

# RELATE: Relationship Evaluation of the Individual, Family, Cultural, and Couple Contexts\*

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*The purpose of this article is to present the conceptual model underlying RELATE, a relationship evaluation instrument, and to describe how this instrument can be used by instructors, clinicians, and therapists. The RELATE model contains measures of the 4 primary contexts of a couple's experience: the individual, the family, the culture, and the couple. The model includes some of the primary variables in Gottman's marital cascade and has been evaluated for reliability and validity. Examples of how to use the instrument and model are illustrated for couples, educators, and clinicians.*

It is challenging to capture the dynamics of couple relationships. Scholars have used interviews, observations, surveys, tasks, and even physiological measures to attempt to understand the quality of relationships. One group of scholars, the RELATE Institute (RI, previously the Marriage Study Consortium), was formed in 1979 by a diverse group of researchers, clinicians, and educators, dedicated to the dual goals of strengthening and understanding premarital and marital relationships.

Over the last 20 years, members of the RI have grappled with trying to measure the complexities of adult romantic relationships from a variety of different angles. In addition, the RI has searched for ways to present data in a manner that is useful to couples and the family professionals who work with them. Through this endeavor, three versions of a comprehensive instrument and accompanying feedback tool have been published. The most recent version of the instrument is the **RELATIONSHIP** Evaluation Questionnaire (RELATE; Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997). This article describes the development of the conceptual model from which RELATE was derived and discusses how the model and instrument can be used by educators, clinicians, and researchers.

## The Development of the RELATE Model

The RELATE model was developed by reviewing over 50 years of research that delineated the important premarital predictors of later marital quality and stability. The comprehensive review of research on premarital predictors of marital quality by Larson and Holman (1994) was a foundational document for RELATE. Table 1 lists the main findings from this review. Since the 1994 review, new research indicated additional constructs to include in the model (Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). These new additions are listed in bold in the table. This

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list of constructs was used to develop items included in the instrument. The couple process model extensively studied and researched by Gottman, providing one of the best models for the prediction of marital success or failure, was included as part of the couple constructs. Over time, as new research emerges, the constructs in RELATE will continue to evolve.

Researchers have recently emphasized the need to develop relationship models that are more comprehensive and that include constructs that (a) target trait-like characteristics of partners, and (b) capture behavioral exchanges between partners (Bradbury, Campbell, & Fincham, 1995). Because of the comprehensive nature of RELATE, it contains extensive measures of both types of constructs, as well as measures of family background, culture, and values.

Whereas the initial scales included in the instrument came from existing research and from previous versions of RELATE, there is a conceptual model that organizes the numerous subcategories and suggests relationships between the constructs assessed via the scales. The systemic model underlying RELATE suggests that relationships are developed and maintained within a series of contexts or subsystems (Bradbury & Fincham, 1987, 1988, 1991), as noted in Figure 1. Although numerous contexts can be measured, the most important ones for premarital and marital relationships include the individual, familial, cultural, and couple contexts (Holman & Associates, 2000; Larson & Holman, 1994).

The individual context is a combination of inherent individual characteristics (e.g., gender, age, etc.), personality traits (e.g., sociability, volatility, kindness, flexibility, etc.), and beliefs and attitudes (autonomy, spirituality, beliefs about gender and roles, etc.).

Some of the important aspects of the familial context include the style and quality of the parents' couple relationship, the quality of the relationship of each parent with the children, and the stressors and trauma a family must endure. These aspects of the family create a family tone that can be mapped on a continuum from safe-predictable-rewarding to unsafe-chaotic-punishing.

The cultural context includes variables such as race, religion, socioeconomic status, and geography. Culture also includes the beliefs and values that are supported by social systems surrounding families and individuals.

The couple context is made up of interaction patterns that

Table 1  
*Premarital and Marital Variables Derived From the Literature Associated With Marital Quality*

Context	Subcategories	Constructs
Individual	Traits or characteristics	Gender Age Physical health
	Styles of interacting or behaving	Emotional maturity Self-esteem Depression (happiness) <b>Flexibility</b> <b>Calmness</b> <b>Sociability</b> <b>Kindness</b>
Family	Parents' relationship	Substance abuse Parental divorce <b>Parental marital style (validating, avoidant, volatile, hostile)</b>
	Parent-child relationship	Parental marital satisfaction Relationship with mother Relationship with father
	Family environment	Family status (step, adoptive, etc.) Family stress Family trauma and addictions <b>Family tone and influence</b> Support from parents and in-laws
Culture		Race Religion Occupation Education Income Support from social network
Couple	Interactional patterns	Empathy <b>Clear sending</b> <b>Regard-love</b> <b>Soothing</b> <b>Criticism</b> <b>Contempt</b> <b>Defensiveness</b> <b>Stonewalling</b> <b>Relational style (validating, avoidant, volatile, hostile)</b>
		Sexuality <b>Boundaries</b> <b>Possessiveness</b>
	Relational traits or behaviors	Physical and sexual coercion Length of the relationship Status of the relationship Cohabitation Pregnancy and childbirth <b>Problem areas</b>
	Homogamy-consensus	Consensus on values and attitudes Perceptions of partner Similarity on socioeconomic status, age, religion, and so forth
	Relational outcomes	Satisfaction Stability

