

# A Dyadic Analysis of Emotion Regulation as a Moderator of Associations Between Marital Conflict and Marital Satisfaction Among First-married and Remarried Couples

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## Abstract

We examined emotion regulation strategies as moderators of marital conflict and marital satisfaction between first-married and remarried couples. Remarried couples with a stepchild ( $n = 108$ ) and first marriage couples ( $n = 111$ ) with a child completed online surveys. Perceptions of both spouses were analyzed using actor–partner interdependence modeling. Although remarried spouses reported more marital conflict and lower marital satisfaction than first marriage spouses, emotion regulation strategies did not moderate the association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction differently for first-married and remarried couples. Expressive suppression exacerbated the negative association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction for men, and cognitive reappraisal attenuated the

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negative association for women. There was one partner effect; husbands' greater cognitive reappraisal buffered the negative association between husbands' marital conflict and wives' marital satisfaction. Marriage order was less important than gender in how emotion regulation moderated the associations among marital conflict and marital satisfaction.

## **Keywords**

emotion regulation, marriage, remarriage, marital conflict, marital satisfaction, gender

Although not all researchers have found marital quality related to marriage order (e.g., Vemer et al., 1989; Whitton et al., 2013), many researchers have found that individuals in first marriages report higher marital quality than do remarried individuals (e.g., Cutrona et al., 2011; Rogers, 1996; Shafer et al., 2014). These disparities in marital quality often have been attributed to differences in how marital conflict is managed in remarriages and first marriages (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Jensen et al., 2014a; Jensen et al., 2017). For example, remarried couples have been reported to have poorer communication, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills than do couples in first marriages (Bray et al., 1987; Farrell & Markman, 1986; Halford et al., 2007; Mirecki et al., 2013). Because they are not as adept at solving problems and resolving conflicts, stressors build up more rapidly than problems can be resolved by remarried couples, leading to even more stress and less effective conflict management (Bray et al., 1987; Farrell & Markman, 1986; Halford et al., 2007; Mirecki et al., 2013). The stress-ineffective response pattern is thought to lead to less satisfaction and lower relationship stability for remarried couples than for first marriage couples (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Saint-Jacques et al., 2011).

Despite the progress of research in this area, the individual and relational dynamics that contribute to differences between first-married couples and remarried couples, particularly those with children from prior unions, in associations among marital conflict and marital satisfaction, remain unclear. Therefore, there is a need to expand research on potential differences in intra-personal and marital dynamics between first-married and remarried couples. Emotion regulation strategies may be a promising area to explore in examining dissimilarities in how remarried and first-married couples manage marital conflicts, and how differences in conflict management may relate to marital satisfaction. Given that emotion regulation is one determinant of good marital relationships (Bloch et al., 2014; Levenson et al., 2013), and an important

mechanism to manage interpersonal/marital conflicts (Low et al., 2018), it is plausible that exploring emotion regulation strategies may be helpful in clarifying marriage order variability in relationship satisfaction. Therefore, in this study, we build on extant literature by examining how emotion regulation strategies moderate the effects of marital conflict on marital satisfaction among husbands and wives in first-married couples and remarried couples. Although we acknowledge that associations between marital conflict and marital satisfaction are plausibly transactional, research has highlighted relationship conflict as a precursor to relationship satisfaction, particularly as relationships become more established (Larsen & Olson, 1989; Lavner et al., 2017). Consequently, we conceptually frame marital conflict as antecedent to marital satisfaction in our study. We also limit our sample to couples residing with children because the presence of stepchildren is a critical feature differentiating couples in first and higher-order marriages and because stepchildren are a substantive source of marital conflicts for remarried couples (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

### *Emotion Regulation*

Emotion regulation refers to “the way in which individuals influence the emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998, p. 275). Individuals engage in constant regulation of their emotions to bring them closer to the emotional state they desire, and they are effective at this to varying degrees (Gross & John, 2003; Gross & Thompson, 2007). Although multiple frameworks explain how individuals regulate their emotions (e.g., Koole, 2009; Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999), Gross’s (1998) process model of emotion regulation is the most widely used (Webb et al., 2012).

Gross’ (1998) model posits that emotion regulation may occur at any time throughout an emotion-generating process. Most researchers have examined two types of emotion regulation strategies, cognitive reappraisal, and expressive suppression. *Cognitive reappraisal* entails reframing a situation to alter its emotional impact, usually in positive ways (Gross, 1998, 2002). Cognitive reappraisal directly influences how individuals view emotional events and is thought to be effective at regulating emotions (John & Gross, 2004). Results from multiple meta-analyses of over 1,000 studies have shown that cognitive reappraisals typically have moderate effects on emotional responses (i.e.,  $d = 0.36 - 0.65$ ; Aldao et al., 2010; Augustine & Hemenover, 2009; Webb et al., 2012). In contrast, *expressive suppression* occurs after an emotion has been experienced and involves inhibiting, concealing, or shortening the emotional response (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003). Use of expressive suppression

has been associated with decrease in emotional displays, but this strategy often fails to decrease the experience of emotions and may even *increase* the intensity of undesired emotions (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003; Webb et al., 2012). Thus, individuals who suppress emotional displays appear to be effective at hiding their feelings, but they are not able to suppress the actual emotional experience; expressive suppression is ineffective at changing the valence, intensity, and duration of the experienced emotion (John & Gross, 2004).

