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Memories of Partner Empathic Responding: Construct Measurement and Validation

presented by

Keith Philip Sanford

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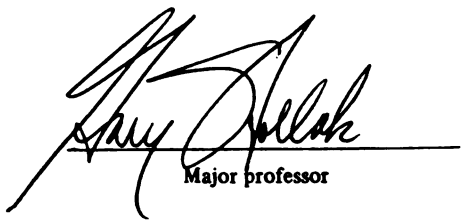
Master of Arts degree in Psychology



Major professor

Date April 8, 1996

MEMORIES OF PARTNER EMPATHIC RESPONDING: CONSTRUCT MEASUREMENT AND VALIDATION

By

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A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Psychology

1996

ABSTRACT

MEMORIES OF PARTNER EMPATHIC RESPONDING: CONSTRUCT MEASUREMENT AND VALIDATION

By

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Two instruments to assess Memories of Partner Empathic Responding (MOPER), a previously uninvestigated construct expected to be salient in marital relationships, were created and validated. Seventy-four married individuals completed a 4 minute speeded test intended to assess memory accessibility and a 20 item Likert-type questionnaire. These measures produced high reliability coefficients and a high convergent validity coefficient. The Likert-type measure of MOPER was related to but not redundant with general marital adjustment, and these two constructs best fit a two dimensional over a one dimensional confirmatory factor analysis model. The speeded test measure of MOPER was not correlated with length of marriage nor with a measure of general response production. The importance of the construct as being distinct from general marital adjustment and as being potentially useful for understanding marital communication is discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Kristen Sanford, Gary Stollak, Galen Bodenhausen, and William Donohue for their assistance in the preparation of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Married couples undoubtedly carry with them a set of memories regarding how their partners usually respond to conflict and anger in their relationship. Accessing and assessing these memories, then, is highly salient for both marital therapists and researchers alike. For example, memories of partner empathic responding may be expected to affect a couples' ability to use effective listening and speaking skills. Guerney (1983), Markman, Stanley and Blumberg (1994) and Baucom and Epstein (1990) all recommend a similar set of communication skills involving specific roles for speaking and for listening. Overall, effective communication requires both an ability to express personal feelings sensitively and clearly when speaking, and an ability to set personal opinions and defensiveness patiently aside while listening.

It is easier to express one's own feelings sensitively and clearly when one's partner is viewed as an empathic responder to such feelings. Similarly, it should be easier to listen without defensiveness and to set one's own viewpoint aside temporarily, if one has confidence that one will eventually come to feel understood. A person who remembers his or her spouse as rarely responding empathically to personal concerns or anger will likely find it much harder to be empathic; "Why should I listen to you if you never listen to me?"

Although research has yet to explore memories of partner empathic responding, the importance of such a construct is indicated. Baucom and Epstein (1990) suggest that research on cognitions in marriage needs to investigate:

> *perceptions* (about *what* events occur), *attributions* (about *why* events occur), *expectancies* (predictions of what *will* occur), *assumptions* (about the nature of the world and correlations among events), and *beliefs or standards* (about what 'should' be). p 47

Although Bradbury and Fincham (1990) have demonstrated that distressed and non-distressed marital couples differ in the types of attributions they make for partner behaviors, to date little research has investigated the role of other cognitions in marriage, such as "perceptions" or, more accurately, memories. Most research on marital memories has involved investigating the degree to which spouses agree on the occurrence of various concurrent daily interaction events. For example, did both spouses check "we watched TV" for Wednesday on the Spouse Observation Checklist (Weiss & Summers, 1983)? Such research has generally found low rates of agreement, and thereby indicates the importance of memories in marriage (Weiss & Heyman, 1990). Similarly, Buehlman, Gottman, and Katz (1992) were able to predict with a high rate of accuracy which couples would eventually divorce simply on the basis of how they viewed their past. Although this research did not specifically address memories of partner empathic responding, it did demonstrate that memories of the past are salient in marital interaction.

It was the goal of the present project to construct and validate a questionnaire for assessing Memories of Partner Empathic Responding (MOPER). The construct of interest is distinctively cognitive, pertaining to memories of past events (given that reports about "what actually occurred" in a marital relationship can only be made after the fact).

