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Relationship Satisfaction

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Synonyms

Couples satisfaction; Relational functioning; Relational well-being

Definition and Overview

Relationship satisfaction has been defined as a subjective sense of relational quality arising from evaluations of the positive and negative dimensions of one's romantic relationship (Fallis et al., 2016, adapted from Lawrance & Byers, 1995). From an evolutionary perspective, this penchant for tracking relational costs and benefits is seen as an evolved mechanism with a distinct adaptive function (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Long-lasting, committed relationships create the groundwork for reproductive success in humans, facilitating both direct reproduction and the ability to effectively care for offspring (Mealey, 2000). Given that relationship satisfaction has direct implications for the likelihood that genes are successfully transmitted to subsequent generations, humans have evolved the capacity to scan their relationships for cues of dissatisfaction (de la Garza-Mercer et al., 2006). This pattern serves to generate motivation for improving relational quality or, when necessary, for seeking another relationship with the potential for more favorable reproductive outcomes (Shackelford & Buss, 2000).

An extensive body of research points to the importance of relationship satisfaction as a construct (for a review, see Bühler et al., 2021). Relationship satisfaction is critical for both reproductive success and individual health outcomes across the lifespan. Indeed, few socioemotional variables predict well-being and longevity more robustly than the quality of one's romantic relationships (e.g., Byers, 2014; Whitton & Whisman, 2010; Fuller-Iglesias, 2015). With that in mind, this chapter aims to provide a broad overview of the literature on relationship satisfaction with a dedicated focus on the factors that facilitate and attenuate such satisfaction from an evolutionary perspective. Given the breadth of research on relationship satisfaction, a brief overview is also provided of correlates from other, non-evolutionary perspectives, including relational, clinical, and psychophysiological perspectives.

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Correlates of Relational Satisfaction from an Evolutionary Perspective

Sexual Satisfaction

Sexual and relationship satisfaction have been closely and consistently linked throughout the literature; couples who are more satisfied in their relationships are also, on average, happier with their sex lives (for a review, see Freihart et al., 2020). Notably, the directionality of this larger relationship varies by biological sex in heterosexual relationships. For women, relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction tend to covary over time; for men, sexual satisfaction often precedes and drives future evaluations of relational quality (Fallis et al., 2016). This finding is consistent with sexual strategies theory, which contends that men and women face different short- and long-term adaptive problems in their sexual relationships (for a review, see Buss & Schmitt, 2017).

These sexually differentiated adaptive problems stem from stark differences in minimum obligatory parental investment (Trivers, 1972). For ancestral women, reproduction was costly, at minimum requiring 10 months of gestation and an extraordinary number of physical resources (Buss & Schmitt, 2017 for review; Trivers, 1972). Conversely, an ancestral man could be reproductively successful merely by providing enough sperm to fertilize the ovum of a sexually accessible, fertile woman. Given these differences, women evolved to be more psychologically oriented toward relationships with partners seen as both reproductively viable and capable of providing physical, financial, and emotional resources. Men, on the other hand, evolved to optimize for sexual variety and frequency, given that their chances of reproductive success increased proportionally with their engagement in sexual activity (Buss, 1998; Buss & Schmitt, 2017).

Given this context, women are more likely to be sexually and relationally satisfied when their partners demonstrate evidence for their ability to (1) pass on high-quality genes and (2) provide resources to support potential offspring. This is evidenced by the fact that women are more likely to experience orgasms with partners whose features provide cues toward fertility (Puts et al., 2012). Sexual satisfaction is likely to suffer in absence of these cues; recent research suggests that orgasmic dysfunction in women may reflect an inability to attract or retain a high-quality mate (for a review, see Gallup et al., 2018). More broadly, women are hypothesized to pay particular attention to cues related to relational stability when evaluating their feelings of sexual satisfaction. Research suggests that women are most likely to experience sexual satisfaction when their partners demonstrate affection and verbal intimacy, perhaps because such patterns predict relational longevity (de la Garza-Mercer et al., 2006). A longer-lasting relationship may endure across the course of childrearing and thus confer several resources and advantages to offspring (Shackelford & Buss, 1997).