### *Emotion Regulation, Marital Conflict, and Marital Satisfaction*

Both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have found that emotion regulation approaches are related to relationship and marital satisfaction (Tani et al., 2015; Zeidner & Kloda, 2013) and to conflict resolution (Low et al., 2018). Cognitive reappraisal may bolster marital relationships by enhancing individuals' perceptions of their spouses and by reducing marital conflict (Ben-Naim et al., 2013; Finkel et al., 2013). It is possible that remarried couples, particularly those with children from prior unions, could benefit from cognitive reappraisal more than first-married couples do. Remarried couples in stepfamily households often are dealing with relatively more marital and family stressors than couples in first marriages, and consequently may have more conflicts and more opportunities to utilize cognitive reappraisals (Papernow, 2018; Shafer et al., 2013). Moreover, clinicians have long contended that cognitive flexibility in remarriages with children is an asset when solving problems and managing emotionally charged situations (Coleman et al., 2001; Papernow, 2018; Visher & Visher, 1997). There also is some evidence that cognitive flexibility regarding relationships helps adults in stepfamilies as they establish new romantic bonds (Jensen et al., 2014b; Pyke & Coltrane, 1996) and maintain pre-existing relationships such as with co-parents (Ganong et al., 2015). We therefore hypothesized:

**Hypothesis 1:** Cognitive reappraisal would buffer the association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction and these moderating effects would be greater for individuals in remarriages than in first marriages.

Expressive suppression by husbands has been found to be negatively related to their own and their spouses' marital satisfaction (Velotti et al., 2016). Stonewalling, a type of expressive suppression (Gottman, 1994), and expressive suppression generally (Klein et al., 2016), have been found to be related to lower levels of spouses' marital satisfaction and greater likelihood of divorce. Spouses' use of expressive suppression may be more strongly

associated with lower marital satisfaction for stepfamily couples than for first-married couples (Visher & Visher, 1997). Given that an important facet of stepfamily living is negotiating new family rules and routines (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2018), repeated expressive suppression could perpetuate more family conflict by preventing spouses from talking about their problems. This emotional regulation strategy of ignoring conflicts and problems as if they do not exist, sometimes called pseudomutuality (Visher & Visher, 1997), hinders married couples from resolving conflicts or disagreements, contributing to dissatisfaction and poorer intimacy over time. Couples whose prior marriages ended in divorce may shy away from confrontations and refrain from negative expressions because they fear another marital dissolution (Papernow, 2018); couples in first marriages may have had fewer unpleasant experiences related to openly disagreeing with spouses, and so are less likely to engage in emotion suppression.

Expressive suppression by the spouse also has been found to be related to perceiving spouses' criticisms as hostile, which in turn was related to lower marital satisfaction (Klein et al., 2016). It may be that spouses of individuals who regularly employ expressive suppression do communicate in a more hostile manner, which is not conducive to conflict resolution or marital quality (Klein et al., 2016); it is likely that all couples would be affected by these dynamics, but remarried couples with children from prior unions may be more adversely affected than those in first marriages because stepfamilies' structural complexity provides many opportunities for stress and disagreements about childrearing, household rules, and new roles (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Saint-Jacques et al., 2011), and so remarried couples may engage more often in expressive suppression as a way to reduce the number of conflicts and attempt making the complexity more manageable.

In addition, expressive suppression limits the ability of spouses to recognize nonverbal behaviors in their partners. Spouses rely on emotional signals to attain mutual understanding (Ickes & Simpson, 1997), so when spouses are unable to accurately interpret partners' emotions, they may make erroneous assumptions, they can become frustrated, and discordant interactions may ensue (Fruzzetti & Iverson, 2006; Waldinger & Schulz, 2006). Remarried couples who have not effectively established new patterns of interaction may have to rely more on nonverbal behaviors (Farrell & Markman, 1986). Thus, if expressive suppression is heavily used by remarried partners, the quality of their communication may suffer and promote maladaptive emotional responses to conflict, which may contribute to lower marital well-being compared to first-married couples. We hypothesized:

**Hypothesis 2:** Expressive suppression would exacerbate the association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction and these moderating effects would be greater for individuals in remarriages than in first marriages.

### *Gender Differences in Emotion Regulation*

Prior research is limited regarding gender differences in spouses' use of emotion regulation strategies. There is some evidence that husbands' emotion regulation may be more important for marital satisfaction; husbands' negative affect toward wives predicts declines in wives' marital satisfaction (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991), and husbands' negativity affects wives more than the converse (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1988; Velotti et al., 2016). However, some researchers have found that women, in general, use cognitive reappraisal more than men do (Duarte et al., 2015; Spaapen et al., 2014) and that men generally use expression suppression more frequently than women do (Gross & John, 2003). Consequently, we propose the following hypotheses related to gender differences in emotion regulation:

**Hypothesis 3a:** Husbands will use expression suppression more frequently than wives.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Wives will use cognitive appraisal more frequently than husbands.

Finally, given the scant research assessing dyadic processes, we raise the following open-ended research question: Are one spouses' reports of marital conflict and emotion regulation associated with the other spouses' reports of marital satisfaction (i.e., partner effects)?

### *The Present Study*

This study is among the first to explore emotion regulation strategies among both remarried and first-married couples. Using paired couple data from remarried and first-married couples, we examined whether emotion regulation strategies moderated the association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction. We hypothesized that any observed moderation would be more pronounced among remarried couples than first-married couples. We also examined, but did not hypothesize about, partner effects, or the extent to which one spouses' reports of marital conflict and emotional regulation was associated with the other spouses' reports of marital satisfaction.

## Method

### *Data Collection*

Couples for this study were recruited through online advertisements (e.g., Craigslist, Facebook) and word-of-mouth, using snowball sampling. The online advertisement included a link to an initial screening form, which was housed on the Qualtrics platform. The initial screening form was presented to prospective participants to ensure the following inclusion criteria were met: (a) both spouses from opposite-sex marriages were willing to participate, (b) at least one spouse had a child between the ages of 6 and 17, (c) the child lived in the household with them, and (d) the couple had internet access so they could be contacted to complete online surveys. For remarried couples, an additional inclusion criterion was that they must have lived in the same household for three months or longer with at least one child from a prior union, and the child resided with them more than half of the time. This criterion was intended to ensure that remarried couples had time to establish ways of handling disagreements (Preece & DeLongis, 2005). For first-married couples, the child was their offspring. These inclusion criteria were selected for several reasons: We limited the sample to opposite-sex couples primarily to control for demographic differences between same-sex and opposite-sex couples with children. We wanted only couples with children because much of the prior research on couple satisfaction in remarriage is focused on remarried couples in stepfamilies. We chose couples who lived with (step)children between the ages of 6 and 17 because there is evidence that stepfamily dynamics differ for families of school-age and adolescent children more so than for stepfamilies with younger children (Ganong et al., 2011), and so we were concerned that remarried couple dynamics would differ as well.