Specifically, it is the degree to which a person remembers his or her spouse (or partner) as being an empathic, understanding listener vis-à-vis marital conflict and expressions of anger. At the negative end of the continuum, the person has many memories of not being understood, remembering angry feelings as leading to adverse non-empathic responses on the part of his or her spouse. At the positive end of the continuum, the person remembers his or her spouse as demonstrating high levels of empathic skill, remembering angry feelings as eventually leading to increased intimacy and understanding. The construct, then, is one of memories and not necessarily related to actual interaction or behavior. It is also distinguished from the degree to which the self is viewed as an empathic responder. Rather, it is a phenomenological focus on what a person presently remembers about his or her partner's past behavior.

An essential validation criteria for MOPER is that it should be related to underlying memories of not being understood. Previous research on sentiment override, however, indicates that marital couples often respond to relationship questionnaires simply on the basis of their present level of satisfaction, irrespective of questionnaire content (e.g., see Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips & Osborne, 1995). It is possible that more distressed couples would simply claim to recall their partners as being more non-empathic, when in actuality they have the same types of memories as their non-distressed counterparts. In other words, it is important to demonstrate discriminant validity between MOPER and satisfaction (or adjustment).

Previous research in cognition indicates that cognitions can be described in terms of accessibility, and that the more accessible the cognition, the more likely it is to impact

future behavior (Fazio & Williams, 1986; Kallgren & Wood, 1986). Accessibility, then, provides a useful validation criteria -- MOPER should be negatively related to accessibility of memories of not being understood. If MOPER were unrelated to memory accessibility, then it might be best understood as a cognitive distortion, or filter, that is simply an artifact of satisfaction. In contrast, if MOPER is indeed related to accessibility of memories of not being understood, then it would appear to be a valid construct likely to have unique and important relationships with salient behavioral variables such as the use of speaking and listening skills.

Given that there are currently no validated instruments specifically related to memories in marriage, the present project created and validated two substantially different measurement methods for assessing MOPER. The first method was a 20 item Likert-type questionnaire intended to assess general memories of partner empathic responding vis-à-vis anger and conflict in the relationship, and the second method was an open-response four minute speeded test intended to assess the accessibility of memories of not being understood.

Validation criteria for the Likert-type method to assess MOPER.

First, the Likert-type questionnaire was expected to demonstrate high internal reliability and high test retest reliability, and to correlate with the speeded test of MOPER and with marital adjustment. Given past research finding high rates of sentiment override on Likert-type marital questionnaires (mono-method bias), the Likert-type measure of MOPER was actually expected to have a higher correlation with a marital adjustment

questionnaire than with the speeded test of MOPER. Nevertheless, the Likert-type measure of MOPER was expected to demonstrate discriminant validity by explaining a substantial portion of variance in the speeded test of MOPER that could not be accounted for by the adjustment measure. Discriminant validity was also investigated using confirmatory factor analysis. A two dimensional model (adjustment and MOPER as two separate dimensions) was compared with a one dimensional model (both adjustment and MOPER as one dimension) with the expectation that if MOPER is indeed distinct from adjustment, then the two dimensional model should fit well, the one dimensional model should not fit well, and there should be a significant difference between the fit of the two models.

Validation criteria for the speeded test method to assess MOPER.

The speeded test version of MOPER was expected to demonstrate adequate test retest reliability and to correlate with the Likert-type measure of MOPER, and the correlation with the Likert-type measure of MOPER was expected to be stronger than the correlation with adjustment. Regarding discriminant validity, the speeded test version of MOPER was not expected to be substantially correlated with simply a general tendency to give many responses to open-ended questionnaire items, nor with relationship length (as a longer relationship might produce more memories).

Method

Participants

Participants include 74 married individuals recruited as part of a larger research project through one of three sources: (1) letters sent to residents in married student housing at a large university, (2) letters sent home with elementary school children in a public school district, and (3) letters sent to pastors at local churches. As compensation, a free marriage enhancement seminar was provided for participating institutions and/or individuals. The participants had an average age of 36 (range 18 to 66, sd = 11.68), an average of 1.7 children (range 0 to 8, with a mode of 0), and were married an average of 10 years (median = 5 years, range less than one year to 43 years). Eleven percent of the participants had been previously married, and 93 percent were Caucasian. The household annual income levels were as follows: less than 25,000 (27%); 25,000 - 40,000 (19%); 40,000 - 75,000 (32%); 75,000 - 125,000 (19%); and greater than 125,000 (3%). In variation from the usual sampling bias in marital interaction research (couples responding to newspaper ads for monetary compensation), most couples in the present sample likely participated because either (1) the marriage enhancement seminar sounded interesting, or (2) they were part of a group whose leader promoted the seminar. In terms of general satisfaction, however, the couples in the present project appear to be quite similar to samples used in other research. For example, the average score on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) was 115.07 (sd = 12.17), which is not significantly different from

Spanier's original sample (t = .15, n.s., as based on Spanier's reported mean of 114.8, and standard deviation of 17.8 using 218 couples).

