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Duncan Cramer

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Relationship Satisfaction and Conflict Style in Romantic Relationships

DUNCAN CRAMER

*Department of Social Sciences
Loughborough University, England*

ABSTRACT. The aim of this study was to determine to what extent the association between relationship satisfaction and a negative conflict style in romantic relationships may be due to the frequency of conflict or of conflict not satisfactorily resolved. The 6-item Relationship Assessment Scale (S. S. Hendrick, 1988) and an 11-item conflict scale created by the author for this study were completed by a group of young British adults (65 women and 30 men) concerning their current romantic relationships, all of which were heterosexual. The results confirmed that a negative conflict style was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction when either conflict or conflict not satisfactorily resolved was controlled. Conflict not satisfactorily resolved was also significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction when either conflict or a negative conflict style was controlled. Conflict and a negative conflict style were also significantly correlated with relationship duration.

DISSATISFACTION IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS has been found to be closely associated with having differences of opinion and negative conflict styles (Cramer, 1998). For example, 9 of the 15 items of the Short Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) and 15 of the 32 items of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) assess the extent of agreement or disagreement between partners on various issues because these items were found to be related to other items measuring relationship adjustment. A major aspect of many approaches to couple therapy involves trying to encourage partners to resolve their differences (Jacobson & Gorman, 1995).

Several researchers have developed questionnaires for assessing the frequency of conflict resolution styles in romantic relationships and have generally found these to be associated with relationship satisfaction. For instance, Kurdek (1994, 1995) devised the 16-item Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory, which measures the frequency of the four styles of problem solving: positive problem

Address correspondence to Duncan Cramer, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, England; d.cramer@lboro.ac.uk (e-mail).

solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance. These styles were correlated with concurrent relationship satisfaction as measured by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986) in North American gay, lesbian, and married couples in the first study and in married couples in the second study. In the first study, 27 of the 32 correlations were significant; in the second study, 13 of the 16 correlations were significant.

The finding that relationship satisfaction is associated with conflict style may be confounded by the following two main problems. First, these studies have measured conflict styles in terms of how frequently the styles have been used but have not assessed how frequently conflict itself occurs. Therefore, it is unclear to what extent the frequency of conflict style is confounded by the frequency of conflict. Conflict style frequency may be related to conflict frequency, or conflict frequency may be as or more closely associated with relationship satisfaction than conflict style frequency. In other words, conflict style frequency may simply reflect conflict frequency.

The conflict style questions are not applicable to individuals who do not experience conflict and so should not be completed by them. No indication is given in these studies that some participants did not complete these questions. Without questions assessing whether conflict occurs, it is not possible to determine whether and in what way individuals not experiencing conflict are responding to these questions. Second, because these studies have not measured the extent to which conflict has been satisfactorily resolved, it is unclear to what extent the frequency of conflict style is confounded by the frequency of conflict not satisfactorily resolved. In other words, conflict style frequency may largely represent the frequency of conflict not satisfactorily resolved.

The aim of the present study was to determine the extent to which the association between relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships and the frequency of a negative conflict style is due to the potential confounding influence of frequency of conflict and conflict not satisfactorily resolved.

Method

Participants and Measures

Participants were a convenience sample of 199 British undergraduates. Relationship satisfaction was measured with the Hendrick (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale, which Hendrick found was correlated .80 with the Spanier (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale. The Relationship Assessment Scale consists of 7 items (e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?") answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale. In this study the last item ("How many problems are there in your relationship?") was excluded from the analyses because it overlapped conceptually with the content of the questions on differences of opinion. High scores indicate greater relationship satisfaction.

Handling differences of opinion over minor issues was measured with 11 items answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (7). Minor issues were chosen to ensure that more participants would be able to answer items on how differences were handled and to prevent participants from referring to differences of opinion concerning the ongoing status of the relationship itself. The first item asked about the frequency of having different opinions ("How often do you have different opinions with her/him?"). The next 5 items asked about the frequency of various negative experiences of having such differences (e.g., "How often do you have different opinions where you feel irritated with her/him?" and "How often do you have different opinions which you avoid discussing with her/him?"). The last 5 items inquired about the frequency of the differences being satisfactorily resolved (e.g., "How often do you have different opinions which remain unresolved?" and "How often do you have different opinions in which you are satisfied with the result?"). Higher scores indicate more frequent differences, negative experiences, and differences not satisfactorily resolved. These three indices are respectively called conflict, negative conflict style, and unresolved conflict.