Only one screening form was completed for each couple. Couples who did not meet selection criteria were informed via an auto-generated email. Eligible couples were sent emails with information about the study, consent forms, and an alpha-numeric code to identify them. Eligible couples were sent links to a survey via Qualtrics, which allowed them to provide information about their marriage and sociodemographic data.

After receiving one spouse's responses, the other spouse was sent an email reminding him or her to complete the questionnaire. A second reminder was sent a week later, and a third reminder was sent one week after that. If there was no response, we considered the couple to be nonresponsive and excluded them from the study. These methods were extremely effective; the completion rate for those who met the study criteria and who began the surveys was 80%. After completing the questionnaires, each spouse was mailed \$15. Spouses' data were linked based on assigned couple identification numbers.

## Sample

The sample was comprised of 111 first-married couples and 108 remarried couples. First-married couples had been married a mean of 8.95 years ( $SD = 6.08$ ) and had a mean of 1.72 children ( $SD = 0.88$ ); the average age of their children was 5.49 years ( $SD = 4.31$ ). First-married couples were predominantly white (90.1% of husbands and 88.3% of wives), employed full-time (77.5% of husbands and 73% of wives), and possessed at least a bachelor's degree (75.7 % of husbands and 82% of wives). First-married couples also reported an annual median family income range of \$70,000 to \$79,000.

Remarried couples had been married a mean of 5.86 years ( $SD = 4.14$ ) and had a mean of 2.40 children ( $SD = 1.21$ ); the average age of their children was 9.84 years ( $SD = 5.85$ ). Similar to first-married couples, remarried couples were predominantly white (75 % of husbands and 70.4% of wives), employed full-time (72.2% of husbands and 55.6% of wives), and had some college education (82.4% of husbands and 90.7% of wives). Remarried couples reported an annual median family income range of \$60,000–\$69,000. Most remarried couples were part of simple stepfamilies (i.e., only one partner brought a child or children from previous unions; 58%); 78% of remarried couples were comprised of a stepfather and mother.

## Measures

*Marital conflict.* Marital conflict was measured with 20-items drawn from multiple sources. Seven were taken from the *Beier–Sternberg Discord Questionnaire* (DQ; Beier & Sternberg, 1977), six items were from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) and seven items we created (e.g., disciplining children). Items were chosen to represent a wide range of issues in which couples with children in their households might disagree. The items assessed the extent to which respondents perceived agreement or disagreement in their couple relationship with respect to various topics, including *money, childrearing, sex, free-time activities, relationships with in-laws, holidays, household tasks, friends, and work issues*. The items were ordinal, with response options ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). The items demonstrated acceptable internal consistent reliability across respondent groups ( $\alpha = 0.85$  for first-married wives,  $\alpha = 0.93$  for remarried wives,  $\alpha = 0.90$  for first-married husbands,  $\alpha = 0.94$  for remarried husbands) and were summed into a composite scale; higher scores indicated more marital disagreements.



*Marital satisfaction.* Marital satisfaction was indicated by wives and husbands via the six-item Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983). The first five QMI items asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with statements about the marital relationship (e.g., “We have a good marriage;” “My relationship with my partner makes me happy”). Response options for these items ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The sixth item asked participants to rate their level of happiness in their marriage using a 10-point scale, ranging from 1 (*extremely unhappy*) to 10 (*totally perfect*). The sixth item was transformed to match the metric of the first five items (i.e., the item was divided by the appropriate factor to transform the metric from 10-point metric to a 7-point metric). Composite scores with all six items were then estimated, and higher values indicated higher levels of marital satisfaction. The items yielded acceptable levels of internal consistency reliability across all respondent groups ( $\alpha = 0.85$  for first-married wives,  $\alpha = 0.93$  for remarried wives,  $\alpha = 0.90$  for first-married husbands,  $\alpha = 0.94$  for remarried husbands).

*Marriage order.* Marriage order was a dichotomous variable that indicated whether respondents were in a first marriage or a remarriage. First marriage was coded as 0, whereas remarriage was coded as 1.

*Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.* Both wives and husbands responded to statements about their emotion regulation strategies using the *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003). The ERQ is a 10-item self-report measure designed to assess two forms of emotion regulation, *cognitive reappraisal* (e.g., “When I want to feel more positive emotion, I change the way I think;” “When I want to feel less negative, I change what I am thinking about”) and *expressive suppression* (e.g., “I keep my emotions to myself;” “When I am feeling positive emotions, I am careful not to express them”). Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each statement; response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Composite scores were estimated for both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression and for both wives and husbands. Higher scores indicated higher levels of each construct. Items for cognitive reappraisal yielded acceptable levels of internal consistency reliability across all respondent groups ( $\alpha = 0.78$  for first-married wives,  $\alpha = 0.89$  for remarried wives,  $\alpha = 0.82$  for first-married husbands,  $\alpha = 0.90$  for remarried husbands). Items for expressive suppression also yielded acceptable levels of internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = 0.84$  for first-married wives,  $\alpha = 0.82$  for remarried wives,  $\alpha = 0.84$  for first-married husbands,  $\alpha = 0.89$  for remarried husbands).