Note: Items in bold represent new constructs added since the 1994 article by Larson and Holman.

can be measured in areas such as communication, conflict, sexuality, time together, and other shared activities. In general, these interaction patterns can be categorized as either positive or negative. As demonstrated in Gottman's (1994, 1999) work, the ratio of positive to negative experiences in the couple relationship is an important predictor of stability and satisfaction.

The Gottman model (1994, 1999) of marital interaction is embedded in the scales that represent the couple context. More specifically, Gottman demonstrated that couples progress down a cascade of ever-increasing distress that begins with criticism. Criticism leads to contempt, which in turn leads to defensive-

ness, and this leads to stonewalling (distancing). Couples who experience contempt also are likely to become physiologically aroused or flooded during conflict and are more prone to continue toward divorce. Couples who are able to soothe self and other during relationship conflict are better able to resist the downward cascade. Gottman identified four types of couples by the way they handled conflict. Three of the couple types—validating, avoidant, and volatile couples—can be enduring, functional styles. The fourth type, hostile couples, is an unstable relationship that is likely to result in high distress and divorce.

Although the Gottman model was developed using samples of married couples, evidence from preliminary analyses with pilot samples during the development of RELATE and from analyses in recent years with large premarital samples demonstrates that the scales derived to represent Gottman's cascade are distinct and reliable, that they explain couple satisfaction and stability well, and that they can be used with high rates of accuracy to discriminate between premarital couples who have a hostile conflict style and those who do not (Busby & Taniguchi, 2000; Holman & Jarvis, 2000; Taniguchi & Busby, 2000). In addition, because the age at first marriage is now as old as it has ever been for couples in the United States, 25 for women and 27 for men, and because many couples spend several years cohabiting or exclusively dating (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2000), it is likely that some of the patterns measured by the Gottman model will be present in most premarital relationships.

### *Interactions Between Contexts*

The conceptual model for RELATE shows that the individual, familial, cultural, and couple contexts are constantly influencing one another in a reciprocal manner. Whenever two individuals form a relationship, their unique contexts interact with and influence one another. Each relationship is made up of multitudinous differences and similarities between the partners and contexts. Understanding the meaning these differences and similarities hold for each partner is crucial for relationship decisions and satisfaction (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979).

The resulting instrument measures the current perceived relationship between these contexts and the person's satisfaction with these relationships. More specifically, a person may see herself as self-confident, kind, and able to communicate well with others. This may be related to a perception of encouraging and connective relationships in the family of origin and to a current relationship with a partner that also is satisfying. However, the partner may or may not see her in the same way and may be from a dissimilar familial or cultural context. In addition, the partner may see himself differently than he sees her and differently than she sees him. These differences and similarities may be implicit or explicit and may have positive or negative meanings to the partners. The instrument clarifies these perceptions and provides an awareness or consciousness to the couple that can help them explore their relationship more openly if they elect to do so.

The model in Figure 1 is designed to describe the general relationships between the major constructs measured in RELATE. The model suggests that the interpersonal contexts of family and culture influence the intrapersonal context of the individual. The individual, family, and cultural contexts, in turn, influence couple patterns. The patterns of interacting for the couple then determine the overall satisfaction and stability of the relationship.

