variables are reported in Table 2. The correlations in the two triangles are those between the participants' variables, whereas the correlations in the rectangle are those between the partners' variables.

**Correlations between partners.** Consistent with our predictions, self-critical men and women tended to be married to individuals who reported more complaints about them. However, spousal complaints were not associated with

**TABLE 1**  
**Means and standard deviations on the demographic and study variables**

	Women ( <i>n</i> = 64)		Men ( <i>n</i> = 64)		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	(SD)	<i>M</i>	(SD)	
Demographics					
Age (years)	32.4	(9.7)	34.7	(10.0)	
Years married	7.7	(7.9)			
Occupational status	42.4	(13.8)	46.8	(13.4)	
Employed (%)	64.1		76.6		
Family income <sup>a</sup> < \$40,000 (%)	42.2		33.8		
Post-secondary education (%)	57.9		56.3		
Study variables					
Complaints about spouse	28.3	(22.1)	20.9	(19.9)	2.67**
Intimacy with spouse	8.0	(1.1)	7.6	(1.2)	2.71**
Beck Depression Inventory	8.8	(8.1)	7.4	(7.5)	1.44

<sup>a</sup> As reported by each spouse.

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

**TABLE 2**  
**Correlations among husbands' and wives' personality and interpersonal behavior**

	Husbands					Wives				
	SC	NE	INT	CP	BDI	SC	NE	INT	CP	BDI
Husbands										
Self-criticism	1.0									
Neediness	.66**	1.0								
Intimacy	-.21	.06	1.0							
Complaints	.45**	.18	-.24	1.0						
BDI	.47**	.34**	-.20	.39**	1.0					
Wives										
Self-criticism	.27*	.01	-.23	.25**	.22	1.0				
Neediness	.08	-.13	-.31*	.07	.19	.62**	1.0			
Intimacy	-.20	.01	.52**	-.21	-.37**	-.32*	-.30*	1.0		
Complaints	.34**	.13	-.41**	.45**	.51**	.43**	.28*	-.55**	1.0	
BDI	.24	.22	-.36**	.30**	.49**	.55**	.34**	-.51**	.56**	1.0

*Notes:* Intimacy = Miller Social Intimacy Scale; Complaints = Areas of Change Questionnaire; BDI = Beck Depression Inventory.

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

targets' neediness. Similarly, needy women tended to be married to men who reported low levels of intimacy in their marriages. The correlation between husbands' neediness and wives' intimacy was not significant. Again, spousal intimacy was not correlated with targets' self-criticism. Thus, the zero-order correlations indicated that self-criticism and neediness have distinct interpersonal correlates. Interestingly, ratings of self-criticism, intimacy, spousal complaints and depressive symptoms tended to be positively correlated within dyads, indicating that the spouses tended to report similar levels of these variables.

**Correlations within individuals.** Turning to the within-subject correlations, we found that self-criticism for men and women was related to the report of more complaints about their partners. In addition, self-criticism for women was related to less intimacy with their husbands. Thus, for women, self-criticism was associated both with less intimacy and with more marital complaints. Contrary to our prediction, men's neediness was not associated with how intimate they perceived their marriages to be. However, more needy women reported that they were both less intimate with their husbands and had more complaints about them than did women low in neediness. In this sample, neediness and self-criticism were moderately to highly correlated for both men and women.

#### **Do spousal variables moderate the association between personality and depression?**

First, we tested the hypothesis that spousal variables moderate the association between personality and depressive symptoms. Spousal variables would moderate the association if individuals are at greater risk for depression when their

partners' self-reports match their personality vulnerability. Consistent with Baron and Kenny's recommendation (1986), moderator effects were tested with hierarchical multiple regression equations (HMRs) predicting depressive symptoms. First, personality was entered into the regression equation, followed by the matching spousal variable, and finally by the interaction between personality and the spousal variable. Significant interaction terms were explored further to determine the source of the interaction. High, average, and low levels of the variables were estimated by calculating the mean and by either adding or subtracting 1 standard deviation. These values were substituted into the regression equation, which was then used to predict BDI scores at all possible combinations of high, average and low levels of the interacting variables (Aiken & West, 1991).

Because the results of HMRs are highly sensitive to outliers, we tested for outliers before conducting our analyses. An outlier was defined as an individual whose score was greater than  $\pm 3$  standard deviations from the sample mean. We found four men who were outliers on the neediness subscale, the MSIS, or the BDI, and two women who were outliers on the MSIS or the BDI. These participants' scores were deleted only for analyses that included the variable on which they were outliers.