*Covariates.* A set of sociodemographic covariates were held constant in our models. Specifically, we included measures for racial/ethnic identity (0 = White, 1 = Non-white), employment status (0 = Not full-time employment, 1 = Full-time employment), education (dummy coded, with four categories representing high school or less, some college, bachelor's degree, or graduate/professional education or more [reference group]), years married (continuous measure in year units), number of children (continuous measure), and the age of the oldest child in the household (continuous measure in year units).

## *Data Analysis*

We began by examining descriptive statistics associated with all substantive variables and covariates for the full sample, as well as across each respondent group (i.e., husbands in first marriages, husbands in remarriages, wives in first marriages, and wives in remarriages). We then assessed (a) whether husbands in first marriages differed significantly from husbands in remarriages, (b) whether wives in first marriages differed significantly from wives in remarriages, and (c) whether husbands and wives differed from each other (Hypotheses 3a and 3b). We used appropriate bivariate statistical tests (i.e., two-tailed, independent-samples *t*-tests for continuous variables, and chi-squared tests for binary or categorical variables).

Following bivariate analyses, we used actor-partner interdependence modeling (APIM) in a path analysis framework (Cook & Kenny, 2005) to examine Research Question 1 and test Hypotheses 1 and 2. The maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors was used. APIM is suitable for handling dyadic data, which are nested and non-independent. Moreover, APIM has the capacity to estimate associations between one dyadic member's reports of independent and dependent variables (i.e., actor effects), as well as estimate associations between one dyadic member's reports of an independent variable and the other dyadic member's reports of a dependent variable (i.e., partner effects). Beginning with a main effects model (Model 1), we regressed husband and wife reports of marital satisfaction on husband and wife reports of marital conflict, husband and wife reports of emotional regulation, marriage order, and covariates. We then estimated a two-way interaction model (Model 2), which focused on potential interactions between marital conflict and emotion regulation from both husband and wife reports. Marriage order was specified as a covariate in this model. Lastly, we estimated a three-way interaction model by specifying marriage order as an additional moderator (Model 3). This model included all integral two-way and three-way interaction terms. For significant interaction effects, we used data visualization to aid in interpretation.

The following criteria were indicative of acceptable model fit: non-significant chi-square test of model fit, comparative fit index (CFI) value greater than or equal to 0.95, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value less than or equal to 0.06 (West et al., 2012). Preliminary assessments indicated that the APIM was sufficiently powered to detect model fit (MacCallum et al., 1996). On the basis of our model degrees of freedom and sample size, our model was sufficiently powered at the 0.80 level to detect close fit or not close fit. Data management was conducted using Stata 15, and all multivariate modeling was conducted using Mplus 8.1. Missing data were handled using a full information maximum likelihood estimator (Enders, 2010).

## Results

### *Differences Between First-married Couples and Remarried Couples*

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for substantive variables and covariates for the full sample as well as for each respondent group (i.e., husbands in first marriages, husbands in remarriages, wives in first marriages, and wives in remarriages). Results from bivariate analyses indicated several significant differences between first-married and remarried husbands and wives. Relative to husbands in remarriages, husbands in first marriages reported significantly lower levels of marital conflict ( $M = 2.20$  versus 2.61) and significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction ( $M = 6.11$  versus 5.60). Husbands from first marriages and remarriages did not differ in levels of emotion regulation strategies. Relative to wives in remarriages, wives in first marriages reported significantly lower levels of marital conflict ( $M = 2.20$  versus 2.45), significantly lower levels of expression suppression ( $M = 2.76$  versus 3.36), and significantly higher levels of marital satisfaction ( $M = 6.09$  versus 5.64); wives from first marriages and remarriages did not differ in levels of cognitive reappraisal. With respect to Hypotheses 3a and 3b, bivariate analyses also indicated that only one emotional regulation variable differed significantly between husbands and wives. Consistent with our expectation as outlined in Hypothesis 3a, husbands reported significantly higher levels of expression suppression than wives ( $M = 3.86$  versus 3.06), on average.

There also were demographic differences. Overall, both husbands and wives in first marriages reported higher levels of education relative to husbands and wives in remarriages. Husbands and wives in remarriages also were more racially and ethnically diverse than husbands and wives in first marriages. A larger proportion of wives in first marriages reported being employed full-time (73%) than wives in remarriages (55.6%). Lastly,

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Differences Between Respondents in First Marriages and Remarriages.

Husbands	Full Sample				First Marriage (n = 111)		Remarriage (n = 108)	
	Mean or %	SD	Min	Max	Mean or %	SD	Mean or %	SD
Marital satisfaction	5.86	1.20	1.00	7.00	6.11	0.93	5.60	1.38*
Marital conflict	2.40	0.77	1.00	6.00	2.20	0.59	2.61	0.87*
Expressive suppression	3.86 <sup>b</sup>	1.48	1.00	7.00	3.77	1.24	3.94	1.69
Cognitive reappraisal	4.74	1.17	1.00	7.00	4.88	0.97	4.60	1.33
Non-white racial/ethnic identity	17.4%				9.9%		25.0%	*
Employed full-time	74.9%				77.5%		72.2%	
High school education or less	11.9%				6.3%		17.6%	*
Some college	31.1%				18.0%		44.4%	*
Bachelor's degree	29.2%				38.7%		19.4%	*
Graduate education or more	27.9%				36.9%		18.5%	*
Income	7.30	2.91	1.00	11.00	7.63	2.65	6.94	3.14
Years married <sup>a</sup>	7.42	6.43	1.00	28.00	8.95	6.08	5.86	4.14*
Number of children <sup>a</sup>	2.05	1.11	1.00	7.00	1.72	0.88	2.40	1.21*
Child age <sup>a</sup>	7.64	5.56	1.00	24.00	5.49	4.31	9.84	5.85*

(continued)

