

DETERMINING THE FACTORS OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION, SEXUAL COMMUNICATION, AND COMMUNICATION AFFECT

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Abstract

Several theories of intimate relationship satisfaction have been proposed to explain which relationship processes truly provide for a happy relationship. The literature suggests three main variables as central to relationship satisfaction: interpersonal communication, sexual communication, and communication affect. Each factor has been shown to relate to relationship satisfaction, but they have not been directly compared with each other in a single sample, nor have they been tested on young, exclusive dating relationships. Questionnaires derived from these three approaches were given to 40 college students in exclusive intimate relationships, and were correlated with scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, a well validated inventory assessing overall relationship adjustment and satisfaction. Relationship communication skills proved to be the most reliable predictor of concurrent relationship satisfaction. Implications for this finding are discussed.

Introduction

The search for the key to what accounts for relationship satisfaction has long mystified researchers. As such, inventory after inventory has been created to measure different variables within relationships. Researchers have created inventories assessing everything from sexual satisfaction and function (LoPiccolo & Steger, 1974; McCabe, 1998) and overall communication (Hecht, 1978), to interaction affect (Gottman & Levenson, 1985). Several questionnaires have been created that attempt to measure several variables at once on different (sometimes unfounded and ambiguous) subscales, such as

intellectual intimacy or attitude to privacy, each assumed, but many times not supported, to relate to overall relationship satisfaction (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Holman & Li, 1997; Schaefer & Olson, 1981). There is even a debate as to which overall relationship satisfaction inventory to use, with new ones always being created and compared to the last (Locke & Wallace, 1959; Snyder, 1979; Spanier, 1976).

The most extensively researched applied approaches that measure variables related to relationship satisfaction are derived from general communication, sexual communication, and interaction affect theories. The communication processes within a couple have been strongly emphasized in relationship counseling, and it has been proposed that “the study of marriage and marital therapy can best be advanced at this time through a better understanding of marital communication processes” (Notarius, Markman, & Gottman, 1983, p. 118). Communication skills have even been claimed to be the “key” and “lifeblood,” of a successful relationship (Bienvenu, 1969; Bienvenu, 1970). Research has backed up this claim and has found that good communication skills can differentiate satisfied from unsatisfied couples (Gottman, 1982; Gottman & Porterfield, 1981; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998; Pasupathi, Laura L. Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1999).

Other researchers have taken a merely sexual stance, and proposed that sexual communication and the resulting sexual intimacy can alone distinguish satisfied from unsatisfied relationships (Banmen & Vogel, 1985; McCabe, 1999). As one researcher explains, “Children are taught from childhood not to express sexual feelings and impulses. In the majority of American families, parents do not communicate with their children about sex. Consequently, young couples have very little adequate preparation for understanding their own sexuality and for later marital dialogue,” (Bienvenu, 1980a, p. 1). When the sexual communication breaks down within a couple, this leads to frustration and resentment when neither member of the couple can express their desires. This may further result in people taking on outside sexual partners. Despite the obvious importance of sexual communication skills, there has only been one inventory created to solely measure this communication dimension, and despite its use in practice, the research on this is surprisingly quite minimal (Banmen et al, 1985; Bienvenu, 1980a; Bienvenu, 1980b; McCabe, 1999).

In addition to verbal communication skills, there is a growing body of research that emphasizes the emotions in couple interactions. Researchers have begun to analyze the conflicts of couples in the

laboratory, and can now predict marital happiness and stability after observing their interactions. Positive and negative affect have been measured in marital interactions, and a higher exchange of negative emotions associated with a low degree of positive emotions is characteristic of both unstable and unsatisfied couples (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Gottman, 1993; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). In addition to simply the level of positive or negative affect, researchers have proposed a balance theory of positive and negative affect in interaction that relates to relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1993). The role of affect in interaction is so prominent, that within three minutes of a marital conflict, researchers can now predict divorce using affective measures (Carrere & Gottman, 1999).

To date, these approaches have only been extensively tested on married couples. Despite the fact that young exclusive dating relationships provide the foundation for relationships in later life, researchers dismiss these relationships as immature and unstable, although in fact the opposite may be true. Researchers have blatantly ignored this group with statements like “the usual college dating relationship was, of course, not sufficient for meeting our criteria” (Schaefer et al., 1981). In this experiment, three models of relationship processes, interpersonal communication, sexual communication, and interaction affect, were compared with an overall measure of relationship adjustment and satisfaction. Using a direct analysis and comparison of these variables, it will be determined which model best relates to overall relationship functioning. This type of multidimensional investigation has never been accomplished in the literature, possibly because researchers approach the subject of relationship satisfaction with predetermined views. This method allows each model a chance to prove its usefulness in predicting relationship satisfaction in a single sample. We hypothesize that all variables will reliably predict relationship satisfaction, however because college relationships are shorter than marriages, basic communication skills will be most salient when assessing relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Forty university students (20 woman and 20 men) from a liberal arts college located in the Northeast, between the ages of 18 and 22 that have enrolled in an introductory psychology class and have

described themselves as involved in an exclusive relationship, were asked to complete four questionnaires that assessed their overall relationship functioning, satisfaction, and communication in different areas. All participants were contacted through a bulletin board sign up sheet, and were asked to arrange an hour session to fill out questionnaires. When finished, participants were subsequently debriefed about the purpose of the experiment and given lab credit for their time.

