

---

# Tempting Today, Troubling Tomorrow: The Roots of the Precarious Couple Effect

William B. Swann Jr.  
Jennifer Guinn Sellers  
Katie Larsen McClarty  
*University of Texas–Austin*

---

*The precarious couple effect occurs when men pair with women who are both critical and more verbally disinhibited than them. Evidence that dissatisfaction runs high in such relationships makes one ask why people enter them in the first place. In Study 1, respondents recalled that past partners who were verbally disinhibited were relatively active in initiating the relationship. In Study 2, verbally inhibited men evidenced ambivalence in that they disliked disinhibited women more than inhibited ones but these feelings of disliking did not translate into expectations of feeling tense during the interaction. Study 3 revealed that initial interactions between inhibited men and disinhibited women go smoothly unless (a) the women are critical and (b) the pair discusses a stressful topic. The authors suggest that members of precarious couples are drawn to one another because, in initial encounters, their communication styles are relatively symbiotic. Alas, this initial chemistry does not always endure.*

---

**Keywords:** relationships; verbal inhibition; social; personality

**T**he very same choices that are functional in the short run may prove disastrous in the long run. Although most people readily acknowledge the veracity of this principle, many routinely ignore it when making important life decisions. The “precarious couple effect” may represent one example of this phenomenon. The effect occurs when verbally inhibited men pair with verbally disinhibited women who also happen to be critical, producing relationship disharmony (Swann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2003). In this report, we suggest that people may be drawn into such relationships by some of the very same factors that prove problematic later on. In particular, just as the communication styles of members of precarious couples may be symbiotic during initial encounters, later when partners encounter stress, these same communication styles may sew the seeds of relationship discord.

## *Verbal Inhibition in Social Interaction*

Virtually all humans possess a basic desire to connect to others. Nevertheless, the extent to which they use language to forge these connections varies considerably. At one end of a continuum, verbally disinhibited persons translate their every thought and feeling into words quickly and without hesitation. At the other end, verbally inhibited persons are relatively slow and reluctant to say what is on their minds.

Swann and Rentfrow (2001) developed a scale to measure these individual differences. Disinhibitors tend to express themselves as soon as thoughts occur to them, endorsing items such as, “I speak my mind as soon as a thought enters my head.” At the opposite end of the verbal inhibition continuum, inhibitors are relatively slow in responding to others, endorsing items such as, “If I disagree with someone, I tend to wait until later to say something.” The verbal inhibition measure has desirable psychometric properties, including internal consistency and temporal stability (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Scores on this measure are independent of intelligence, social desirability, and gender of the participant. Verbal inhibition is broader than emotional expressiveness because disinhibitors are just as quick and loquacious in expressing their beliefs and opinions about abstract ideas as they are in expressing their emotions (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Verbal inhibition also differs from responsiveness as that construct is typically construed.

---

**Authors’ Note:** We thank Jane Richards for helpful comments on this work and Jeff Potter for his assistance in obtaining participants for Study 1. This research was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Mental Health (MH57455) to William B. Swann Jr. Address correspondence to William B. Swann Jr., Department of Psychology, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712; e-mail: swann@mail.utexas.edu.

*PSPB*, Vol. 32 No. 1, January 2006 93-103

DOI: 10.1177/0146167205279584

© 2006 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.

That is, whereas some (e.g., Gottman, 1982; Stern, 1977) have restricted the use of responsiveness to responses that are both positive and contingent (e.g., reacting in ways that are appropriate given the context), disinhibited responding may include responses that are negative (e.g., verbally abusive remarks) or unprovoked (e.g., inappropriate comments). Verbal inhibition is also narrower than psychological reticence, which consists of six components, such as shyness, withdrawal, and fear of negative evaluations (e.g., Kelly et al., 2002).

Correlations with the Big Five traits (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999) reveal that verbal inhibition is a blend of Extraversion and Neuroticism. That is, verbal inhibition was moderately related to both Extraversion and Neuroticism and correlations with the other Big Five traits (Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) were negligible (Swann et al., 2003). Correlations with the facets of Costa and McCrae's (1992) NEO-PI-R revealed a zero correlation between verbal inhibition and impulsivity, which is not surprising given that existing impulsivity scales focus on behaviors such as eating rather than verbalization. The only substantial correlation with a facet of the Big Five reflected a tendency for inhibitors to be less assertive than disinhibitors ( $r = .61$ ), a facet of Extraversion. Assertive people may be distinguished by their propensity to use the verbal channel as opposed to channels (e.g., nonverbal) that are less salient, more ambiguous, and easier to ignore. In support of this mediational argument, Swann and Rentfrow (2001) and Swann et al. (2003) found that the relation between their verbal inhibition measure and their criterion variables generally persisted when they controlled for assertiveness but the relation between assertiveness and the criterion variables dropped to zero when they controlled for verbal inhibition.

Scores on the verbal inhibition measure predict several distinct phenomena in the laboratory and field, ranging from one-on-one interactions in the laboratory to group interactions in classrooms (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). For example, during phone conversations between strangers, disinhibitors as compared to inhibitors responded to their partners more frequently, rapidly, and effusively. Moreover, the behaviors of disinhibitors led their interaction partners to ascribe a host of positive characteristics to them. Verbal inhibition scores also predicted how participants responded in emotionally neutral settings (classroom discussions and getting-acquainted conversations) as well as settings that triggered amusement or irritation. For example, when annoyed, disinhibitors verbalized their consternation, whereas inhibitors steamed in silence as their blood pressure soared.

Verbal disinhibition also tended to amplify participants' qualities. For example, those interacting with disinhibitors as compared to inhibitors found it easier to discern their sociability and intelligence. Similarly, objective judges' ratings of the emotional states of disinhibitors tracked their blood pressure more faithfully than did judges' ratings of the emotional states of inhibitors. These data thus offer converging evidence that verbal inhibition affects the interplay between people's overt behavior, physiological responses, and the impressions of others (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001).