Measures

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Spanier, 1976) is a widely used 32 item questionnaire for assessing dyadic adjustment and includes dimensions of Satisfaction, Consensus, Affectional Expression and Cohesion. This questionnaire has a reported internal reliability of .96 (Spanier, 1976), two week test retest reliability of .87 (Carey, Spector, Lantinga & Krauss, 1993), and validation studies have found that the DAS adequately discriminates between distressed and non-distressed couples (Spanier, 1976; Eddy, Heyman, & Weiss, 1992).

The demographics questionnaire used in the present study included questions regarding age, number of children, household income, years married, religion, occupation, and previous marriages.

For the speeded test version of MOPER, participants were given an instruction page entitled "What I Wish My Spouse Understood," which read as follows:

> In all marriages spouses often experience feelings of being **NOT UNDERSTOOD** by their partner. Can you think of the times in your relationship when your spouse did not understand your perceptions, feelings, beliefs, motives, attitudes, or wishes? Please try to remember as many of these experiences as possible, both recent experiences and events from many years ago.

Participants were told they would have four minutes to "briefly write down as many experiences as possible." To reduce error variance that would result from participants spending differing amounts of time writing entries with varying degrees of detail, participants were instructed to "limit each entry to ten words or less," and to further clarify this point three brief examples were provided of appropriate entries regarding incidents involving not being understood about needing a pet, feeling unfairly accused in the kitchen, and feeling a particular habit is disrespectful. Thus, this exercise is based on the assumption that people who have more memories of partner non-empathic responding will have greater accessibility to memories of not being understood, and will thereby be able to report a greater number of such memories within the four minute time frame.

The Likert-type measure of MOPER was a 20 item questionnaire developed for this project labeled "Spouse Response to Angry Feelings" (see Appendix 1). The instructions to this questionnaire read:

> All married people experience anger toward their spouse from time to time. The purpose of this questionnaire is to get a general history of the ways your spouse responds to your angry feelings when they arise. That is, on those occasions when you get angry, what does your spouse do? Please read each item, then place an "X" in the box indicating how often this particular event occurs in your marriage.

The items include examples of empathic responding (listening, understanding), of non-empathic responding (interrupting, defensive responding, yelling, withdrawing), and of feeling exasperated because of non-empathic responding -- all of which were rated on a 5-

point scale (always, often, sometimes, rarely, never). Thus, this questionnaire is intended to assess a single dimensional construct cutting across the entire spectrum of possible memories regarding partner-empathic versus partner-non-empathic responding vis-à-vis anger or conflict in the relationship.

An additional questionnaire completed by each participant was used as a measure of a general tendency to give many responses to open ended questionnaire items. This questionnaire asked couples to consider a specific conflict incident and to list reasons why "your partner did what he or she did" and to list reasons why "you did what you did." The number of attributions a participant listed on this questionnaire, regardless of whether the attributions were positive or negative, was used as an indicator of general response production.

Procedure

All participants completed two sessions at least two weeks apart. Each session lasted about 1.5 to 2 hours, and involved completing several questionnaires and engaging in two communication exercises unrelated to the present report. During the first visit, couples completed the demographics page together, individually completed the DAS while in separate rooms, and individually completed both MOPER measures and the attributions questionnaire while in the same room separated by a screen.

The second visit was completed at least two weeks after the first, and proceeded in a similar fashion, except for the fact that participants did not complete the demographics form or the DAS a second time. The two MOPER measures and the attributions questionnaire, however, were completed again during the second session.

Results

Reliability and convergent validity

Chronbach's alpha for the Likert-type measure of MOPER was .94, and the test retest correlation was .92. The speeded test version of MOPER produced a test retest correlation of .67. The two measures of MOPER were correlated -.42 ($p < .001$) -- the correlation being negative because a high score on the Likert-type measure indicates many memories of partner empathic responding, whereas a high score on the speeded test indicates many memories of not feeling understood.