The neediness and self-criticism scores were moderately to highly correlated in our sample (see Table 2). As a result, we checked the stability of our results by re-running all analyses while controlling for the 'other' personality dimension (i.e. we tested self-criticism and spousal complaints effects while controlling for neediness). The results we obtained with and without the controls were identical. Below, we report the results only for the uncontrolled analyses.

Separate analyses were conducted for men and women (see Table 3). First, we tested the hypothesis that spousal complaints moderate the association between self-criticism and depression. Both husbands' and wives' depressive symptoms were predicted only by their own self-criticism scores. Spousal complaints and the interaction terms were not significant in either equation. Thus, the association between self-criticism and depression was not moderated by spousal complaints.

Next, we tested the hypothesis that spousal intimacy moderates the associa-

**TABLE 3**  
**Hierarchical multiple regression equations predicting depressive symptoms from personality and spousal behavior**

	Husbands				Wives			
	<i>r</i>	<i>pr</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>pr</i>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>F</i>
Self-criticism	.48**	.27*	.35	31.56***	.53**	.44***	.41	47.71***
Spousal complaints	.51**	.18	.02	1.84	.31*	.02	.00	< 1
Interaction term	.50**	.07	.00	< 1	.28*	.11	.01	< 1
Neediness	.35*	.47***	.27	21.23***	.31*	-.09	.08	4.87*
Spousal intimacy	-.37*	-.40**	.12	11.49***	-.37*	-.19	.02	1.64
Interaction term	.33*	-.42**	.11	11.90***	.27*	.13	.01	< 1

*Notes:* *F*-value is that associated with the change in  $R^2$ . *r* = zero order correlation with depressive symptoms; *pr* = partial correlation with depressive symptoms;  $\Delta R^2$  = change in  $R^2$  when variable entered into equation.

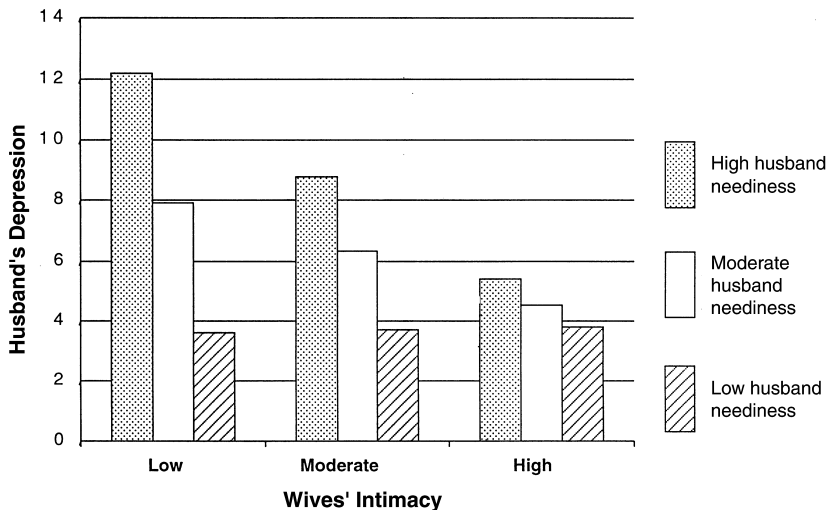
\*  $P < .05$ ; \*\*  $P < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $P < .001$ .

tion between depressive symptoms and neediness (see Table 3). Wives' depression was predicted by their neediness only; neither their husbands' intimacy nor the interaction term contributed significantly to the equation. For men, both their neediness and their partners' intimacy scores were predictors of depressive symptom levels. In addition, the interaction term was significant. Exploration of the interaction indicated that wives' intimacy level moderated the association between husbands' neediness and their depressive symptoms (see Figure 1). When women reported high levels of intimacy in their marriages, their husbands tended to have low levels of depressive symptoms, regardless of their levels of neediness. However, moderately to highly needy men were more likely to feel dysphoric when their wives perceived their marriages to be less intimate.