#### *Verbal Inhibition and the Precarious Couple Effect*

Of greatest interest here is the influence of verbal inhibition on the quality of close relationships. Theoretically, if both partners are verbally disinhibited, both will respond rapidly and effusively to one another, fostering feelings of connection to one another. Similarly, if both partners are inhibited, both will feel gratified that their partner offers them space to respond thoughtfully. When partners differ in their level of verbal inhibition, however, difficulties may arise. Just as disinhibitors may think that the paucity of responses by inhibitors reflects lack of interest in the relationship, inhibitors may find disinhibitors overwhelming.

Some asymmetries in levels of verbal inhibition of relationship partners may be particularly problematic. A key consideration may be that the relative verbosity of disinhibitors allows them to dominate their partner verbally. This raises the possibility that men who pair with a relatively disinhibited woman may resent what they perceive as a violation of traditional gender role expectations. In fact, Carli and her associates (Carli, 1990; Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995) have reported that men derogate women who speak rapidly and with few hesitations, that is, verbally disinhibited women. We suspect that verbally inhibited men may be particularly resentful of verbally disinhibited women because the verbal reticence of such men may intensify their feeling of powerlessness when interacting with verbally dominant partners (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Rudman & Glick, 2001). In addition, if their verbally dominant partner is also critical, inhibited men may become especially disgruntled. That is, criticalness is not only intrinsically off-putting but it will be amplified, and thus more noticeable, in partners who are disinhibited (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001).

In support of this reasoning, in four studies, a man-more-inhibited effect emerged such that couples were dissatisfied when the man was more verbally inhibited than the woman (Swann et al., 2003). A precarious couple effect also emerged, wherein relationship quality was lowest when men were paired with relatively disinhibited women who were also critical. Finally, a recent study replicated both the man-more-inhibited and precarious

couple effects and showed that when one member of the couple encountered a stressor, the physiological systems of people in precarious couples were relatively slow to recover (Swann, McClarty, & Rentfrow, 2004).

Evidence that man-more-inhibited and precarious couples experience dissatisfaction raises an intriguing question: If such relationships are problematic, why do people initiate them? One possibility is simply that people do not recognize how inhibited their partner is. This seems unlikely in light of Swann et al.'s (2003) evidence that the precarious couple effect emerged not only when participants reported their own level of verbal inhibition but also when they estimated their partners' level of verbal inhibition. This suggests that people *are* aware of their partner's level of verbal inhibition. Such awareness, however, does not seem to dissuade them from entering and maintaining man-more-inhibited and precarious pairings.

We propose here that people are drawn into precarious pairings because such pairings satisfy important needs during the initial phases of relationships. The process may be set in motion when the self-confidence and verbal facility of disinhibited women leads them to initiate an interaction with an inhibited man. As they become more comfortable in the relationship, however, those women who are not only disinhibited but also critical may express their criticalness more and more, causing their partners to withdraw. For their part, inhibited men may enter relationships with disinhibited women with a very different set of sentiments. On one hand, because they find initial interactions taxing and stressful, they may be grateful that disinhibited women approach them and "take over" the interaction. This should foster a positive mood state, marked by relief and relative calm. On the other hand, they may be turned off by the verbal dominance of such women because such dominance activates their negative attitudes toward gender role violations. The problem may be exacerbated if the women's verbal disinhibition is accompanied by criticalness. Feeling that they are drowning in a sea of criticism, inhibited men may withdraw. This may be catastrophic for the relationship because male withdrawal is thought to send relationships into a downward spiral (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 1999).

If criticalness of disinhibited women does indeed play a key role in the demise of precarious couples, then it becomes important to identify the conditions under which it will prove problematic. Relatively stressful situations represent one possibility. That is, stressors may well induce critical women to express their negative sentiments toward the situation or partner. We will test this and related hypotheses in our research by having pairs of participants who are at risk for developing into precari-

ous couples interact in a stressful or nonstressful encounter.

### *Overview*

We conducted three studies to identify the roots of man-more-inhibited and precarious couples. The first two studies focused on the building block of precarious couples: man-more-inhibited couples. The results of these studies set the stage for the final investigation of the antecedents of precarious couples. Specifically, Study 1 was designed to document our assumption that disinhibited persons are relatively aggressive in initiating relationships but that when relatively disinhibited women pair with relatively inhibited men, both partners wind up being disenchanted with the relationship. Study 2 was designed to test the notion that after a brief interaction that was ostensibly a prelude to a longer one, inhibited men would express disliking for disinhibited women but that such disliking would not translate into tension among men (due to the calming effect of knowing that disinhibited women would do most of the talking in the upcoming interaction). Finally, in Study 3, we examined the impact of the stressfulness of the interaction on satisfaction with the interaction among unacquainted pairs who were, or were not, at risk for developing into precarious couples.

### STUDY 1: RETROSPECTIONS ON PAST RELATIONSHIPS WITH INHIBITORS AND DISINHIBITORS

#### *Methods*

*Participants.* Participants were 3,446 Internet users (2,254 women, 1,192 men) who had been involved in a close relationship. Each participant volunteered to complete an online questionnaire about their dating history at a Web site that features several psychological surveys ([www.outofservice.com](http://www.outofservice.com)). Racial makeup was 78% Caucasian, 8% Asian, 3.9% African, 3.6% Latino or Hispanic, .6% American Indian, and 5.9% No Category. The median reported age was 21. All the effects reported here were unchanged when we covaried out race and age.

*Materials and procedure.* Participants arrived at [outofservice.com](http://outofservice.com) by typing in the Web address or by following a link from another Web site. Once at [outofservice.com](http://outofservice.com), participants began by completing some demographic information and Swann and Rentfrow's (2001) measure of verbal inhibition. Participants were then asked to recall, in random order, either a verbal disinhibitor ("high blirter") or verbal inhibitor ("low blirter") from their dating history.

To ensure that participants could recognize disinhibitors from their past, high blirters were described as follows:

... tend to express themselves as soon as the thought occurs to them. They talk a lot and are not afraid to speak up. They tend to endorse items such as, "If I have something to say, I don't hesitate to say it" and "I speak my mind as soon as a thought enters my head."

In contrast, low blirters were described as follows:

... are relatively slow in responding to others. They talk sparingly and hesitate to speak up when something is on their mind. They tend to endorse items such as, "It often takes me awhile to figure out how to express myself" and "If I disagree with someone, I tend to wait until later to say something."