Comparatively, men tend to evaluate sexual satisfaction levels differently than do women, privileging qualities like sexual frequency and novelty over relational cues (e.g., Stephenson et al., 2021; Kim & Jeon, 2013). While often attending more to the intrapersonal components of sexuality when evaluating sexual satisfaction (e.g., satisfaction with personal experiences of pleasure, satisfaction with sexual frequency, etc.), men may use their overall sense of sexual satisfaction to inform feelings of relationship satisfaction (Stephenson et al., 2021; Fallis et al., 2016). In other words, men are more likely to experience contentment and a desire to maintain a relationship in the context of being sexually satisfied. Again, this is reflective of the fact that ancestral men who engaged in sexual activity more frequently were more reproductively successful (Buss, 1998).

Mate Value

Mate value refers to one's desirability on the mating market (Buss & Barnes, 1986). In general, mate value is determined by a combination of the following: (1) reproductive value, or the number of offspring one can expect to produce in their lifetime, and (2) resource holding potential/status, or the hierarchical location of an individual in their larger social context (Mealey, 2000; Olderbak & Figueredo, 2012).

For men, reproductive value is often evaluated based on the presence of androgen-dependent, masculine traits (e.g., muscle mass). These traits provide cues toward reproductive viability because their heritability depends on the presence of a strong immune system and a lack of harmful genetic mutations (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997; Folstad & Karter, 1992; Puts et al., 2012). Notably, androgen-dependent traits may have persisted over time as a function of male dominance competitions, rather than female choice, which makes them an especially strong predictor of genetic quality (Puts, 2010; Berglund et al., 1996). Status, on the other hand, is determined primarily as a function of a man's ability to accrue and bestow resources (Fisher et al., 2008). Across cultures, women tend to prefer slightly older male partners with greater financial prospects (Walter et al., 2020).

For women, mate value is primarily a function of youth and physical attractiveness. A woman's reproductive value is highest during the onset of puberty when she has the greatest number of reproductively viable years in her future. Women are also most able to successfully carry a pregnancy to term at the beginning of their reproductively viable years, making youth a strong marker of mate value (Buss, 1989). Further, hormonally modulated features such waist-to-hip ratio and facial symmetry may provide additional cues toward a woman's fertility, increasing the importance of female physical attractiveness for desirability in a mating context (Singh, 2002).

While mate value is comprised of different facets for men and women, individuals tend to find romantic partners whose overall level of mate value closely matches their own. Known as assortative mating (Buss & Barnes, 1986), this phenomenon has been consistently observed in both human and animal species. Notably, assortative mating tends to increase feelings of relationship satisfaction. When partners feel as though they are well-matched, they often experience a greater sense of security in their relationship (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). This suggests that relationship satisfaction is a matter of mate optimization rather than objective mate value; individuals are motivated to pursue the highest-quality mate possible without selecting for a partner they risk losing to a mate of higher value.

When discrepancies do exist between the mate value of romantic partners, their overall relationship satisfaction may be negatively impacted (Conroy-Beam et al., 2016). More specifically, it seems that partners with higher mate value frequently evaluate the attractiveness of other potential mating options and experience decreased contentment with their current partner as a function of these comparisons (Hromatko et al., 2015). The lower mate value partner, on the other hand, may develop feelings of anxiety or insecurity related to their partner's potential defection to another mate, thereby decreasing their personal feelings of satisfaction in the relationship (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2007). Interestingly, the fulfillment of mate preferences seems unrelated to relationship satisfaction. In other words, relationship satisfaction is not improved by finding a partner who meets specific mate value expectations, it is only decreased by having a partner one views as less desirable (Conroy-Beam et al., 2016).

Lower mate value partners may subsequently engage in various mate retention strategies in an effort to protect their relationship (Salkicevic et al., 2014). Buss (1988) has identified 19 such retention tactics across five larger categories: positive inducements, public signals of possession, direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. Some of these retention strategies may be beneficial for relational stability and satisfaction over time. For instance, individuals who attempt to retain their higher mate value partner by investing in the relationship or providing their partner with reassurance may experience increased relationship satisfaction as a result (Salkicevic et al., 2014). More commonly, mate retention strategies lead to decreased relationship satisfaction. Cost-inflicting mate retention tactics (e.g., vigilance, monopolization of time) are used more commonly by and toward partners of lower mate value and result in reduced relationship satisfaction for both partners (Salkicevic et al., 2014).