Materials

Four questionnaires were given to participants to measure different aspects of their relationship: the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), a shortened version of the Premarital Communication Inventory (Bienvenu, 1975), the Sexual Communication Inventory (Bienvenu, 1980), and the Conflict Affect Assessment Inventory, a questionnaire derived from the Specific Affect Coding System (Gottman & Levenson, 1985; Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman et al., 1998) designed to measure emotions during a conflict. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale was chosen because it has been used to measure the satisfaction and adjustment of both married and unmarried couples, and because of its overall high reliability of .96. Twenty-eight items of the scale were used to assess overall relationship adjustment in these couples, and in addition, individuals were asked to record the length of their relationship. The questionnaire included questions such as “In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?” Most questions are answered on a 5-point scale from “never” to “all of the time.”

A 34-item version of the Premarital Communication Inventory was chosen because it was designed to measure communication skills in exclusively dating couples, and was originally tested on a sample of 78% college students (Bienvenu, 1975). The items in the inventory had been validated with 530 subjects, and the inventory had been able to significantly distinguish those couples with exceptional and dysfunctional communication skills. The items included questions such as “Do you find his/her tone of voice irritating?” and “Do you think your partner is too critical?” All questions attempt to get at the overall construct of relationship communication quality.

The Sexual Communication Inventory (Bienvenu, 1980), is a one of a kind 40-item questionnaire that assesses the sexual communication skills of a couple. The inventory was validated using a small

sample, and had also been approved by a panel of sex therapists certified by the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT). Marital status of a couple was not assumed in this questionnaire, thus making it applicable to this sample. This inventory was given to participants to assess their overall level of sexual communication. Sample items included “Does your partner discuss clearly matters related to sex?” and “Do you think your partner understands your sexual needs?” Participants answered either yes, no, or sometimes by checking the appropriate box.

To investigate the couples’ interaction affective levels, researchers would usually observe couples in a conflict and code appropriately. The coding of these interactions often took years (Gottman & Levenson, 1985), so it seemed necessary to find a new and faster approach to investigate the same construct. Five positive dimensions (affection, humor, interest, joy, and validation) and 10 negative dimensions (anger, disgust, contempt, sadness, tension, whining, defensiveness, domineering, belligerence, and withdrawal) were taken from the original Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF) (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) that tested for communication affect, and were adapted into a 30-item Conflict Affect Assessment Inventory in which participants described a recent argument and reported the degree to which they felt each one of 15 affect dimensions on a 9-point scale also adapted from the SPAFF (Gottman & Levenson, 1985). To control for biases, participants also recorded how they believed their partner perceived them.

Results

The four questionnaires were scored in accordance with the authors’ instructions. A multiple regression analysis was conducted predicting relationship satisfaction from relationship communication, sexual communication, and communication affect. The overall equation was significant, $F(3, 36) = 22.08$, $p \leq .001$, indicating that these variables were indeed able to reliably predict relationship satisfaction as was hypothesized. However, only relationship communication contributed significantly to the score variance as an individual predictors. This finding indicates that couples with better relationship skills are more likely to be satisfied in their relationships. No statistically significant effects were found for gender or length of relationship on relationship satisfaction.

Discussion

Relationship counseling methods continue to be derived from research done with married couples. Few studies are available that have assessed relationship satisfaction in exclusively dating couples. The results from this experiment indicate that the most significant factor predicting relationship satisfaction from among the three models tested is relationship communication skills. Multidimensional research of this sort should continue to be done, and has implications for marital and premarital couples alike. There is no doubt that more research is desperately needed, considering some researchers have stated that the entire field of marital therapy might be “in a state of crisis” because of ineffective therapeutic approaches (Gottman et al., 1998).

A relationship communication model has been used in practice and shown to be quite effective (Cole & Cole, 1999). This model involves the teaching of listening and verbal skills to ensure better understanding between partners, very much like those skills tested for on the Premarital Communication Inventory. With college-aged dating couples, the results of this study suggest that the lack of basic communication skills is a factor which determines relationship satisfaction more than any other interaction factor. The most effective method to improve relationship satisfaction among this group may be to make couples more aware of these communication skills.

Research in this area must not stop here. This multidimensional model should be applied in a longitudinal paradigm as well. Skills in this area should be taught to couples to test their effect on later relationship satisfaction in an experimental study. Above all, therapists need to be aware of which techniques should be kept, refined, or discarded.

Our early dating relationships provide the foundation for relationships in later life. The implications of these results may contribute to a more effective relationship counseling method with this sample. If each couple knows on which skills they should focus their attention early in the relationship, this will provide for a better relationship in the future. When an individual goes through dozens of failed relationships, the assault on his or her self-esteem and fear of rejection can affect how he or she deals with relationships for the rest of their life. This does not have to happen if individuals and couples alike know the skills which contribute effectively to long lasting and satisfying relationships.

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