**Table 1. (continued)**

Wives	Full Sample			First Marriage (n = 111)		Remarriage (n = 108)		
	Mean or %	SD	Min	Max	Mean or %	SD	Mean or %	SD
Marital satisfaction	5.87	1.11	1.00	7.00	6.09	0.78	5.64	1.34*
Marital conflict	2.32	0.71	1.00	6.00	2.20	0.54	2.45	0.84*
Expressive suppression	3.06 <sup>b</sup>	1.37	1.00	7.00	2.76	1.21	3.36	1.46*
Cognitive reappraisal	4.90	1.02	1.50	7.00	5.02	0.83	4.77	1.18
Non-white racial/ethnic identity	20.5%				11.7%		29.6%	*
Employed full-time	64.4%				73.0%		55.6%	*
High school education or less	5.9%				2.7%		9.3%	*
Some college	27.9%				15.3%		40.7%	*
Bachelor's degree	32.9%				43.2%		22.2%	*
Graduate education or more	33.3%				38.7%		27.8%	
Income	7.24	2.90	1.00	11.00	7.61	2.65	6.88	3.11

Notes. <sup>a</sup>Indicates significant difference between respondents in first marriages and remarriages; two-tailed independent-sample t-test or chi-square test at the  $p < 0.05$  level. <sup>b</sup>Variable is not shown for wives because the variables are identical between both reporters in each couple. <sup>c</sup>Significant difference at  $p < 0.001$  between husbands and wives as indicated by a two-tailed independent-samples t-test.

first-married couples had been married longer ( $M = 8.95$  years versus 5.86 years), had fewer children in their households ( $M = 1.72$  versus 2.40), and had younger children on average ( $M = 5.49$  years versus 9.84 years) relative to remarried couples. See Table 1 for more details.

### *Emotion Regulation and Marriage Order as Moderators*

Table 2 displays results associated with our APIM. The main effects model yielded significant actor effects, such that husband reports of marital conflict were negatively associated with husband reports of marital satisfaction ( $b = -0.33, p < 0.05; \beta = -0.21$ ) and wife reports of marital conflict were negatively associated with wife reports of marital satisfaction ( $b = -0.60, p < 0.01; \beta = -0.39$ ), net the influence of husband and wife reports of emotion regulation, marriage order, and covariates. Specifically, a one standard deviation increase in husbands' reports of marital conflict was associated with a 0.21 standard deviation decrease in husbands' reports of marital satisfaction; a one standard deviation increase in wives' reports of marital conflict was associated with a 0.39 standard deviation decrease in wives' reports of marital satisfaction.

Turning to two-way interactions, the results yielded several significant interaction terms. First, the model partially supported Hypothesis 2 by revealing a significant interaction between husband reports of marital conflict and expressive suppression on husband reports of marital satisfaction ( $b = -0.16, p < 0.01$ ), net the influence of all other variables in the model. Specifically, with respect to husband reports, higher levels of expressive suppression exacerbated the negative association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction. See Figure 1 for a visualization of the significant interaction effect. The simple slope of husband reports of marital satisfaction regressed on husband reports of marital conflict, also shown in Figure 1, was non-significant at the 95% confidence level across all values of husband reports of expressive suppression (Bauer & Curran, 2005). Thus, the interaction effect should be interpreted with caution.

In partial support of Hypothesis 1, the model also revealed a significant interaction between wife reports of marital conflict and cognitive reappraisal on wife reports of marital satisfaction ( $b = 0.16, p < 0.01$ ), net the influence of all other variables in the model. Specifically, with respect to wife reports, higher levels of cognitive reappraisal attenuated the negative association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction. See Figure 2 for a visualization of the significant interaction effect. Notably, the simple slope of wife reports of marital satisfaction regressed on wife reports of marital conflict,

**Table 2.** Actor–Partner Interdependence Model Estimating Interactive Effects of Marital Conflict, Emotion Regulation, and Marital Status on Marital Satisfaction.

Marital Satisfaction, Husband Report						
	Model 1: Main Effects		Model 2: Two-way Interactions		Model 3: Three-way Interactions	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Remarried	-0.41	(0.24)	0.09	(0.25)	-1.23	(4.05)
<b>Husband Reports (Actor Effects)</b>						
Marital conflict	<b>-0.33</b>	<b>(0.13)</b>	<b>0.02</b>	(0.57)	0.18	(1.09)
Cognitive reappraisal	0.10	(0.07)	0.14	(0.3)	-0.37	(0.5)
Expressive suppression	-0.10	(0.06)	0.08	(0.16)	0.31	(0.37)
Marital conflict X cognitive reappraisal			0.03	(0.11)	0.11	(0.21)
Marital conflict X expressive suppression			<b>-0.16</b>	<b>(0.05)</b>	-0.18	(0.17)
Marital conflict X remarried					0.14	(1.29)
Cognitive reappraisal X remarried					0.61	(0.59)
Expressive suppression X remarried					0.09	(0.41)
Marital conflict X cognitive reappraisal X remarried					-0.12	(0.24)
Marital conflict X expressive suppression X remarried					0.01	(0.17)
<b>Wife Reports (Partner Effects)</b>						
Marital conflict	-0.16	(0.11)	0.17	(0.28)	0.01	(0.89)
Cognitive reappraisal	0.13	(0.07)	0.06	(0.16)	0.35	(0.3)
Expressive suppression	0.06	(0.05)	0.31	(0.13)	-0.02	(0.24)
Marital conflict X cognitive reappraisal			0.04	(0.06)	-0.09	(0.16)
Marital conflict X expressive suppression			-0.01	(0.05)	0.03	(0.12)
Marital conflict X remarried					-0.36	(0.93)

(continued)