Whereas the members of the RI also believe that relation-

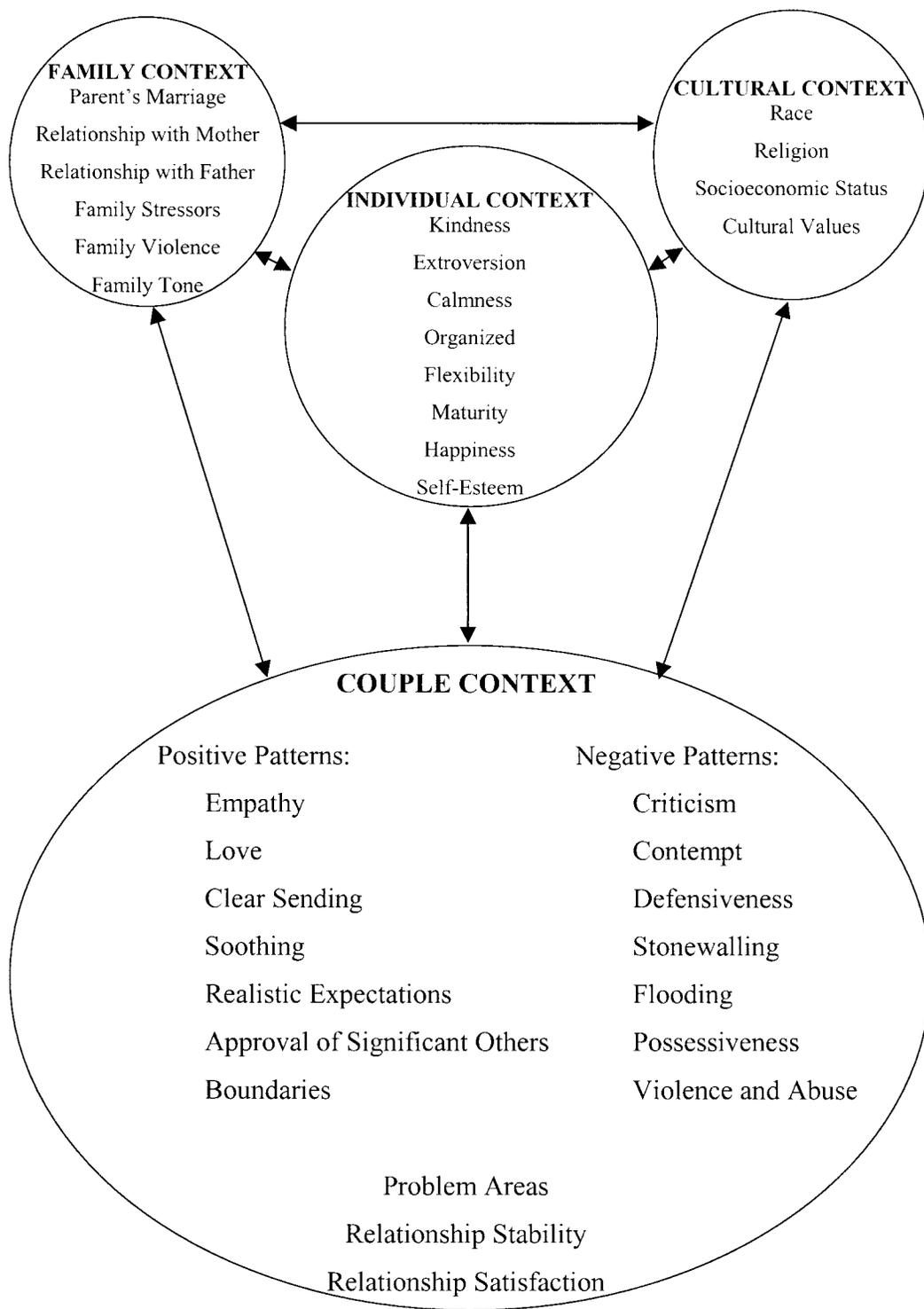


Figure 1. *The RELATE Model*

ships between contexts are reciprocal in nature, we now believe that the important influences of the individual, family, and cultural contexts primarily infiltrate the couple processes and are manifested in the unique relational styles of each couple. This does not mean that individual, family, and cultural backgrounds are unimportant; it simply means that these background qualities do not have a strong direct effect on the quality of the couple

relationship. Multiple studies with many different samples and instruments have demonstrated this principle repeatedly (Busby & Reichert, 2000; Holman, Larson, & Harmer, 1994; Holman et al., 2000; Levine & Busby, 1993).

Perceptions in the present are then both an evaluation of the current situation and a summation of the past. When a respondent answers a series of questions about empathy demonstrated