### Does personality mediate the association between the spousal variables and depressive symptoms?

Alternatively, we proposed that spousal variables may contribute indirectly to depression by elevating levels of the vulnerability factor. For instance, spousal complaints may elevate targets' self-criticism, which subsequently increases their depressive symptoms. In this case, self-criticism would mediate the association between spousal complaints and depressive symptoms. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), the following conditions must be met for mediation to be demonstrated: (i) spousal complaints must be correlated with targets' depressive symptoms; (ii) self-criticism must be correlated with spousal complaints; and (iii) when spousal complaints and self-criticism are entered simultaneously into a MR equation predicting targets' depressive symptoms, the partial correlation between spousal complaints and targets' depressive symptoms must be smaller than the zero order correlation. Consistent with conditions (i) and (ii), spousal complaints were correlated with targets'

**FIGURE 1**  
**Husbands' depression as a function of wives' intimacy and husbands' neediness**



depressive symptoms for both sexes, and spousal complaints were associated with targets' self-criticism for both sexes (see Table 2).

To test the mediating hypothesis, we regressed depressive symptoms onto spousal complaints and targets' self-criticism, separately for the husbands and wives. The equation predicting husbands' depressive symptoms was significant,  $F(2,58) = 15.83$ ,  $p < .01$ , and accounted for 35 percent of the variance in husbands' depressive symptoms. When both variables were in the equation, the partial correlation between spousal complaints and husbands' depressive symptoms was no longer significant ( $pr = .17$ ). Similarly, the equation predicting wives' depressive symptoms was significant,  $F(2,59) = 20.34$ ,  $p < .01$ , and accounted for 41 percent of the variance in depressive symptoms. Again, the partial correlation for spousal complaints was no longer significant once self-criticism was in the equation ( $pr = .06$ ). Thus, our findings suggested that spouses' complaints about their partners may increase risk for depressive symptoms indirectly by increasing self-criticism.

Next, we tested the mediating hypothesis for wives' neediness and husbands' intimacy. Husbands' intimacy was negatively correlated with both their wives' depressive symptom levels and their wives' neediness (see Table 2), fulfilling conditions (i) and (ii) of Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure. When we entered husbands' intimacy and wives' neediness simultaneously, the regression equation was significant,  $F(2,59) = 5.09$ ,  $p < .01$ , and accounted for 15 percent of the variance in wives' depressive symptoms. The partial correlation between husbands' intimacy and wives' depression was no longer significant ( $pr = -.23$ ). Thus, low levels of husbands' intimacy appear to increase wives' neediness and, indirectly, their depressive symptom levels.

## Discussion

The present study had two goals: first, to determine whether neediness and self-criticism are associated with distinct marital environments and, second, to evaluate two pathways by which these environments may be related to personality and depressive symptoms. The first alternative, the moderating hypothesis, is derived from Blatt's (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992) perspective. We reasoned that personality vulnerability may be more strongly linked to depressive symptoms when the spouse's behavior matches the vulnerability. The second possibility, the mediating hypothesis, is derived from Coyne and Whiffen's (1995) suggestion that matching spousal behavior may elevate levels of the vulnerability factor, which then increases depressive symptoms indirectly.

The data for neediness in men were supportive of the moderating hypothesis. Men's neediness was not associated consistently with the marital context: needy men were married to women who varied in the level of intimacy they perceived in their marriages. Moreover, the relationship between men's neediness and their depressive symptoms was moderated by the levels of intimacy reported by their wives. High levels of neediness in men were not associated with high levels of depressive symptoms if their wives perceived their marriages to be very intimate. However, when the wives of moderately to highly needy men perceived their marriages to be less intimate, their husbands were more likely to report depressive symp-

toms. This finding supports Blatt and Zuroff's (1992) contention that personality interacts with matching life stress to produce depression.

Our results also are consistent with the research of Brown and Harris (1978), who demonstrated that, among women, having an intimate relationship with a boyfriend or husband lowered the risk of depression in the face of life stress. Our findings indicate that intimacy with their wives is similarly protective for men. Intimacy with the spouse may be critical in predicting whether needy men become depressed because men are less likely than women to have intimate relationships outside of their marriages (Dindia & Allen, 1992). This finding also may partially explain why married men are generally at low risk for depression (Gove, 1972) because women, on average, create more intimate relationships than do men (Dindia & Allen, 1992). Therefore, on average, married men may be protected from developing depression by having intimate relationships with their wives.

The results for self-criticism and for neediness in women were congruent with the mediating hypothesis. Self-critical individuals inhabit marriages that are characterized by self-criticism and complaints about the spouse on the part of both partners. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that self-critics report poor interpersonal functioning characterized by hostility (e.g. Alden & Bieling, 1996; Zuroff, 1994). In addition, they are consistent with our previous report that the spouses of self-critics feel maritally distressed and criticize their partners (Whiffen et al., in press). In the present study, our analyses were consistent with the hypothesis that spousal complaints have a direct impact on self-criticism, which then increases vulnerability to depressive symptoms. Support for the mediating hypothesis is consistent with other research indicating that individuals recovering from clinical depression are at elevated risk for relapse if their spouses are critical of them (cf. review by Coiro & Gottesman, 1996). Our research adds to this literature by suggesting a mechanism by which spousal criticism may be depressogenic: specifically, spousal criticism may elevate self-criticism.