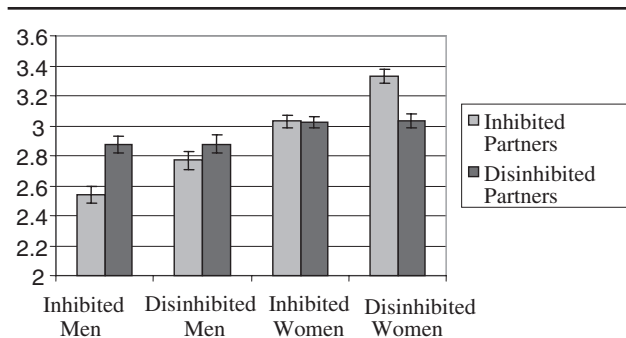
After reading either the high or low blirter profile, participants answered three questions in random order. One question asked participants to estimate, on a 5-point scale ranging from *none* to *all of them*, the number of such partners who "made the first move in initiating the relationship." Two questions asked participants to indicate, on 5-point scales ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, the extent to which such partners (a) were easy to begin a relationship with and (b) inspired feelings of resentment.

#### Results and Discussion

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a series of 2 (participant's verbal inhibition: high, low, as assessed by a median split)  $\times$  2 (gender: male, female)  $\times$  2 (verbal inhibition of the past relationship partner: high, low; a repeated measures variable) analyses of variances (ANOVAs) with the three survey items as dependent variables.

*Perceived aggressiveness in initiating the relationship.* Participants felt that verbal disinhibitors were especially apt to initiate the relationship and were easier to begin the relationship with. Specifically, participants indicated that relative to inhibitors, disinhibitors were more apt to make the first move,  $F(1, 2,405) = 582.67, p < .01, \eta^2 = .18$ , and seemed easier to initiate relationships with,  $F(1, 2,418) = 240.58, p < .01, \eta^2 = .09$ . The inhibition scores of participants had no effects, suggesting that both inhibitors and disinhibitors recognized these qualities in disinhibitors.<sup>1</sup>

*Estimated resentment while in the relationship.* Was there evidence of the man-more-inhibited effect demonstrated in previous research? Yes. The means plotted in Figure 1 are consistent with the predicted man-more-inhibited effect. Planned comparisons revealed that verbally inhibited men remembered being more resentful of disinhibited, as compared to inhibited, women,  $F(1, 2,393) = 17.07, p < .01$ , and verbally disinhibited women



**Figure 1** Resentment toward former partners in Study 1.  
NOTE: Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

remembered being more resentful of inhibited, as compared to disinhibited, men,  $F(1, 2,393) = 10.28, p < .01$ .<sup>2</sup>

The results of Study 1 provide some hints as to why inhibited men might wind up in relationships with disinhibited women. That is, our findings indicate that disinhibited persons are especially likely to initiate the relationship. Because inhibitors suffer from shyness and low self-esteem (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001), they should appreciate partners who are willing to make the first move in the relationship. Nevertheless, however symbiotic such pairings may be initially, past work on the man-more-inhibited effect suggests that the honeymoon may soon be over. In the next study, we focus on the possibility that one factor that may undermine such relationships is that inhibited men are quietly ambivalent about disinhibited women.

#### STUDY 2: ARE INHIBITED MEN AMBIVALENT TOWARD DISINHIBITED WOMEN?

Study 2 was designed, in part, to test the idea that male inhibitors might be of two minds when it comes to disinhibited women. On one hand, they may find the verbal dominance of such women threatening and dislikable (e.g., Carli, 1990; Carli et al., 1995). On the other hand, they may welcome the eagerness of such women to take over the conversation because it promises to alleviate their anxiety. The result may be that inhibited men's negative thoughts about disinhibited women are disjunctive with their feeling that such women are less nerve-wracking than inhibited women.

#### Methods

*Participants.* Mixed-sex pairs of students (55 men, 55 women) enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin participated in exchange for credit in introductory psychology. Racial makeup was 67% Caucasian, 18% Asian American, 10% Latino or Hispanic, 3% African American, 1% American Indian, and 1% Unreported. Members of each pair of participants were randomly assigned



to the role of perceiver or target. Data were analyzed for perceivers only because we assumed that the highly scripted behaviors of perceivers (who mechanically read questions from a preexisting script) would provide targets with little basis for recognizing and reacting to the levels of verbal inhibition they displayed. Preliminary analyses confirmed that the verbal inhibition scores of perceivers were unrelated to the perceptions of targets.

*Procedure.* To ensure that participants were not influenced by the physical attractiveness of the participants with whom they would be paired, we had members of each pair report to separate waiting areas. Upon arrival, they were escorted to a private cubicle. The experimenter introduced the study as an investigation of the getting-acquainted process in which one participant (the perceiver) would be interviewing another participant (the target) over a simulated telephone. The experimenter used a coin toss to assign participants to one or the other role.

Perceivers asked each of eight questions and waited until the target responded to each one before proceeding to the next one. The questions had been prepared in advance. They were designed to be interesting but not provocative (e.g., "What is your favorite color?" "Why did you come to UT?"). As soon as the target completed each response, the perceiver moved to the next question. Upon completion of the interview, participants completed Swann and Rentfrow's (2001) measure of verbal inhibition as well as the measures of likeability and emotional state.

*Cognitive reactions: Perceived likeability.* Participants rated the extent to which the target could be described by a list of words related to likeability (likeable, charming, respectable, positive, warm, abrasive, offensive, worthless, unimportant, and obnoxious) on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all descriptive*) to 10 (*very descriptive*). Negatively valenced words were recoded such that higher scores indicate higher levels of liking. These items were closely associated with one another ( $\alpha = .85$ ), which allowed us to sum them into a composite measure.