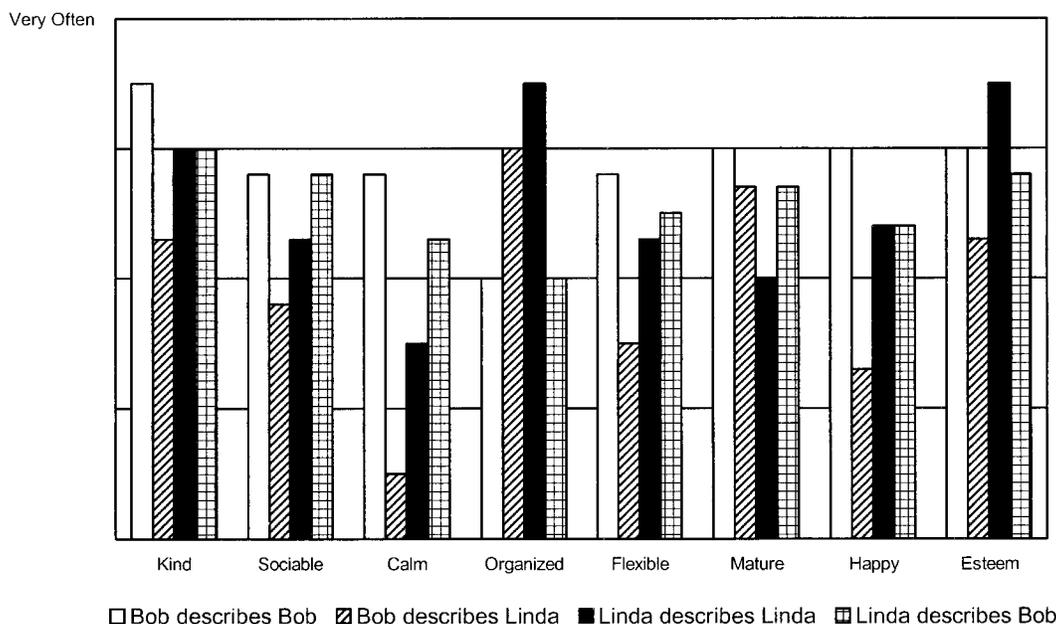


Figure 2. Personality Characteristics of Bob and Linda: Sample Case

Note: The bar graph in the figure shows how each respondent rated self and partner on a variety of personality characteristics. Those who completed RELATE without a partner would only have scores for themselves. Each scale is based on the respondent's assessment of how much the words describe the individual, from *never* to *very often*. As can be seen, each general personality characteristic has four different bars associated with it. The first shows how Bob describes himself. The second is how Bob describes Linda. The third bar shows how Linda describes herself. The fourth bar shows Linda's description of Bob. Respondents are able to refer to the actual questions at the end of the Report for the exact scores on how they rated themselves and their partner.

by a partner, this empathy scale is more than just an evaluation of a partner in the present. Perhaps the partner has recently improved in the area of empathy, so the respondent rates the partner as high. Another possibility is that the respondent is low on empathy and therefore considers the partner as high in this area even though others might not concur. Or, if the respondent had few positive experiences with empathy in the family of origin, this will influence how questions are answered. Even if the partner is low on empathy, according to most people, because the respondent's frame of reference is from a system of low empathy, the partner might receive a high score. What matters is that both partners are able to understand each other's perceptions of empathy in the relationship, that they are able to understand the frame of reference that created these ratings of empathy, and that they can grapple with the meaning that empathy has for the overall quality of the relationship. Although unlikely, it may be that neither partner expects much empathy from the other, and it isn't a matter of importance for a particular couple. This nonemphasis on empathy would certainly be related to past experiences in the families and cultures of reference.

### Metaposition

The power of a self-report instrument is that it encourages a stepping back from the stream of everyday life and a consideration of where the relationship is, where it has come from, and where it is going. This metaposition is especially helpful if the instrument itself is designed also to encourage dialogue and awareness of the partner's perceptions. By asking for ratings of the partner, the instrument requires that individuals step outside their own perspectives and consider the way self and other interact to create a unique relationship system.

RELATE was designed to encourage understanding of both

partners' perceptions regarding the relationship. Three characteristics of the instrument contribute to its usefulness in this area. First, partners are asked to rate both self and partner on almost all the couple scales and the individual personality scales. This creates a natural desire to see how the partner scored on these scales and a tendency to discuss the answers. Second, the four scores, ratings of self and partner for both members of the couple, are presented side by side in graphic format to help couples consider all the ratings on a particular scale (see Figure 2). Third, specific answers to each question are printed after the graphs so couples can refer to the questions, explore where they see things differently or the same, and gain further specific knowledge about their relationship.

### Data Analyses

RELATE was developed by following the standards of educational and psychological testing (American Psychological Association, 1985) and the principles of construct hierarchy for multidimensional scaling (Busby, Crane, Larson, & Christensen, 1995; Comrey, 1988). This process was complicated and extensive, requiring several pilot studies, preliminary factor analyses, test-retest and internal consistency analyses, content validity analyses, and the rewriting of many items. The final form of RELATE was created by statistically and qualitatively analyzing over 450 items. The analyses aided the researchers in reducing the final instrument to the 271 items that were eventually published and distributed. RELATE has been in use since 1997, and over 12,000 individuals from across the United States have taken the instrument. Additional reliability and validity analyses other than those done for the development of the instrument were con-

ducted with new samples and are summarized in the next sections.

### Reliability Analyses

The reliability coefficients for the main subscales of RELATE, arranged in the order they are given to respondents on the RELATE Report, are presented in Table 2. Most of the subscales were designed to meet internal consistency and test-retest reliability standards. A few scales were designed to meet only test-retest standards, because their purpose was heuristic. The value questions are an example of this, as the goal with these questions was to help couples discover and discuss a wide variety of important values rather than to create focused, internally consistent scales. For example, on the marital sexuality value scale there are questions about how often the respondent wants to have intercourse, whether sexuality should be exclusive to the partner, premarital sex, and the meaning of sex. As designed, these questions should not necessarily be internally consistent, but they should cover a broad range of issues relating to sexuality to stimulate couple discussions.