**Table 2. (continued)**

Marital Satisfaction, Husband Report									
Model 1: Main Effects			Model 2: Two-way Interactions			Model 3: Three-way Interactions			
b	SE	p-value	b	SE	p-value	b	SE	p-value	
Cognitive reappraisal X remarried			-0.60	(0.42)				0.15	
Expressive suppression X remarried			0.26	(0.34)				0.45	
Marital conflict X cognitive reappraisal X remarried			0.21	(0.19)				0.27	
Marital conflict X expressive suppression X remarried			-0.10	(0.14)				0.47	
R-squared	0.19				0.22				0.27
Marital Satisfaction, Wife Report									
Model 1: Main Effects			Model 2: Two-way Interactions			Model 3: Three-way Interactions			
b	SE	p-value	b	SE	p-value	b	SE	p-value	
Remarried	-0.21	(0.23)	0.37		0.33	2.16	(2.53)	0.39	
<b>Wife Reports (Actor Effects)</b>									
Marital conflict	<b>-0.60</b>	<b>(0.12)</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>-1.58</b>	<b>(0.28)</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>-1.83</b>	<b>(0.58)</b>	<b>0.00</b>
Cognitive reappraisal	0.13	(0.08)	0.11	-0.26	(0.17)	0.13	-0.25	(0.19)	0.18
Expressive suppression	-0.07	(0.05)	0.15	<b>-0.20</b>	<b>(0.1)</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>-0.34</b>	<b>(0.16)</b>	<b>0.03</b>
Marital conflict X cognitive reappraisal			<b>0.16</b>	<b>(0.06)</b>	<b>0.01</b>	<b>0.22</b>	<b>(0.09)</b>	<b>0.01</b>	
Marital conflict X expressive suppression			0.06	(0.04)	0.08	0.11	(0.08)	0.15	
Marital conflict X remarried						0.05	(0.69)	0.94	

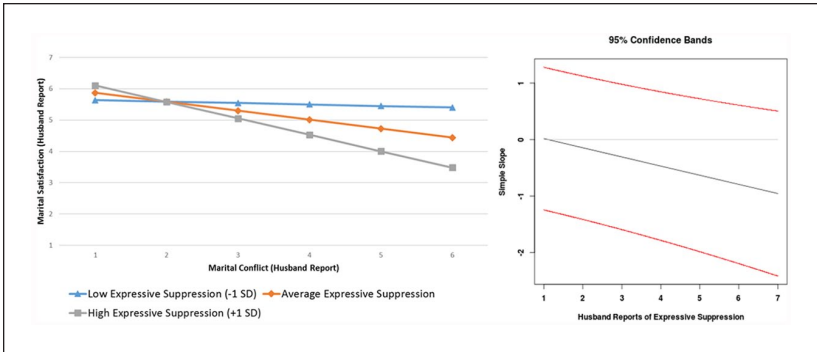
(continued)



**Table 2. (continued)**

	Marital Satisfaction, Wife Report								
	Model 1: Main Effects			Model 2: Two-way Interactions			Model 3: Three-way Interactions		
	b	SE	p-value	b	SE	p-value	b	SE	p-value
Cognitive reappraisal X remarried							-0.24	(0.38)	0.53
Expressive suppression X remarried							0.34	(0.25)	0.17
Marital conflict X cognitive reappraisal X remarried							0.00	(0.14)	0.99
Marital conflict X expressive suppression X remarried							-0.09	(0.09)	0.32
<b>Husband Reports (Partner Effects)</b>									
Marital conflict	-0.05	(0.12)	0.65	<b>-0.95</b>	<b>(0.47)</b>	<b>0.04</b>	-0.25	(0.58)	0.66
Cognitive reappraisal	-0.08	(0.06)	0.21	<b>-0.61</b>	<b>(0.26)</b>	<b>0.02</b>	-0.25	(0.32)	0.44
Expressive suppression	-0.03	(0.04)	0.45	0.11	(0.12)	0.37	0.14	(0.18)	0.45
Marital conflict X cognitive reappraisal				<b>0.22</b>	<b>(0.1)</b>	<b>0.02</b>	0.05	(0.13)	0.69
Marital conflict X expressive suppression				-0.05	(0.04)	0.21	-0.05	(0.08)	0.53
Marital conflict X remarried							-0.69	(0.73)	0.34
Cognitive reappraisal X remarried							-0.36	(0.43)	0.40
Expressive suppression X remarried							-0.09	(0.25)	0.72
Marital conflict X cognitive reappraisal X remarried							0.17	(0.15)	0.26
Marital conflict X expressive suppression X remarried							0.01	(0.09)	0.89
R-squared			0.31			0.37			
<b>Model Fit</b>									
$\chi^2(df)$ , p-value	16.79(10)	p = 0.08		15.65(10)	p = 0.11		14.13(10)	p = 0.17	
CFI	0.93			0.95			0.97		
RMSEA (90% CI)	0.06 (0.00, 0.10)			0.05 (0.00, 0.10)			0.04 (0.00, 0.09)		

Notes. Bold font highlights significance at  $p < 0.05$ . The model included the following covariates: racial identity, educational attainment, employment status, years married, number of children, and child age. CFI = Comparative fit index; RMSEA = Root mean square error of approximation.

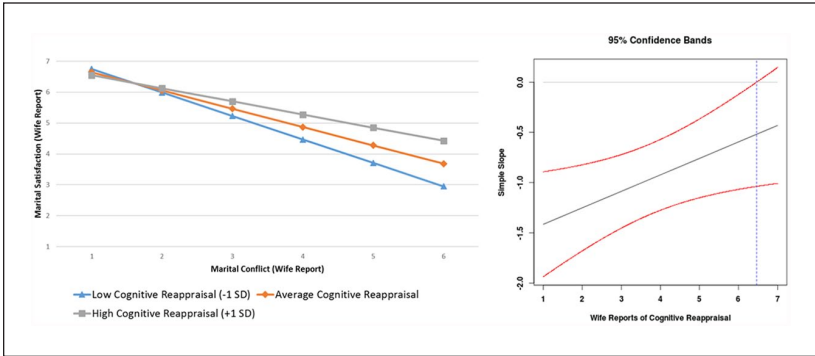


**Figure 1.** A visualization of the interaction effect between marital conflict and expressive suppression on marital satisfaction, husband reports (actor effect). Notes. *SD* = Standard deviation. All other model variables are held at sample mean levels. The simple slopes chart (a) visualizes the regions of significance and provides an inferential test for any possible simple slope of the focal predictor variable and (b) graphically depicts the precision of estimation of the effect of the focal predictor over the full range of the moderator.