*Tense arousal versus energetic arousal (i.e., negative vs. positive affectivity).* After completing the packet of questionnaires, participants learned they would be interacting face-to-face with the person they just spoke to. Before the interaction, participants completed the PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), in which the instructions were reworded to assess their current, rather than chronic, mood state. Contrary to the common assumption that positive and negative affectivity represent opposite affective states, the two forms of affectivity are somewhat independent. The measure of negative affectivity taps "tense arousal," as captured by items such as jittery, afraid, upset, and nervous. The measure of positive

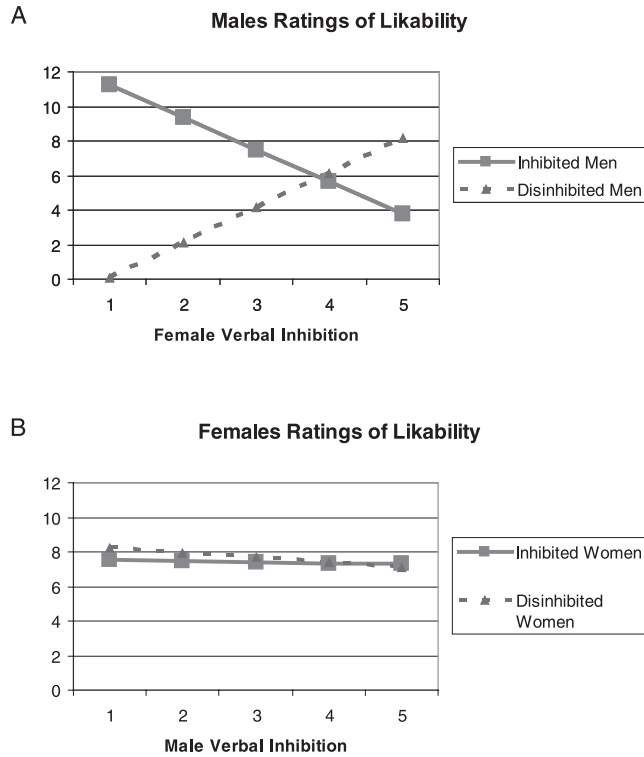
affectivity taps "energetic arousal," as captured by items such as inspired, strong, attentive, and alert. We accordingly averaged scores on the measure of negative affectivity separately from scores on the measure of positive affectivity. Upon completing these measures, participants were fully debriefed and excused.

### *Results and Discussion*

Were verbally inhibited men ambivalent about their anticipated interactions with verbally disinhibited women? Specifically, when such men were asked how they felt about the upcoming interaction, did they display high levels of disliking that were not matched by equally high levels of anticipated tension?

*Liking.* Our primary hypothesis was that, on the basis of an exceedingly brief interview, verbally inhibited men would like verbally inhibited women more than verbally disinhibited women. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a multiple regression in which the predictors were participant verbal inhibition, target verbal inhibition, and gender, with the first two factors entered as continuous variables, whereas gender was dummy coded. A marginally reliable three-way interaction emerged,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 47) = 3.25, p < .08, B = -1.80, R^2$  change = .11. Examination of men and women separately revealed a significant interaction between verbal inhibition and partner inhibition among men,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 24) = 6.50, p < .02, B = 3.27$ , but no such interaction among women,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 23) = .03, p < .87, B = -.283$ . As can be seen in the upper panel of Figure 2, verbally inhibited men liked inhibited women significantly more than disinhibited women,  $B = -1.16, t(24) = -2.14, p < .05$ , whereas disinhibited men liked disinhibited women more than inhibited women,  $B = 1.25, t(24) = 2.63, p < .02$ .<sup>3</sup> Hence, as predicted, verbally inhibited men disliked disinhibited women more than inhibited ones.

*Tense arousal (negative affectivity).* We expected that the disliking that inhibited men felt toward disinhibited women would not necessarily translate into feeling tense about the upcoming interaction with them. In particular, we suspected that although inhibited men might dislike disinhibited women in most contexts, in a getting-acquainted situation, such women would allay their anxiety by filling the air with an abundance of words. As a result, any discomfort that inhibited men might experience toward disinhibited women due to their feelings of dislike for such women may be neutralized by relief due to the willingness of such women to take charge of the conversation, thus taking inhibited men off the spot. In contrast, although inhibited men might be smitten by inhibited women in general, in a getting-acquainted situation, the verbal reticence of such women might exacerbate their nervousness. For these reasons, when it comes

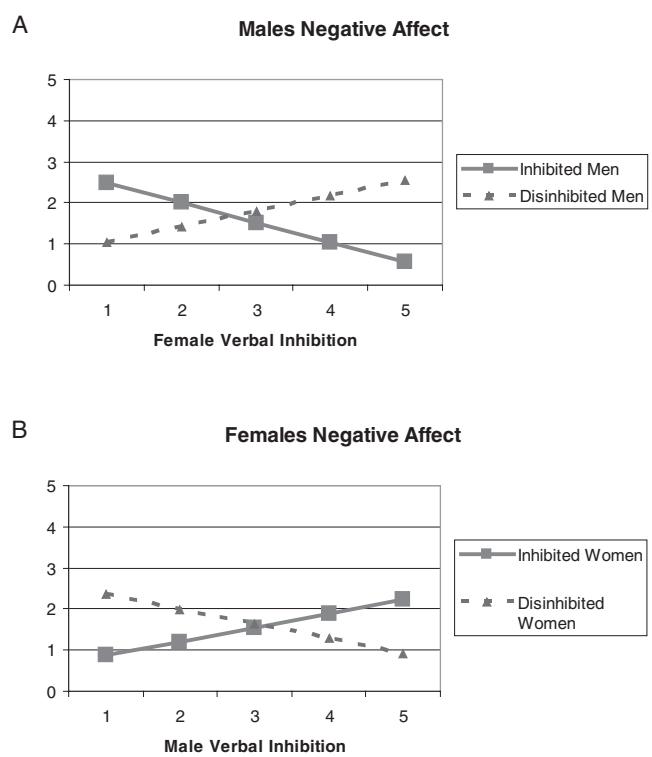


**Figure 2 Liking ratings in Study 2.**  
 NOTE: Inhibited and disinhibited groups were composed of participants 2 standard deviations below or above the mean, respectively.

to allaying the anxiety of inhibited men in getting-acquainted settings, disinhibited women may be equal to—or even superior to—inhibited women.

Analyses of the tense arousal (negative affectivity) variable supported our hypotheses. That is, in the eyes of inhibited men, disinhibited women were no longer out-classed by inhibited women as they were on the liking measure. A multiple regression revealed a significant three-way interaction between participant verbal inhibition, target verbal inhibition, and gender,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 47) = 6.18, p < .02, B = -10.37$ . Both sexes appeared to contribute to this interaction because when we examined them separately, both men and women showed modest (marginally significant, at best) interactions between verbal inhibition and partner inhibition,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 24) = 2.57, p < .12, B = 1.60$ , and  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 23) = 4.00, p < .057, B = -3.1$ , respectively.