Discriminant validity

As expected, the Likert-type measure of MOPER was highly correlated with dyadic adjustment ($r = .66$, $p < .001$). Thus, it is important to demonstrate that the MOPER measure is not simply measuring the same thing as the adjustment measure. First, the MOPER measure should account for a significant portion of variance in the speeded test that the adjustment measure cannot explain. In addition, a confirmatory factor analysis should support a model in which MOPER and adjustment are defined as two separate dimensions. To test the first criteria, both the adjustment score and the Likert-type MOPER score were used to predict the speeded test score in a stepwise regression procedure. In the first step, only adjustment was entered, and the resulting

R square was not significant (R square = .05, n.s.). In the second step, the Likert-type measure of MOPER was added to the equation and the R square increased substantially (R square = .18; difference F (1, 71) = 11.54, $p < .01$). The partial correlation between the two MOPER measures controlling for satisfaction was -.37 ($p = .001$).

The second discriminant validity criterion was that a two dimensional model should fit better than a one dimensional model. To create these models, a number of composite subscales were constructed. Composite scores were used because a confirmatory factor analysis based on individual items (52 in this case) would have more degrees of freedom than participants in the present sample. Thus, the DAS was divided into the four subscales indicated by previous research: Consensus, Satisfaction, Cohesion, and Affectional Expression (Spanier, 1976; Eddy, Heyman, & Weiss, 1992). Each subscale was summed, and the four resulting composite scores served as four separate indicators of adjustment in the confirmatory factor analysis model. Because the Likert-type MOPER measure was not intended to be multidimensional, it was simply randomly divided into three subscales to be summed and used as three separate indicators of MOPER in the confirmatory factor analysis.

The two dimensional model specified that the four satisfaction indicators load on one latent variable (dimension) and the three MOPER indicators load on a second latent variable. The two latent variables were allowed to correlate (analogous to oblique rotation), and none of the error variances were allowed to correlate. This model produced a good fit (Goodness of Fit Index = .94; Normed Fit Index = .95). The completely standardized factor loadings are listed on Table 1.

The one dimensional model specified that all seven indicators load on only a single latent variable, and again no error variances were allowed to correlate. This model fit slightly less than adequately (Goodness of Fit Index = .86; Normed Fit Index = .89), and was significantly worse than the two dimensional model (difference chi-square with 1 degree of freedom = 22.00, $p < .001$). The completely standardized factor loadings are listed on Table 1. In summary, the model specifying that MOPER and marital adjustment are two separate dimensions fit the data well, and this model fit significantly better than model specifying that both MOPER and adjustment are indicators of a single dimension, a model which fit the data slightly less than adequately.

Table 1

Completely Standardized Factor Loadings for One- and Two-dimensional Models

	Two Dimensional Model		One Dimensional Model
	Adjustment	MOPER	
DAS Consensus	.66		.45
DAS Satisfaction	.84		.64
DAS Cohesion	.69		.55
DAS Affectional Expression	.45		.49
MOPER 1st subscale		.92	.92
MOPER 2nd subscale		.95	.95
MOPER 3rd subscale		.93	.93

Regarding the speeded test version of MOPER it is important to demonstrate that (1) it is different from general response production, and (2) that it is not simply assessing relationship length, with longer relationships resulting in more memories regardless of memory content. The latter criterion was met in that the correlation between the speeded MOPER measure and number of years married was non-significant ($r = -.17$), interestingly leaning toward younger relationships reporting more memories of not being understood.

A measure of general response production was created from a questionnaire requesting both self and partner attributions for a given specific incident. Participants completed this questionnaire for two different specific incidents at both sessions, resulting in a total of 8 different attribution lists. The content of these lists was ignored, and the number of attributions given was simply summed to give a response production score. This score was reliable (Chronbach's alpha = .87) and not significantly correlated with general satisfaction ($r = .06$, n.s.), and as expected, not correlated with the speeded test version of MOPER ($r = .04$, n.s.).