Women's neediness was associated with reports by both spouses that the marriage was less intimate, and with the women's reports that they had many complaints about their husbands. This pattern is intriguing because, on the surface, it appears to be inconsistent with theoretical descriptions of needy persons as actively seeking the love and approval of significant others (e.g. Andrews, 1989; Blatt, 1974).

However, our results are not necessarily at odds with previous reports that needy persons are compliant, yielding, influenceable, and have difficulties being assertive in close relationships (Bornstein, 1992; Fichman et al., 1994). These interpersonal behaviors may be aspects of 'silencing the self' that was proposed by Jack (1991) as an alternative way of conceptualizing neediness. 'Silencing the self' occurs when individuals inhibit the expression of negative emotions, particularly anger, in intimate relationships. Jack proposed that self-silencing is motivated by a desire to avoid conflict, which is believed to threaten the relationship. However, self-silencing has

the ironic consequence of impeding the development of intimacy because the self-silencer is not being herself in the relationship. Without the authentic communication of emotions and opinions, the partner cannot really know the self-silencer. We propose that our results can be understood within this framework. Needy women may behave in ways that avoid conflict with their spouses (i.e. compliance), but that ultimately impede the development of intimacy. In addition, they may not express their complaints about their partners, which would interfere with the resolution of difficulties. In all likelihood, both spouses' interpersonal behavior creates a feedback loop that maintains the negative interaction cycle in which the wife is emotionally needy but complaining and the husband is emotionally withdrawn. A similar interaction pattern, blame-withdraw, is commonly observed in the marital distress literature (Johnson, 1996), and may be linked to depression (Fruzzetti, 1996).

Consistent with the mediating hypothesis, low levels of spousal intimacy appeared to have an impact on women's levels of neediness. Thus, for women, marriage to a non-disclosing spouse may raise concerns about the availability and emotional responsiveness of their husbands. Such concerns may then elevate levels of self-reported neediness.

While our results were consistent with the moderating hypothesis for neediness in men, and with the mediating hypothesis for self-criticism and neediness in women, it is important to point out that our data were cross-sectional. As a result, we can conclude only that the data are consistent with the causal pathways we proposed. Other possibilities were not eliminated. For instance, husbands of needy women may experience their wives' emotional needs as overwhelming, with the result that they withdraw emotionally. Similar alternative scenarios could be hypothesized for each of the effects that we demonstrated. A longitudinal study is required to fully test our hypotheses about the causal relations among spousal behavior, targets' personality, and targets' depressive symptoms.

Additional limitations also should be noted. First, we relied on self-report data to assess both depression and the marital variables. While the Beck Depression Inventory is a widely used measure of depressive symptoms, it does not measure clinical depression, which may differ from elevated symptom levels in important ways (Coyne, 1994). Similarly, self-reports of complaints and intimacy measure perceptions of marital processes that may differ from what researchers might observe. For instance, we do not know the extent to which spouses express their complaints about their partners. Second, our sample was self-selected and non-clinical. However, the processes we are exploring should be more evident in clinical samples of either depressed persons or maritally distressed couples. We urge other investigators to replicate and extend our study, particularly with clinical samples.

Despite these limitations, our study adds to the existing literature linking personality vulnerability to specific interpersonal contexts. We found that, among men, neediness is associated with depression only in the context of a marriage that lacks intimacy. This finding may partially explain why

neediness in men is not consistently associated with depressive symptoms (Rude & Burnham, 1995; Whiffen et al., in press). Self-criticism and neediness in women are linked to the interpersonal context in a different manner: matching spousal behavior appears to elevate levels of the personality vulnerability which then increases depressive symptoms. Thus, self-critics tend to be married to people who have many complaints about them, and needy women tend to be married to men who report low levels of marital intimacy. To some extent, then, an individual's self-criticism or neediness may be a realistic response to a distressing interpersonal context. Our results underscore the importance of understanding the interpersonal context in which depression occurs.

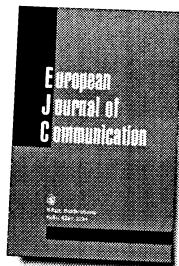
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