As can be seen in the upper panel of Figure 3, verbally inhibited men experienced no more tension when expecting to interact with verbally disinhibited, as compared to verbally inhibited, women. In fact, if anything, there was a weak, nonsignificant trend for inhibited men to report more tension when they anticipated interacting with inhibited, as compared to disinhibited, women,  $B = -.90, t(24) = -1.56, p < .13$ . Less important, verbally



**Figure 3 Self-reported negative affect in anticipation of interacting with someone of the opposite sex in Study 2.**  
 NOTE: Inhibited and disinhibited groups were composed of participants 2 standard deviations below or above the mean, respectively.

disinhibited men displayed slightly (nonsignificantly) less tension when expecting to interact with inhibited women,  $B = .71, t(24) = 1.41, p < .17$ .

The data in the lower panel of Figure 3 show that women displayed a pattern that was nearly the opposite of men; that is, verbally disinhibited women displayed marginally more tension when anticipating interacting with verbally inhibited as compared to disinhibited men,  $B = -.87, t(23) = 1.82, p < .08$ , whereas verbally inhibited women displayed marginally more tension when anticipating an interaction with verbally disinhibited men than with verbally inhibited men,  $B = .83, t(23) = -1.82, p < .09$ .

Considered together with the liking data, the important finding here was that the feelings of disliking that verbally inhibited men had for verbally disinhibited women did not translate into feelings of tension toward them. In fact, if there was any tendency whatsoever, it was for inhibited men to feel less tense around disinhibited women (although this tendency did not reach conventional levels of significance). The important point here, then, is that the disliking that inhibited men had for disinhibited women was not accompanied by feelings of tension. Presumably, these mood states would make them relatively receptive to the overtures that the results

of Study 1 indicated that disinhibited people are apt to make.

*Energetic arousal (positive affectivity).* There were no main or interactive effects of the predictor variables on the measure of positive affectivity. This finding is important because it undermines a rival interpretation of our findings. That is, inhibited men may have reported relatively little tension (i.e., negative affectivity) when expecting interaction with disinhibited women because their dislike for such women made them lose interest and become apathetic about the forthcoming interaction. If our inhibited men simply did not care about disinhibited women, then their psychological withdrawal should have been reflected in low scores on our measure of energetic arousal or positive approach (i.e., positive affectivity). The lack of effects on this variable diminishes the plausibility of this rival hypothesis.

*Summary.* The results of Study 2 thus confirmed our hypothesis that inhibited men are ambivalent about interacting with disinhibited women: They do not like such partners but are relatively calm about the prospect of talking with such women in a getting-acquainted conversation. Disinhibited women expressed no such ambivalence about interacting with verbally inhibited men. In Study 3, we determined how these contrasting expectations played out during actual interactions between unacquainted people who were at risk for developing into precarious couples, that is, couples comprised of critical women and relatively inhibited men.

#### STUDY 3: WHICH UNACQUAINTED PAIRS COMMUNICATE AMICABLY ABOUT STRESSORS?

The results of Study 2 suggest that inhibited men may feel torn about interacting with disinhibited women because their feelings of disliking for such women did not translate into the tense mood states that are ordinarily associated with disliking someone. In contrast, it appears that inhibited men found inhibited women likeable but not particularly calming. Presumably, if during their interactions, disinhibited women do nothing to confirm the more negative of inhibited men's expectations, stress levels will remain low and harmony will reign. In contrast, if the interaction becomes stressful and one or both partners becomes testy, rapport may erode quickly, leaving dissatisfaction in its wake.

We tested these hypotheses by arranging interactions between previously unacquainted, opposite-sexed pairs who were, or were not, at risk for developing into precarious couples. Inspired by Willerman, Turner, and Peterson's (1976) suggestion that personality may be particularly evident when people are in situations that are personally challenging, we hypothesized that individual differences in communication styles would matter more

when couples were under stress than when they were not under stress. Specifically, we expected that among the couples discussing a stressful topic, man-more-inhibited and precarious pairings would result in less satisfaction with the interaction than other pairings.

#### *Method*

*Participants.* One hundred eighty-six undergraduates (93 mixed-sex pairs) participated in this study for partial fulfillment of course credit or \$7. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 29 ( $M = 19.29$ ). Racial makeup was 54% Caucasian, 24% Asian American, 14% Hispanic, 4% African American, and 3% Other or Unreported. All participants had completed Swann and Rentfrow's (2001) measure of verbal inhibition in a prescreening session earlier in the semester.

*Procedure.* Upon arrival, the experimenter welcomed unacquainted pairs of participants to a bright laboratory room with a couch and a video camera. The experimenter introduced the study as an investigation of social interaction. In the stress condition, the experimenter explained that the upcoming interaction would focus on the process of self-disclosure. Before beginning, participants learned that a coin toss would determine which of the participants would be assigned to the role of "listener" or "discloser." The experimenter then escorted the discloser to a separate room and asked him or her to identify for discussion a current life stressor (e.g., choosing a college major, adjusting to college life, homesickness, or problems with friends or roommates). The discloser and listener were then reunited and encouraged to discuss this stressor as naturally as possible. In the no-stress condition, the experimenter explained that the upcoming social interaction would focus on the getting-acquainted process. Participants learned that they would have 10 min to talk to each other about their major, hometown, interests, and so forth.

Ten minutes later, the experimenter returned with the measure of satisfaction. On three, 5-point Likert scales, participants indicated how much they liked the other participant, how satisfied they were with the interaction overall, and how much they would like to interact with the other participant in the future. Ratings on these three items were totaled to derive a satisfaction-with-the-interaction score ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Both participants completed the satisfaction measure in the low stress condition but only the discloser completed it in the high stress condition (the asymmetry of roles meant that, by design, only the discloser would experience the interaction as truly stressful).