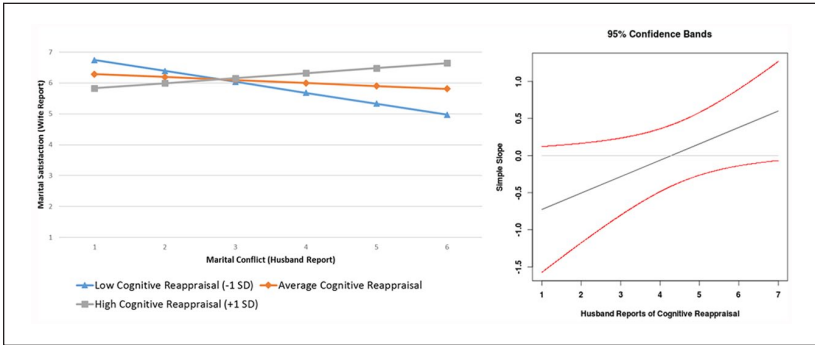
also shown in Figure 2, was significant at the 95% confidence level across almost all values of wife reports of cognitive reappraisal (i.e., up to the approximate value of 6.5). Thus, the interaction effect can be interpreted with relative confidence.

In regard to three-way interactions between marital conflict, emotion regulation, and marriage order to note they were non-significant for both husband and wife reports and in terms of both actor and partner effects. In partial contradiction to Hypotheses 1 and 2, this indicated that the capacity of emotion regulation to moderate a link between marital conflict and marital satisfaction did not differ significantly by marriage order in our sample.

Lastly, with respect to Research Question 1 and in further support of Hypothesis 1, the model revealed a significant interaction between husband reports of marital conflict and cognitive reappraisal on wife reports of marital satisfaction, representing a significant interactive partner effect ( $b = 0.22, p < 0.05$ ). Specifically, higher levels of husband reports of cognitive reappraisal diminished the negative association between husband reports of marital conflict and wife reports of marital satisfaction. See Figure 3 for a visualization of the significant interaction effect. The simple slope of wife reports of marital satisfaction regressed on husband reports of marital conflict, also shown in Figure 3, was non-significant at the 95% confidence level across all values of husband reports of cognitive reappraisal. Thus, the interaction effect should be interpreted with caution.



**Figure 2.** A visualization of the interaction effect between marital conflict and cognitive reappraisal on marital satisfaction, wife reports (actor effect). Notes: *SD* = Standard deviation. All other model variables are held at sample mean levels. The simple slopes chart (a) visualizes the regions of significance and provides an inferential test for any possible simple slope of the focal predictor variable and (b) graphically depicts the precision of estimation of the effect of the focal predictor over the full range of the moderator.



**Figure 3.** A visualization of the interaction effect between husband reports of marital conflict and cognitive reappraisal on wife reports of marital satisfaction (partner effect). Notes: *SD* = Standard deviation. All other model variables are held at sample mean levels. The simple slopes chart (a) visualizes the regions of significance and provides an inferential test for any possible simple slope of the focal predictor variable and (b) graphically depicts the precision of estimation of the effect of the focal predictor over the full range of the moderator.

## Discussion

We used a sample of 111 couples in first marriages and 108 couples in remarriages to examine associations among marital conflict, marital satisfaction, and emotion regulation strategies in the forms of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. We hypothesized that greater use of cognitive reappraisal would reduce the negative association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction and that this moderating effect would be greater for remarried couples than first-married couples (Hypothesis 1) and that greater use of expressive suppression would enhance the negative association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction and that this moderating effect would be greater for remarried couples than first-married couples (Hypothesis 2). Neither of these hypotheses was completely supported by the data, however, the findings did yield partial support by providing evidence that emotion regulation strategies do moderate associations between marital conflict and marital satisfaction. For husbands, regardless of marriage order, greater use of expressive suppression exacerbated the negative association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction; however, as noted earlier, the simple slopes analysis indicated that this interaction effect should be interpreted with some caution. For wives, regardless of marriage order, cognitive reappraisal attenuated the negative association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction. Simple slopes analysis indicated that this interaction effect could be interpreted with relative confidence.

We also assessed gender differences in levels of emotion regulation and potential partner effects. In terms of gender differences across substantive variables (Hypotheses 3a and 3b), we found that husbands reported significantly higher average levels of expression suppression than wives. No other significant differences between husbands and wives were indicated. Although findings from previous studies about gender and emotion regulation have been somewhat mixed (e.g., Bloch et al., 2014; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Masumoto et al., 2016), our findings cohere with those studies (and our hypotheses) indicating women use cognitive reappraisal more than men do (Duarte et al., 2015; Spaapen et al., 2014) and men may rely on suppression of emotional expressions more than women do (Lafrance Robinson et al., 2014). This general area of inquiry warrants further empirical investigation.

In terms of partner effects (Research Question 1), we also found some limited evidence that husbands' greater use of cognitive reappraisal buffered the negative association between husbands' reports of marital conflict and wives' reports of marital satisfaction. No other partner effects were found, and simple slopes analysis indicated that this interaction effect should be interpreted with caution. Taken together, our results suggest there might be

dyadic interdependencies with respect to the role emotion regulation plays in how couples experience conflict and relationship satisfaction. At the least, our use of APIM showcases the robustness of the identified actor effects, which takes into account potential partner influences. We contend that dyadic data should continue to be used in this area of research.