Item reduction

Given the extremely high alpha for the Likert-type MOPER measure, this questionnaire likely contains a degree of redundancy; therefore, it was decided to create a short form version of this questionnaire. Because content validity was judged to be more important than redundancy, the number of items were cut in half using factor analysis to select the most unique items. Although a scree plot clearly indicated that the questionnaire is unidimensional, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted requesting

10 oblique factors. All items loading greater than .7 on a factor were considered to be indicators of that dimension, resulting in each dimension having from 1 to 3 indicators. All single items that served as the only indicator of a given dimension were selected for the short form version of the questionnaire. In cases where a dimension included two or three items, theoretical (subjective) judgment was used to select the best indicator to be included in the short form version of the questionnaire. The items selected for the short form are indicated in Appendix 1. The 10 item short form produced an alpha of .84, a test retest correlation of .86, and a correlation with the speeded test version of MOPER of -.40.

Descriptive statistics

The mean for the full Likert-type measure of MOPER was 69.20 (sd = 12.53, range 35 - 92). The mean for the speeded test was 6.41 entries in four minutes (sd = 2.66, range 2 - 12), and the mean for the short form was 33.53 (sd = 5.60, range 20 - 44).

Discussion

Both the four minute speeded test and the 20 item Likert-type measure appear to be valid and reliable measures of MOPER. Although there was, as expected, a large portion of overlap between the marital adjustment questionnaire and the Likert-type measure of MOPER, they were clearly not assessing identical constructs. Unlike adjustment, the Likert-type measure of MOPER was strongly related to the accessibility of memories of not being understood (the speeded test version of MOPER). Furthermore, a confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the data best fit a model in which the Likert-type MOPER measure and adjustment are conceptualized as two separate dimensions.

The speeded test version of MOPER also evidenced discriminant validity in having low (n.s.) correlations with marital adjustment, response production, and years married. Although the speeded test is somewhat less reliable, it is useful in that it provides a second measurement method, and in that it is intended to directly assess the accessibility of memories. In other research using similar measurement methods, Kallgren and Wood (1986) found that attitudes regarding environment preservation are predictive of actual behavior for participants who list many examples of environment preservation behaviors on a two minute speeded test (high accessibility), and that attitudes are not good predictors of subsequent behavior for participants with shorter lists (low accessibility). Similarly, it may be that low scores on the Likert-type MOPER scale are predictive of

destructive relationship behaviors (for example, poor speaking and listening skills) only for individuals who also have a long list of memories of not being understood. Individuals who score low on the Likert-type MOPER scale, yet have relatively short lists of memories of not being understood could be considered a low memory accessibility group who simply respond to the questionnaire on the basis of sentiment override. Thus, it may be valuable in future research to continue using both the Likert-type measure of MOPER (either the short or long version) and the speeded-test in conjunction with each other.

The theoretical importance of MOPER is emphasized by recent, successful, innovations in marital therapy which stress empathic understanding over communication skills -- for example Johnson and Greenberg's (1985) Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy, and Jacobson and Christensen's (Jacobson, 1992) Integrative Behavior Couple therapy. As Jacobson (1989) notes, couples receiving skills oriented marital therapy often fail to use the skills learned in marital therapy sessions when they are in the heat of real life arguments. Possibly such couples lack memories of partner empathic responding, and remember instead (maybe vividly) hurtful responses characterized by defensiveness, contempt, or silent stonewalling. As a result, these couples may be unable to trust each other enough to use effective listening and speaking skills, and would instead respond reflexively with attack or withdrawal. With fewer memories of empathic responding, they would not employ even learned skills that would produce empathic interactions. In such cases, it may be essential for a marital therapist to first create a substantial set of accessible memories of partner empathic responding in the context of therapy before suggesting that the couple actually attempt to use communication skills outside of therapy.

Given that MOPER and adjustment appear to be two separate constructs, then it is expected that some individuals will be high on one yet low on another. This possibility suggests an interesting expansion on Gottman's (1993) description of three types of stable marriages. According to Gottman, *volatile* couples have the highest rate of emotional expressiveness and are quick to utilize persuasion techniques during problem solving discussions. *Validating* couples are moderately emotionally expressive and are not quick to use persuasion techniques. *Conflict avoiding* couples minimize conflict, are the least emotionally expressive, and avoid using persuasion techniques altogether. All three types represent stable relationships, and would thereby be expected to be within the non-distressed range of marital adjustment. However, it is likely that the adjustment/MOPER ratio will be different for each type of couple. In comparison to their overall marital adjustment, the volatile couple should report (possibly with humor and affection) a large number of memories of not being understood. In contrast, the conflict avoiding couple could have difficulty remembering any instances of not being understood. Only a validating couple, then, would be expected to produce a MOPER score that is directly proportional to their level of adjustment.