Participants also completed Swann et al.'s (2003) measure of self-perceived criticalness. The measure of criticalness was derived from Murray, Holmes, and Griffin's (1996) Interpersonal Qualities Scale (IQS). Nine

items comprised the criticalness scale: critical and judgmental, complaining, moody, controlling and dominant, tolerant and accepting, kind and affectionate, warm, patient, and witty and humorous (the last five items were reverse-coded). The scale was dubbed “criticalness” because principal components analysis revealed that “critical and judgmental” had the highest factor loading. After completing these questionnaires, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

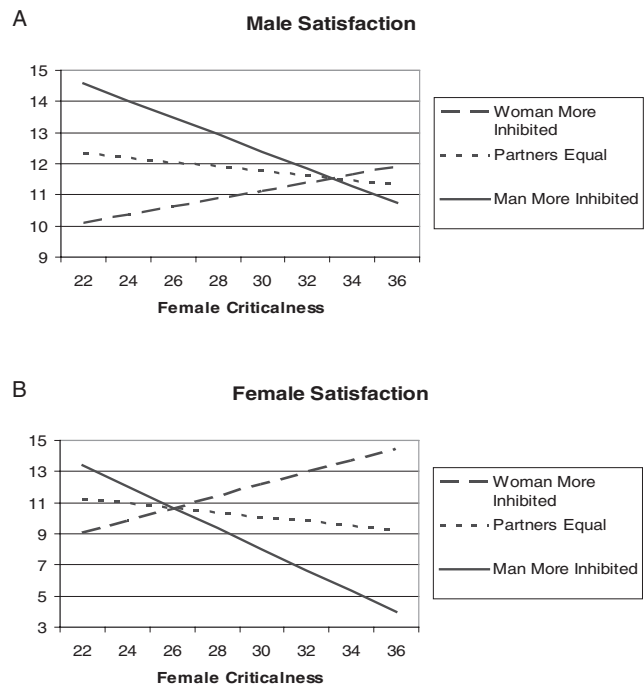
### Results and Discussion

Did the precarious couple effect emerge among our unacquainted dyads? Because both participants completed the satisfaction measure in the low stress condition and their responses may be interdependent, we conducted separate sets of regressions for men and women.

*What type of pairings fostered the most satisfying interactions?* The results supported the importance of personality in challenging situations. A multiple regression revealed a significant three-way interaction between verbal inhibition difference score (male – female), female criticalness, and stress (high-low, a dummy-coded variable).<sup>4</sup> This interaction was significant for both men,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 64) = 6.19, p < .016, B = 1.64, R^2$  change = .08, and women,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 60) = 4.81, p < .033, B = 1.66, R^2$  change = .05. To interpret this interaction, we looked at each stress condition separately.

*Low stress.* As predicted, within the no-stress, getting-acquainted group, there was no precarious couple effect. That is, satisfaction was not predicted by the interaction between verbal inhibition difference score and female criticalness for men,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 43) = 1.52, p < .23$ , or women,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 43) = .05, p < .83$ .

*High stress.* Within the stressful-discussion group, however, a precarious couple effect did emerge for both men,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 21) = 6.15, p < .023, B = 1.75, R^2$  change = .20, and women,  $R^2$  change  $F(1, 17) = 7.18, p < .02, B = 3.39, R^2$  change = .24. To plot the interaction, following Aiken and West (1991), we calculated the simple slope of verbal inhibition difference scores for pairs at the mean, 2 standard deviations above the mean, and 2 standard deviations below the mean. As can be seen in the upper panel of Figure 4, when men were more inhibited than women, satisfaction was lower for the men when the women were more critical. This simple slope was significantly different from zero,  $B = -.27, t(21) = -3.11, p < .006$ . In contrast, when the women and men had similar levels of inhibition or the women were more inhibited than the men, satisfaction was, at best, marginally related to the women’s level of criticalness,  $B = -.07, t(21) = -1.79, p < .09$ , and  $B = .13, t(21) = 1.37, p > .10$ .



**Figure 4** Male and female satisfaction in the high-stress condition of Study 3.

NOTE: The verbal inhibition difference score is based on scores that fall at the mean or 2 standard deviations above or below the mean.

As shown in the lower panel of Figure 4, a similar pattern of results emerged for women. When men were more inhibited than women, satisfaction was lower for women insofar as they were more critical. This simple slope was significantly different from zero,  $B = -.67, t(17) = -3.16, p < .006$ . Also, if the partners had similar inhibition levels, the satisfaction for women was lower when they were more critical,  $B = -.14, t(17) = -2.66, p < .02$ . When women were more inhibited than men, however, her level of criticalness was only marginally significant,  $B = .38, t(17) = 1.97, p < .07$ .

Finally, there also was evidence that the precarious couple pattern was gender specific. That is, there was no precarious couple effect when male criticalness was substituted for female criticalness, and it did not emerge when we examined male-female criticalness.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, our findings supported our major prediction. In particular, parallel to previous research with intact couples by Swann et al. (2003), a precarious couple effect emerged such that couples were dissatisfied in man-more-inhibited couples in which women were critical. As predicted, this precarious couple effect emerged only among participants who were having a stressful interaction.

Inspection of the figures reveals one finding that appears to clash with Swann et al.’s results, however: Men (and to a lesser extent, women) in the high-stress group seemed most satisfied in man-more-inhibited couples in



which the woman was noncritical. Why? In Study 2, the negative affectivity scores of the men suggest that during initial encounters, inhibited men may appreciate the eagerness of disinhibited, noncritical women to carry the conversation, thereby minimizing awkwardness during this phase of the relationship. At the same time, relatively disinhibited, noncritical women may enjoy interacting with relatively inhibited men because such men seem like good listeners. More generally, Swann and Rentfrow (2001) reported that in initial encounters, verbally disinhibited persons were generally perceived quite positively, owing to the tendency for verbal disinhibition to amplify positive qualities (such as the warmth, caring, witty, and humorous qualities that characterize low scorers on the criticalness scale). Of course, as such relationships progress, the charm of the man-more-inhibited pairings may fade somewhat as relatively inhibited men become disenchanted with their inability to get a word in edgewise and disinhibited women become frustrated by the inscrutability and unresponsiveness of inhibited men.