Three separate samples were used to demonstrate reliability with different populations. Demographic details on these samples can be obtained from the first author. The first sample, called the representative sample, was drawn from respondents who took RELATE between 1997 and 1999 until the percentages of people from different races and religions were the same as those in national percentages. The test-retest sample was a new sample specifically collected to evaluate test-retest reliability. The Hispanic sample was also a new sample, which consisted of individuals who spoke Spanish as their primary language and who completed a Spanish version of the instrument (Carroll, Holman, Seguras-Bartholomew, Bird, & Busby, 2001). The time between the test and the retest was 14–21 days for both the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking samples.

The results in Table 2 illustrate that most of the scales on RELATE had reliability scores between .70 and .90 for both internal consistency and test-retest calculations. These are particularly noteworthy results, because most scales only contain 3–4 items, which is less than is generally suggested to obtain high reliability coefficients (Comrey, 1988).

### Validity Analyses

**Construct validity.** Factor analyses were conducted on three of the four main contexts of RELATE: individual (personality scales), family, and couple. The cultural context was primarily measured by individual items such as a race-ethnicity question, so it was not appropriate for factor analyses. The representative sample was used for these analyses. Ninety-two percent of the items loaded exclusively on the proper subscale. Even in the few instances where some items loaded high on several scales, the overlap was expected, such as when the “Relationship With Father” items also loaded on the “Family Tone” scale. In these cases, correlations between scales were explored to provide an additional evaluation of the constructs. All the correlations were in a range between .45 and .65, suggesting there was a strong relationship yet still considerable distinction between constructs.

**Concurrent validity.** Information comparing several scales with the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) (Busby et al., 1995) is included in Table 3. The RDAS is a revision of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), one of the most commonly used measures of marital quality. The general scales of RELATE, such as those measuring satisfaction, stability, prob-

Table 2  
Reliability of RELATE Scales With Three Samples

Scale	Representative Sample (n = 381)		Test-Retest Sample (n = 78)	Hispanic Version Test-Retest (n = 61)
	Internal Consistency	Internal Consistency		
	Male	Female		
<b>Personality scales</b>				
Self				
Kindness	.75	.70	.78	.74
Extroversion	.79	.82	.86	.72
Calmness	.72	.68	.70	.71
Organized	.66	.73	.77	.77
Flexibility	.71	.74	.68	.69
Maturity	.63	.65	.78	.67
Happiness	.76	.82	.78	.68
Self-esteem	.80	.84	.79	.75
Partner				
Kindness	.77	.77	.73	.80
Extroversion	.75	.78	.86	.73
Calmness	.77	.75	.77	.73
Organized	.77	.80	.84	.81
Flexibility	.81	.84	.81	.81
Maturity	.70	.78	.84	.86
Happiness	.79	.84	.55	.74
Self-esteem	.85	.84	.78	.79
<b>Value scales</b>				
Religiosity			.84	.88
Importance of marriage			.81	.87
Gender-based roles			.64	.74
Labor force participation			.71	.79
Importance of money and material			.83	.76
Autonomy			.63	.76
Marital sexuality			.86	.94
Family planning			.81	.78
<b>Family background scales</b>				
Family violence			.81	.87
Sexual abuse			.95	.90
Family stress			.90	.86
Family tone	.82	.85	.90	.77
Parents' marriage	.91	.91	.92	.94
Father-child relationships	.75	.77	.86	.82
Mother-child relationships	.67	.71	.84	.76
Family influence	.75	.79	.83	.79
Self autonomy from family	.63	.65	.74	.78
Partner autonomy from family	.70	.70	.77	.76
<b>Relationship scales</b>				
Self				
Empathic communication	.72	.76	.77	.76
Love	.76	.80	.81	.85
Clear sending	.73	.79	.70	.80
Criticism	.61	.61	.63	.71
Contempt-defensiveness	.71	.75	.83	.76
Stonewalling	.75	.78	.70	.76
Flooding	.68	.75	.71	.77
Soothing	.51	.58	.65	.66
Partner				
Empathic communication	.81	.88	.78	.82
Love	.80	.84	.81	.85
Clear sending	.76	.78	.78	.74
Criticism	.74	.73	.77	.70
Contempt-defensiveness	.78	.83	.77	.86
Stonewalling	.80	.83	.80	.60
Flooding	.77	.77	.67	.74
Soothing	.71	.67	.71	.78
Significant other approval	.72	.74	.65	.69
Possessiveness	.46	.57	.66	.69
Relationship satisfaction	.82	.85	.78	.76
Relationship stability	.81	.82	.78	.86
Violence and abuse			.95	.84
Realistic expectations			.64	.67
Problem areas checklist	.80	.83	.87	.83
Boundaries	.62	.61	.79	.77