Our findings suggest that cognitive reappraisal might exert greater influence on relationship dynamics among wives relative to husbands, given that the findings were consistent with theoretical propositions (Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004) and prior research (Klein et al., 2016; Low et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2012) showing that cognitive appraisals have generally positive effects on reducing distress, and expressive suppression generally has negative effects. Husband's suppression of emotional expression is perhaps not surprising, as many studies have reported that some men tend to deny, stonewall, and repress emotions (e.g., Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Velotti et al., 2016), which does not serve them well in managing distress. In fact, suppression of emotions has been found to be associated with feeling less comfortable or authentic (English & John, 2013), which in turn contributes to lower relationship satisfaction (e.g., Klein et al., 2016). In contrast, women generally are more likely to think about their relationships than men (Zlomke & Hahn, 2010), which may facilitate women optimistically reappraising behaviors, events, and relationship dynamics in ways that assist them in feeling more positive about their relationships and their abilities at handling problems. In general, the results of this study are congruent with traditionally gendered socialization of males and females regarding the ways in which emotions are managed in close relationships (Noller, 1993).

Although we found some evidence that emotion regulation strategies can moderate the association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction (particularly among wives and with respect to cognitive reappraisal), we did not find differences between individuals in first marriages and remarriages, as we had expected. Prior researchers have suggested that remarried couples differ from first marriages in how conflicts are managed (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Jensen et al., 2014a; Jensen et al., 2017), displaying poorer skills at problem-solving, and conflict resolution (Bray et al., 1987; Farrell & Markman, 1986; Halford et al., 2007; Mirecki et al., 2013). In our study, however, even though individuals in remarriages reported greater levels of marital conflict and lower levels of marital satisfaction than individuals in first marriages, spouses in remarriages utilized the same emotion regulation strategies with generally the same effects as spouses in first marriages. The similarities across marriage order groups may be due to several factors. First, individuals may simply "do what they do" in managing emotions during any stressful situation; in other words, they rely on what they know and do what they have

often done previously to manage relationship challenges. Spouses in remarried stepfamilies thus might do what they did before (and do what individuals currently in first marriages do). Second, prior research has found that remarried couples generally do little to prepare for the challenges of remarriage and stepfamily living. They seek neither stepfamily education nor counseling prior to a remarriage, even those that include stepchildren (Higginbotham et al., 2009). This increases the odds that individuals in remarried stepfamilies will rely on skills and emotion regulation strategies they have used in the past. Given the relatively short courtship periods between marriages (Ganong & Coleman, 2017), it seems probable that individuals in remarriages may not have taken the time to prepare for their new unions and the challenges those unions present. In addition, the remarried couples in our sample had been married for a mean of almost six years—the couples in the sample may have weathered early marital challenges and may represent stably remarried couples who have adequate coping strategies—remarried couples without sufficient conflict management and coping skills may have separated already.

We can only speculate, however, about the reasons for the marriage order similarities in emotion regulation strategies. Future researchers will have to explore this further. Considering the apparent gendered impact of emotion regulation strategies in both first-married and remarried couples, more attention should be paid to strategies designed to lessen these gendered phenomena as part of preparation for (re)marriage.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Our findings should be interpreted in the context of some study limitations. For one, the ERQ refers to general emotional regulation strategies and does not necessarily indicate how emotions are regulated in the specific context of marital relationships. In addition, our sample consisted of volunteers recruited online and their responses should not be considered representative of all couples in first marriages or couples in remarriages. The sample was also predominantly white, well-educated, and middle class. All respondents self-reported that they were married and had children, so we cannot generalize findings to cohabiting couples with their own children or cohabiting couples with a child or children from prior relationships, nor can the findings be generalized to gay and lesbian couples with children or stepchildren or to any childfree couples. It also should be noted that some individuals who were in remarried stepfamilies were, in fact, in their first marriages; we defined these as remarried couples if at least one spouse had been married and had a child from a prior relationship. The cross-sectional design was also a limitation of this study.

Stepfamilies are complex. In this study, we were not able to examine differences in stepfamily households and other structural factors (e.g., contacts with nonresidential co-parents) that may affect conflict management, stress, and marital satisfaction. For instance, couples in which both have children from prior unions may have more conflicts than simple stepparent households, and the quality of co-parental relationships may be relevant in understanding remarriage couple conflict management. Future researchers should examine variations within stepfamily couples to explore associations among emotion regulation strategies, marital conflict, and satisfaction.

Future researchers also should obtain a more diverse and more representative sample of individuals in first marriages and remarriages. The use of longitudinal designs also would be necessary to explore causal linkages between relationship conflict, emotion regulation strategies, and marital satisfaction. Cohabiting couples should also be included in future samples and these couples should include individuals in first cohabiting unions and those who have reproduced in earlier relationships. It might be useful as well to use mixed method or qualitative designs to explore emotion regulation and marriage quality. For example, husbands and wives could be presented with typical scenarios and then asked to indicate how they would handle the scenario and how they would manage their emotional responses. Alternatively, individuals could be asked to describe their most recent stressful relationship encounter and their emotion management strategies during that event. Such qualitative data could provide a rich description of how and when emotion regulation strategies are employed among couples.

## *Conclusions*

Although remarried husbands and wives reported more marital conflict and lower marital satisfaction than spouses in first marriages, in this study, we found that emotion regulation strategies did not moderate the association between marital conflict and marital satisfaction differently for first-married couples and remarried couples. Marriage order appeared to be less important than gender in how expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal moderated these associations, with expressive suppression exacerbating the negative effects of marital conflict on marital satisfaction for men, and cognitive reappraisal attenuating the negative association for women. One study cannot answer all questions about emotion regulation and variations in couple dynamics for couples who have had diverse marital histories, but the evidence from this study suggests that researchers might look for other explanations for differences in marital dynamics between first marriages and remarriages.

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