In summary, the primary contribution of this study is in demonstrating that precarious couples are most apt to experience difficulties when one member of the couple is attempting to cope with a stressor. In addition, the fact that participants in this research were previously unacquainted strengthens the case that the roots of disharmony in such couples reside in the communication patterns that characterize such couples rather than other qualities of such pairings.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION

We explored the antecedents of the precarious couple effect, wherein dissatisfaction reigns when men pair with women who are both critical and more verbally disinhibited than them. Taken together, our findings suggest that members of precarious couples are drawn to one another because their communication styles are symbiotic in initial encounters, but this symbiosis does not always persist. In particular, Study 1 illustrated that one advantage of verbally disinhibited persons was their willingness to "make the first move." Such data imply that it was the women in man-more-inhibited and precarious couples who initiated the relationship. The results of Study 2 suggested that inhibited men were ambivalent regarding disinhibited women. While indicating that they found disinhibited women relatively dislikable, they nevertheless acknowledged that they were no more anxious about having an initial interaction with such women as compared to their inhibited counterparts.

The ambivalence of relatively inhibited men toward disinhibited women notwithstanding, the results of Study 3 indicated that initial interactions between relatively inhibited men and disinhibited women often work

out. In fact, such pairings suffered from disharmony only when (a) the women were critical and (b) the pair discussed a stressful topic. Thus, although disinhibited women may run a relatively high risk for relationship disharmony, such disharmony is by no means inevitable.

Evidence of the role of stress and conflict in undermining the relationships of precarious couples is revealing. We suspect that stress triggers disharmony in precarious couples because it prompts critical women to become critical of the situation and their partner. When they do, their relatively inhibited partners experience difficulty rebutting them and instead withdraw. Male withdrawal can be devastating because it diminishes the chances that the reasons underlying the conflict will be fully recognized by the couple. Instead, male inhibitors may privately convict their partners of crimes that their partners do not even know that they have committed. In the end, this may send the relationship into the downward spiral that Gottman and his coworkers have argued is a key predictor of divorce (e.g., Carrère & Gottman, 1999; Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 1999). This reasoning suggests that the key problem with precarious couples is that their personalities interfere with successful conflict resolution and this, in turn, precipitates alienation and disaffection.

This discussion of the role of stress and conflict in relationship difficulties relates also to the more general question regarding the conditions under which personality is most apt to shape the outcome of social interactions. Our data support Willerman et al.'s (1976) contention that the effects of personality may be most evident when people are in situations that are personally challenging. Furthermore, our data also suggest that the personalities of members of couples may serve as the cause as well as an effect of relationship disharmony. That is, because the participants in Study 3 were unacquainted at the beginning of the study, it is clear that our participants' communication styles and women's criticalness caused their later satisfaction with the interaction rather than the other way around.

Those familiar with the literature on the role of personality in close relationships may wonder why the fit of the personality characteristics of our participants mattered despite the discouraging results of many previous explorations of this phenomenon (see Klohnen & Mendelsohn, 1998).<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the key was that we simultaneously explored a personality characteristic (verbal inhibition) and gender roles (e.g., Cattell & Nesselrode, 1967). For example, in Study 2, inhibited men disliked disinhibited women but disinhibited women were equally positive toward inhibited men. In addition, in Study 3, disharmony prevailed when men were paired with relatively disinhibited and critical women but satis-

faction reigned when women were paired with relatively disinhibited and critical men. One task for future researchers will be to specify more precisely the role of gender-role expectations in these and related phenomena.

Another factor that could have contributed to our success was our focus on a highly specific trait: verbal inhibition. In contrast, past researchers have focused on multifaceted traits, such as Extraversion. Because Extraversion has many components (e.g., warmth, gregariousness, activity level, excitement seeking, positive emotions, etc.), people may be matched on Extraversion but not on its specific components, and matches on specific components may prove to be the key to relationship satisfaction.

Finally, our success in relating verbal inhibition to relationship quality may have reflected the nature of verbal inhibition itself. For example, the effects of verbal inhibition do not disappear once people become acquainted, as the effects of related constructs such as shyness are known to do. Furthermore, because the verbal channel is critically important to regulating power and mutual influence, people may be particularly sensitive to their partner's position on this dimension, especially when that person is highly critical.

### Conclusions

The research reported here extends previous work in several ways. For example, our findings offer further evidence that people may sometimes become attracted to each other for the same reasons that undermine their relationship later on (Felmlee, 1995). Similarly, our results suggest that women who display social dominance (in the form of loquaciousness) may be caught between a rock and a hard place—if they find a man who indulges their desire to talk freely, they run an elevated risk of relationship disharmony. This finding parallels, and may help illuminate, evidence from the Adult Attachment literature suggesting that the most common—yet unhappy—pairing is a preoccupied woman and a dismissive man (e.g., Holmes, 2000; Mikulincer & Florian, 1999).

At a more general level, our results offer further evidence that measuring individual differences in verbal inhibition and criticalness offer a means of identifying, in advance, couples who are susceptible to communication difficulties. This finding goes beyond the notion that the personalities of people in relationships combine in a simple, additive fashion, as suggested by the personality-similarity hypothesis (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Klohnen & Mendelsohn, 1998). Rather, people's personalities combine synergistically, such that the qualities of one partner (e.g., criticalness of women or verbal inhibition

of men) are problematic only in combination with specific qualities of the other partner (e.g., Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000, 2002). Apparently, it is not that some relationship partners are deficient in some way, it is just that some personality characteristics lead to discord in the presence of other personality characteristics.

### NOTES

1. It is true that using a regression approach would have maximized power by allowing us to treat verbal inhibition scores as continuous. Nevertheless, an ANOVA is better suited for our repeated measures design and our sample of more than 3,000 participants diminished concerns about inadequate power. Also, although there were a few significant interactions between gender and verbal inhibition of the target, they were dwarfed by the main effects associated with the verbal inhibition of the target, which accounted for at least 90% of the systematic variance in every analysis.

2. The overall ANOVA also revealed significant interactions emerging between verbal inhibition of dating partner and participant sex,  $F(1, 2,393) = 20.20, p < .01, \eta^2 = .01$ , and also between verbal inhibition of dating partners and verbal inhibition of participants,  $F(1, 2,393) = 8.61, p < .01, \eta^2 = .004$ . Finally, the overall analysis also revealed that women remembered being more resentful of their past relationships than did men,  $F(1, 2,393) = 75.44, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$ .