Table 3  
Correlations Between Selected Scales of the RELATE and the RDAS

RELATE Subscale	RDAS
Satisfaction	.58
Stability	.57
Problem areas	-.56
Positive communication	.49
Negative communication	-.52
Partner positive communication	.59
Partner negative communication	-.54
Gottman validating couple style	.36
Gottman hostile couple style	-.47

Note: RDAS = Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale.

lem areas, and communication, should have substantial correlations with the RDAS. However, the correlations should not be so high as to suggest complete overlap, as the scales of the RDAS and RELATE do not share common items and are measuring related but different areas of the couple relationship. For these analyses, the communication scales from RELATE (empathy, love, clear sending, and soothing) were combined and Gottman's scales (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling) were combined to create positive and negative indicators of communication.

The results in Table 3 provide evidence of concurrent validity for RELATE. All the correlations are in the appropriate direction and of sufficient strength to suggest that the instrument captures many important areas of couple functioning.

### Using the RELATE Inventory

RELATE is designed to be used by individuals, couples, instructors, or clinicians without any specific training. Of course, extra training and education by any user of an instrument can only help enhance the value and meaning of the results. The philosophy behind this easy access and use is that the survey and the accompanying Report do not provide information dramatically different than what couples already know and struggle with in their relationship, because they are the ones who answer the questions that are used to generate the Report. The instrument is not presented as a diagnostic tool designed to tell couples or professionals if a relationship will last. What RELATE and the Report do provide that is new is an organized presentation of selected differences and similarities in a relationship that a couple might benefit the most from addressing. This organized presentation of individual, family, cultural, and couple contexts helps the couple clarify perceptions in a visible, understandable fashion and highlights areas of agreement and disagreement that are most likely to be important to the couple over time, because the scales were based on research that has delineated the significant predictors of relationship success. However, each couple is unique, and couples are not told that they must discuss certain areas if they want to have a satisfying relationship.

There are limitations to using the measure. It takes approximately 40–60 minutes to complete, and after spending so much time answering the items, some couples may expect more from the Report than is realistic. For example, some couples may expect the Report to tell them whether they should stay in their relationship or whether they are compatible. The Report does include statements clarifying that the instrument is not designed to make decisions for the couple, but rather, that it is designed to clarify how they perceive each other and their relationship so that more informed discussions can occur.

Another limitation is that individuals may become distressed after answering questions about the experiences they had in their family of origin or their couple relationship. To assist individuals with this distress, to help the couple work through their difficulties, or simply to help them understand their Report in more detail, couples are given information about how to find additional resources, including a user's guide (Loyer-Carlson & Busby, 2001), a trade book (Larson, 2000), and phone numbers where family life educators or therapists can be reached.

### Couple Use

We believe that one of the most unique and important attributes of Report is the comparative process in which partners are asked to rate self and partner, and these responses are presented in the Report (see Figure 2). This comparative process is also one way of overcoming the most serious limitation of survey instruments, reliance on self-report data. Whereas a self-report perception is clearly only a measure of the individual system, it can be argued that the differences between partners' views about each other and about the relationship capture one aspect of the couple system. These differences reflect something between the couple rather than something within the individual.

Measures that code couple interaction may be able to capture the systemic nature of relationships better than surveys. Nevertheless, even in solid interaction research, such as Gottman's (1994), one outcome of couple interaction that is important is the influence these accumulated interactions have on perceptions of self, partner, and the relationship. If the interactions lead to perceptions of each other that are negative and attributions that the partner has negative motives, the relationship is likely to be distressed and unstable (Gottman, 1999; Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994). By encouraging partners to evaluate and discuss their perceptions of each other, the instrument may help them understand the most important result of their systemic interactions, even if it does not measure the interactions as well as other methods do.

Some intriguing results from analyses conducted for this study with the representative sample demonstrate how important it is to ask people to rate both themselves and their partner and then consider the perceptual differences of the couple (Busby & Taniguchi, 2000). The respondent's rating of the partner on both the personality and couple dimensions of RELATE predicts 25% more variance in relationship satisfaction than does the respondent's rating of self. Many instruments only contain the self-rating; however, the findings from RELATE suggest that the rating of the partner is more important than the rating of self, at least in understanding relationship satisfaction. In addition, experiences with pilot testing the instrument and with couples and professionals who recently completed the instrument have demonstrated that the difference people prefer to discuss and focus on is the comparison of the female and male ratings of self. Nevertheless, the data analyses show that this difference has almost no influence on relationship satisfaction, as it explains less than 1% of the variance (Busby & Taniguchi). The only difference that has a consistent influence on relationship satisfaction is the difference between how the respondent rates self and how the respondent rates the partner. This difference explains approximately 8% of the variance in relationship satisfaction. In other words, using empathy as an example, the difference between a woman's view of her empathy and her view of her partner's empathy or the difference between a man's view of his empathy and his view of his partner's empathy is the difference

that influences relationship satisfaction. Therefore, without these cross-ratings, couples would be left to discuss how their ratings of self were different, even though this difference is the least important. The graphs on the RELATE Report (see Figure 2) are arranged so that couples focus on the difference that is most likely to influence relationship satisfaction.