It is also possible that some distressed couples will not show a corresponding dearth of partner empathic memories. This could indicate that a couple communicates and understands each other quite well and that other relationship issues outside the realm of conflict resolution are more salient. A mutually understood or accepted aspect of the relationship may be failing to meet the experienced needs or cognitive expectations of one or both partners. For example, one partner may feel the other is not (or is no longer)

physically attractive (possibly because of aging, health, weight, or sexual orientation). A discrepancy between MOPER and marital adjustment could also indicate that a partner has lost interest in maintaining the marriage, and has become attracted to outside relationship alternatives. This individual may simply lack the emotional investment necessary to keep track of partner empathic responding, and in this case, MOPER scores would poorly predict actual behavior. Thus, a discrepancy between MOPER and adjustment could be highly salient for clinical assessment, and in determining appropriate targets for intervention in marital therapy.

Not only is it possible to have a discrepancy between MOPER and adjustment, but also two partners in a relationship may have substantial differences in MOPER, with one scoring high and the other low. This would be expected in the frequently reported demand/withdrawal cycle (Christensen and Heavey, 1990) characteristic of many distressed marriages in which one partner is seeking greater intimacy via criticism and nagging, whereas the other simply seeks to escape conflict. In this case, the demanding partner may have a long list of memories of not being understood, whereas the withdrawing partner may have a comparatively shorter list.

Clearly, it remains for future research to explore such implications -- as the present report only serves to validate a measurement technique. Furthermore, it is important to note that the present project utilized a relatively nondistressed, small, self-selected sample of participants. It is possible that a more representative sample, or a more distressed sample, or a sample of couples responding to newspaper ads for monetary compensation, would have produced different results. For example, a highly distressed sample may

appear so poorly adjusted and report so many negative memories that it becomes pointless to distinguish between two separate constructs. It is also important to note that the present study only investigated empathic responding vis-à-vis conflict and expressions of anger. It is possible that an individual may remember his or her partner as responding empathically to expressions of anger, yet not remember his or her partner as responding empathically to requests for psychological or sexual intimacy. However, a non-empathic response to a request for intimacy would likely result in feelings of anger, although possibly accompanied by feelings of loneliness as well. Thus, it is not yet clear whether it might be useful to expand the MOPER construct to include responses beyond the purview of anger and conflict. Other important directions for future research include determining the degree to which MOPER indeed impacts communication behaviors, and the degree to which MOPER is a product of actual experience with an empathic spouse. Is low MOPER indicative of memory problems or of non-empathic spouse problems? Overall, the apparent importance of empathy in marriage, and the validating support presented in the present project, suggest that MOPER has the potential to become a useful tool for future researchers and clinicians alike.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1

Spouse Response to Angry Feelings Questionniare Items

1. My spouse interrupts me when I try to explain angry feelings. [R]
2. In disagreements, it is difficult to get my spouse to see my view. [R S]
3. My spouse incorrectly assumes reasons why I do things. [R]
4. My spouse listens to me when I feel angry.
5. When I try to explain angry feelings, my spouse patiently lets me finish whatever I have to say. [S]
6. My spouse understands my true feelings. [S]
7. In disagreements, my spouse jumps to conclusions about what I am thinking or feeling. [R S]
8. When I get angry, my spouse withdraws and gets quiet. [R S]
9. My spouse becomes defensive when I get angry. [R S]
10. When I get angry, my spouse sincerely tries to see my view of things. [S]
11. After a disagreement, my spouse has an accurate understanding of my feelings.
12. When I try to explain angry feelings, my spouse sincerely tries to understand.
13. It is <u>useless</u> to try to get my spouse to understand something I am angry about. [R S]
14. It is better to keep angry thoughts to myself because my spouse would just overreact. [R]
15. When I get angry, I repeat myself because my spouse will not listen. [R]
16. With me and my spouse, anger eventually leads to increased intimacy and understanding. [S]
17. My spouse becomes critical when I try to explain angry feelings. [R]
18. My spouse yells at me when I try to explain angry feelings. [R]
19. When I feel angry, my spouse refuses to talk about it. [R]
20. My spouse walks out when I try to explain angry thoughts. [R S]

[R] *Item was reverse scored.* [S] *Item is included in the short form version of MOPER.*

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