3. As in the previous research on which the present research was based (Swann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2003), we tested the hypothesis that our predicted effects would emerge in dyads composed of participants whose verbal inhibition scores were clearly distinct. For this reason, throughout this report we decomposed the interaction by identifying persons whose verbal inhibition scores were 2 standard deviations above or below the mean of their groups instead of the less restrictive (1 SD) cutpoints discussed by Aiken and West (1991).

4. Although we could have treated the components of the verbal inhibition difference score as separate factors in our design as in Study 2, this strategy would have led to an unwieldy five-factor design that would have been susceptible to the interpretative difficulties imposed by collinearity effects. To avoid these problems, we treated the verbal inhibition scores of partners as difference scores.

5. Because criticalness was measured after the interaction, criticalness scores may have been influenced by events occurring during the interaction. Several considerations argued against this. First, the criticalness measure asked participants to rate themselves in general, not how they behaved in the interaction. Second, in principle, any tendency for participants to infer their criticalness level from their behavior ought to be a highly general one and it was not. In fact, the only instance in which both satisfaction and criticalness scores were depressed was among female disclosers who were less verbally inhibited than their partner, and satisfaction scores were not just low for women, they were also low for men, regardless of how critical such men were. Highly critical women did not express dissatisfaction when they were in the nondiscloser groups or the discloser groups but they were more inhibited than their male partners.

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

## REFERENCES

- Aiken, L. S., & West, S. G. (1991). *Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Berscheid, E., & Reis, H. T. (1998). Attraction and close relationships. In D. Gilbert, S. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (4th ed., Vol. 2, pp. 193-281). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Byrne, D. E. (1971). *The attraction paradigm*. New York: Academic Press.
- Carli, L. L. (1990). Gender, language, & influence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *59*, 941-951.
- Carli, L. L., LaFleur, S. J., & Loeber, C. C. (1995). Nonverbal behavior, gender, and influence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *68*, 1030-1041.
- Carrère, S., & Gottman, J. M. (1999). Predicting divorce among newlyweds from the first three minutes of a marital conflict discussion. *Family Processes*, *38*, 293-301.
- Cattell, R. B., & Nesselroade, J. R. (1967). Likeness and completeness theories examined by sixteen personality factor measures on stably and unstably married couples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *7*, 351-361.
- Condon, J. W., & Crano, W. D. (1988). Inferred evaluation and the relation between attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*, 789-797.
- Costa, P. T., Jr., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). *Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) professional manual*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Felmlee, D. H. (1995). Fatal attractions: Affection and disaffection in intimate relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *12*(2), 295-311.
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1999). Sexism and other "isms": Interdependence, status, and the ambivalent content of stereotypes. In W. B. Swann, J. H. Langlois, & L. A. Gilbert (Eds.), *Sexism and stereotypes in modern society: The gender science of Janet Taylor Spence* (pp. 193-221). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Gottman, J. (1982). Emotional responsiveness in marital conversations. *Journal of Communication*, *32*, 108-120.
- Gottman, J. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Gottman, J. M., & Krokoff, L. J. (1989). Marital interaction and satisfaction: A longitudinal view. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *57*, 47-52.
- Gottman, J. M., & Levenson, R. W. (1999). What predicts change in marital interaction over time? A study of alternative models. *Family Processes*, *38*, 143-158.
- Holmes, J. G. (2000). Social relationships: The nature and function of relational schemas. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *30*, 447-496.
- Houts, R., Huston, T. L., & Robins, E. (1996). Compatibility and the development of premarital relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *58*, 7-20.
- Ickes, W., & Barnes, R. D. (1978). Boys and girls together—and alienated: On enacting stereotyped sex roles in mixed-sex dyads. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *36*, 669-683.
- John, O. P., & Srivastava, S. (1999). The Big Five taxonomy: History, measurement, and theoretical perspectives. In L. A. Pervin & O. P. John (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (2nd ed., pp. 102-139). New York: Guilford.
- Kelly, L., Keaten, J., Finch, C., Duarte, I., Hoffmann, P., & Michels, M. M. (2002). Family communication patterns and the development of reticence. *Communication Education*, *51*, 202-209.
- Klohnen, E. C., & Mendelsohn, G. (1998). Partner selection for personality characteristics: A couple-centered approach. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *24*, 268-278.
- Mikulincer, M., & Florian, V. (1999). The association between spouses' self-reports of attachment styles and representations of family dynamics. *Family Process*, *38*, 69-83.
- Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Griffin, D. W. (1996). The benefits of positive illusions: Idealization and the construction of satisfaction in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*, 79-98.
- Plomin, R., Chipuer, H. M., & Loehlin, J. C. (1990). Behavioral genetics and personality. In L. A. Pervin (Ed.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (pp. 225-243). New York: Guilford.
- Robins, R. W., Caspi, A., & Moffitt, T. (2000). Two personalities, one relationship: Both partners' personality traits shape the quality of their relationship. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *79*, 251-259.
- Robins, R. W., Caspi, A., & Moffitt, T. (2002). It's not just who you're with, it's who you are: Personality and relationship experiences across multiple relationships. *Journal of Personality*, *70*, 925-964.
- Rudman, L. A., & Glick, P. (2001). Prescriptive gender stereotypes and backlash toward agentic women. *Journal of Social Issues*, *57*, 743-762.
- Stern, D. (1977). *The first relationship*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., McClarty, K. L., & Rentfrow, P. J. (2004). *Shelter from the storm? Experimental evidence that (some) romantic partners facilitate recovery from stress*. Manuscript submitted for publication, University of Texas at Austin.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., & Rentfrow, P. J. (2001). Blirtatiousness: Cognitive, behavioral and physiological consequences of rapid responding. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, *81*, 1160-1175.
- Swann, W. B., Rentfrow, P. J., & Gosling, S. G. (2003). The precarious couple effect: Verbally inhibited men + critical, disinhibited women = bad chemistry. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *86*, 1095-1106.
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, *54*, 1063-1070.
- Willerman, L., Turner, R. G., & Peterson, M. (1976). A comparison of the predictive validity of typical and maximal personality measures. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *10*, 482-492.

Received November 19, 2004

Revision accepted May 11, 2005