It is also the experience of RI members, both through research and application, that what is at the core of relationship development and success is the management of perceptual differences rather than the quantity of difference (Levine & Busby, 1993). Because even the most significant difference scores only explain 8% of the variance in relationship satisfaction, it is clear that the quantity of difference is not the primary issue. Each individual is different enough from any other person to create enough conflict so that a relationship may not work. Conversely, each individual is similar enough with any other person to create shared strengths that can sustain a relationship (Bateson, 1999). What seems to be crucial is whether partners can express their perceived differences openly, negotiate a way to interact with one another that maintains self and yet shows flexibility to the partner's preferences, and avoid labeling differences in a pejorative manner (Gottman, 1999; Schnarch, 1997).

We believe that RELATE, by its nature, encourages openness about perceptual differences and can encourage a dialogue regarding the meaning of those differences. It also allows couples to see whether their manner of interacting around differences has created a relationship style that is avoidant, volatile, validating, or hostile.

Further, we argue that by design, the instrument can help couples see the interaction between the individual, family, cultural, and couple contexts. As a couple progresses through the Report, it is easy for them to see the contexts that influence their relationship as they consider measures of culture, family, and personality. It is almost impossible to ignore the influence of these contexts on their relationship functioning. For example, a respondent might see that a partner came from a home where the relationship with each parent was low in satisfaction. The respondent also might notice that the partner's self-esteem seems low, and that as a result, the partner is more defensive when the respondent tries to talk about important relationship problems. Such links between the different contexts seem logical and comprehensible.

### *Use of RELATE in Classrooms*

One of the unique attributes of the instrument is its usefulness in large or small classroom settings (Larson, 1998/1999; Larson et al., 1995). RELATE and its predecessors have been used in many classrooms at universities and colleges and in workshops to allow students hands-on experiences with human development and family science principles.

Because the survey covers aspects of almost all of the important factors that affect marital quality, the RELATE Report coincides with many chapter topics in the leading marriage and family textbooks used in college classrooms or in workshops. Our own use of RELATE in classrooms suggests its value in personalizing for students the facts, statistics, or skills presented in chapters and lectures and thereby facilitating additional classroom discussion as the students connect what they are learning with where they are in their own lives and relationships.

The survey also can be used to help students practice a principle or skill taught in a lecture. This is best achieved by dividing the class into small groups of four or five. The students

take RELATE with either a classmate or a real partner. They receive a comparison of their answers to those of their partners on the Report. Then, as skills are discussed, the students again divide into small groups, and matched members practice the skills learned while other group members observe and evaluate. For example, if soothing skills have been taught, the couple finds an area in the values section where they disagree, and they use the skills to attempt to discuss their differences while soothing self and other as conflict increases. Other group members observe the process and then offer feedback on how well the couple performed.

Another use of RELATE in the classroom is as a final project. Students in the class can take the evaluation with a partner. When they receive the Report, they are assigned to discuss the strengths and weaknesses they find in their relationship. With the knowledge gained from the course, the couple has a structured discussion on how they can improve their weaknesses and build on their strengths. After the discussion, a written report is required, specifically containing the following components: background information about the partners and the history of their relationship, a narrative description of their results including specific strengths and weaknesses, a summary of the couple's discussion on specific improvements that can be made, and an individual estimate of where the student thinks the relationship is going.

We also believe that instructors and clinicians can use the conceptual model (Figure 1) to assist students or clients to understand how the different contexts influence one another to create a unique couple style. This can be accomplished by discussing family roles, values, and experiences that lead to certain expectations about interpersonal relationships. Instructors also can describe how cultures influence families to consider certain behaviors as normative and others as deviant. Then individuals or couples can be encouraged to describe how people coming from certain contexts might react to situations or experiences in dramatically different ways. These reactions also would be influenced by trait-like characteristics such as flexibility or the tendency to be depressed. Over time, couples then develop their own style of responding to differences that is both a combination of previous contexts and the creation of something entirely new.

### *Use of RELATE in Clinical Settings*

Because of the breadth of the survey, we believe it can be used as a general assessment instrument of the couple relationship by therapists working from a variety of therapeutic models. For example, there is sufficient family-of-origin detail to help therapists working from past-oriented models to understand the legacies and injustices from childhood that partners bring to their relationships (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Additional measures in the personality section would be good screening items for depression, hostility, anxiety, and other clinical symptoms that may need more thorough assessment and treatment attention (see Figure 2).