Procedure

Participants were asked to answer the questions in relation to their current romantic relationship if they had one, a past romantic relationship if they did not have a current romantic relationship, or their current closest friend if they had never had a romantic partner. The gender and age of the participant and of the person in the relationship were also obtained as well as the duration of the relationship in years and months.

Results

The analyses were based on the 108 participants who answered the questionnaire in terms of a current romantic relationship. Of these, 3 stated that they never had differences of opinion. Because items on handling differences could not be applied to individuals not having different opinions, these 3 participants were excluded.

The analyses were conducted on 65 women (mean age = 23.28, $SD = 8.64$) and 30 men (mean age = 23.20, $SD = 9.67$) having some differences of opinion and having also complete data on the main variables of interest. Because the results were similar for women and men, they are not presented separately. The mean duration of the current romantic relationship was 4.71 years ($SD = 7.22$). All the relationships were heterosexual. The alpha reliability of the 6-item Relationship Assessment Scale was .87, which is similar to that of .86 reported by Hendrick (1988) for the 7-item scale. The alpha reliability of the 5-item negative conflict style measure was .85; for the 5-item unresolved conflict measure, it was .90.

All the significance levels of the correlations and first-order partial correlations were one-tailed. Relationship duration was significantly, positively correlated with conflict ($r = .19, p < .05$) and negative conflict style ($r = .24, p < .01$). Relationship duration was not related to unresolved conflict ($r = .10$) or relationship satisfaction ($r = .01$).

Relationship satisfaction was significantly, negatively correlated with conflict ($r = -.35, p < .001$), negative conflict style ($r = -.53, p < .001$), and unresolved conflict ($r = -.51, p < .001$). Negative conflict style was also significantly correlated with conflict ($r = .60, p < .001$) and unresolved conflict ($r = .68, p < .001$). When I controlled for conflict, relationship satisfaction was still significantly negatively correlated with negative conflict style ($r = -.43, p < .001$) and unresolved conflict ($r = -.41, p < .01$). When I controlled for negative conflict style, relationship satisfaction was still significantly correlated with unresolved conflict ($r = -.24, p < .05$) but not with conflict ($r = -.04$). When I controlled for unresolved conflict, relationship satisfaction was still negatively correlated with negative conflict style ($r = -.29, p < .01$) but not with conflict ($r = -.12$).

Discussion

The frequency of differences of opinion over minor issues increased with the duration of the relationship. A more negative style of handling differences of opinion also increased with the length of the relationship. This may partly result from participants feeling freer to express more negative behavior in a more secure relationship (Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975). The length of the relationship was not associated with the frequency of satisfactorily resolving minor differences.

Relationship satisfaction was more strongly related to negative conflict style and to unresolved conflict than to conflict. The first-order partial correlation of relationship satisfaction with conflict style remained significant when either conflict or unresolved conflict was controlled. These results show that the association between relationship satisfaction and a negative conflict style is not caused by the confounding influence of either conflict or unresolved conflict. These findings do suggest that a negative conflict style such as becoming irritated or avoiding discussion is associated with relationship satisfaction.

The first-order partial correlation of relationship satisfaction with conflict not satisfactorily resolved also remained significant when either conflict or a negative conflict style was controlled, indicating that this association was not caused by the confounding influence of either of these two variables. However, the first-order partial correlation of relationship satisfaction with conflict was no longer significant when either a negative conflict style or unresolved conflict was controlled. This finding suggests that it is not the frequency of opinion differences that is associated with relationship satisfaction but the manner in which differences are handled and the extent to which they are satisfactorily resolved.

A cross-sectional study such as this cannot address issues of causality.

Nonetheless, there is some evidence from other studies to suggest that the relationship between relationship satisfaction and conflict style may be reciprocal. Vincent, Friedman, Nugent, and Messerly (1979) found that married couples who were asked to act as if they were happily married showed more positive problem-solving and positive verbal and nonverbal behavior and less negative verbal behavior when trying to resolve problems than those asked to act as if they were unhappily married, implying that relationship satisfaction may affect conflict style.

On the other hand, Jacobson (1978) showed that couples with severe marital problems who received communication and problem-solving training reported greater marital adjustment than those on the waiting list control condition, suggesting that increased problem solving may lead to greater relationship satisfaction. Both these studies were carried out in the United States. Although the findings of these two studies are suggestive, further research is necessary to rule out alternative explanations for their results.

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