We view the relationship questions as sufficiently comprehensive to guide behaviorists, structural therapists, narrative therapists, and other systemic clinicians in assessing couple patterns, perceptions of one another, problem areas, and the risk for separation or divorce. For example, if a couple scored low on the relationship satisfaction scale, a therapist might use this as an outcome measure. A behavioral therapist would hope that with specific communication and problem-solving skill training, the satisfaction scores would increase, whereas a narrative therapist

would hope that as couples learn to create new narratives about themselves and their partners, improvements would occur in satisfaction. In order to determine the relationship areas where the couple could use the most help, the therapist would consider the problem areas checklist. The areas where the couple reported the most problems could be used as beginning points for discussion during therapy sessions or for homework assignments. After several months of intervention, the therapist could use the satisfaction scale again with the couple to measure progress. Because a narrative therapist is most interested in the stories or narratives that people tell about themselves or their partner, it may be helpful to also pay close attention to the personality scales. The narrative therapist might also want clients to retake certain personality scales where self and partner are described. This is easily accomplished because the questions and response choices for all the items on the scales are included in the Report. The narrative therapist would hope that perceptions of self and other would improve over time.

RELATE also is useful for therapists and family life educators who are more likely to conduct workshops and retreats designed to enhance relationships. In fact, it could be used as a screening device for seriously distressed couples or as a guide for specific workshop interventions. Workshops could be structured around the different contexts of RELATE. For example, couples could consider and discuss the legacies they brought to their relationship from their families and cultures. They could distinguish between the legacies they would like to honor and those they would like to discard, and they could discuss new legacies they would like to adopt. The different subscale headings of the values and family background sections of RELATE could be used as an outline for covering the variety of legacies that might be discussed. Workshop leaders could assist couples in their discussion process by first focusing on the communication scales of RELATE. With some basic rules and coaching regarding how to listen and show empathy, couples could have a more successful experience when legacies are discussed.

Because the couple scales are closely tied to Gottman's theory and research, it is perhaps most appropriate for clinicians interested in integrating this approach into their therapeutic work (Gottman, 1999). For example, the survey includes evaluations of the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling), the couple's marital style (validating, avoidant, volatile, or hostile), the positivity-negativity ratio, and the perceived ability to soothe self and partner. In addition, the instrument asks questions about parents' family-of-origin relational styles to help respondents consider their family differences and preferences in resolving conflict. Further, the entire individual context, including the personality scales, could be used as an evaluation of the negative and positive attributions partners make about one another (Gottman, 1999; Karney et al., 1994).

Gottman's (1999) clinical approach includes several steps designed to help clinicians coach clients in discussing relationship problem areas. The goal is to teach couples to track their physiological flooding, to soothe self and partner as certain thresholds of arousal are reached, and to learn to predict which relationship problems are not going to be resolved. RELATE contains extensive lists of problem areas that could be used as starting points for these interactions. The survey also includes soothing and flooding scales to help the therapist predict who is more likely to become flooded and who needs more help with learning soothing.

## Conclusions

In this article, we have presented the RELATE instrument and described the model underlying the survey. We have presented the reliability and validity analyses that support the instrument and have described several ways it can be used by couples, instructors, and clinicians.

Further empirical testing of RELATE as an assessment and intervention tool is needed before it can be recommended with confidence for clinical use. However, we believe that the theoretical foundation and the reliability and validity information are solid. If used with clinical wisdom, it would be a good addition to the repertoire of instruments used by clinicians. More than 200 clinicians are currently using the instrument with their clients (based on unpublished user data collected at the RI). Although a systematic survey of these clinicians has not been conducted, their continued use of the survey speaks to the value of the instrument for their practices.

In addition to the clinicians who use RELATE, there are more than 140 instructors, 65 clergy and religious leaders, and numerous other professionals who regularly use the instrument. Their informal comments sent to the RI express their sentiments regarding its value:

I like RELATE because it's not so secretive. They can interpret it themselves or with the person who is working with them as a counselor, a marital educator, or a clergy.

RELATE seems to hit all the areas that have been drawn out by research that are predictive of relationship satisfaction.

The best thing about RELATE is the simplicity and the completeness of it.

It provides opportunities for couples to really think about and assess themselves in the areas that affect relationships.

Personal comments offered by couples who have taken the instrument also suggest its value in helping them understand their relationship and discover where added growth is necessary:

Since we received our results back, my fiancé and I have had many good discussions about our relationship and our future that I don't think would have come up otherwise.

I personally felt that taking RELATE was good for both of us to open our eyes to what the other one was seeing.

RELATE was another tool that helped my fiancée and me to strengthen our relationship.

As a self-guided intervention, RELATE and its predecessors have been used and reused by many couples over time. With the guidance of family life educators, instructors, or clinicians who understand family theory and research, the potential benefit of RELATE is only enhanced.

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