Notably, mate preferences may shift across the ovulatory cycle for naturally cycling women with

implications for relationship satisfaction. Heterosexual women are hypothesized to prefer highly masculine traits during their ovulatory period, when they are most fertile and therefore most motivated to pursue high-quality genes for potential offspring (consciously or not). Throughout the remainder of their menstrual cycle, women may shift their preferences toward mates who demonstrate a capacity to accrue resources or to provide non-material, emotional support (e.g., Williams & Lenington, 1993). Some evidence suggests that relationship satisfaction is maximized when these shifting preferences align with a partner's observed traits.

The suppression of ovulation through oral contraception provides an interesting test to this theory (Roberts et al., 2013, 2014). Women who meet their partners while taking oral contraception are less likely to select for masculine traits. To that end, theorists argue that individuals who meet their partners while taking oral contraception will be satisfied in their relationship as long as they continue using such contraceptives (Roberts et al., 2013, 2014). If interest in masculine traits resumes upon discontinuation of oral contraception, women may subsequently find their partner less desirable and report less satisfaction in their relationship (Roberts et al., 2013, 2014). Importantly, this theory, known as "congruency theory," is somewhat controversial. A recent study tested this theory in four separate samples and found evidence supporting the theory in only one (Fiurašková et al., 2022). In any case, it does seem that women place different importance on various aspects of mate value as a function of their place in the overall menstrual cycle, and by extension, their level of fertility.

Personality

Importantly, physical attractiveness and status are not the only inputs to mate value. A robust body of literature suggests that personality factors are relevant for both mate value and relationship satisfaction. Personality traits, or a person's stable patterns of thought and behavior across time, are thought to inform how individuals perceive their social environment and relate to others (Back et al., 2011; Caspi & Roberts, 2001). To that end, it stands to reason that personality traits would also inform how individuals perceive their romantic relationships.

Across the personality literature, the most common associations between personality variables and relationship satisfaction include: low neuroticism, high agreeableness, high conscientiousness, and high extraversion (Malouff et al., 2010). Neuroticism is the personality variable most consistently and strongly associated with relationship satisfaction, perhaps because neurotic individuals are more likely to express contempt, defensiveness, and criticism of their partners (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). More agreeable individuals tend to engage in behaviors thought to facilitate intimacy (i.e., offering forgiveness, engaging in activities that are meaningful to their partner), which may have the effect of increasing both self and partner perceptions of relational quality (Branje et al., 2005; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001; Steiner et al., 2012). Conscientious individuals may be better at controlling their impulses, potentially leading to a reduction in reactivity during conflict (Schaffhuser et al., 2014). Finally, extraverted individuals tend to be more joyful in their social interactions and display higher levels of positive affect, patterns which may encourage positive relational feedback loops that facilitate satisfaction (Schaffhuser et al., 2014; Malouff et al., 2010).

Interestingly, the combined presence of these four personality traits (i.e., low neuroticism and high agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion) has been hypothesized by some theorists as being characteristic of the "ideal romantic partner" (Figueredo et al., 2006). Given that this particular personality profile is desirable from a long-term mating perspective, it was likely preferentially selected for across the course of evolutionary history. To that end, this combination of traits is both genetically and phenotypically correlated, in addition to being highly correlated with overall perceptions of mate value (Olderbak & Figueredo, 2012).

Infidelity

From an evolutionary and reproductive perspective, infidelity presents notable costs to both men

and women (Olderbak & Figueredo, 2012). If a man engages in infidelity, he may ultimately produce children with more than one woman, resulting in a reduction of resources directed to each partner and each child. Conversely, if a woman engages in infidelity, her male partner may inadvertently invest time and resources in offspring to whom he has no genetic relation (i.e., cuckoldry; Shackelford & Buss, 2000). Given the high costs of infidelity for all involved, it is perhaps no surprise that infidelity is closely tied to decrements in relationship satisfaction. Indeed, research suggests that perceptions of both emotional and physical infidelity dramatically reduce experiences of relational quality and predict relationship dissolution, a finding which replicates cross-culturally (Betzig, 1989).

Age, Relationship Duration, and Reproduction

Historically, psychologists believed that time was among the most robust predictors of relationship satisfaction. More specifically, research suggested a gradual but persistent decline in relationship satisfaction over time for most couples (i.e., Karney & Bradbury, 1995). While evidence for a decline in relationship satisfaction across the lifespan exists, recent research suggests a more nuanced trajectory for relational contentment. Indeed, a recent meta-analytic review including over 165,000 participants painted a rather complicated picture: relationship satisfaction appears to decline between the ages of 20 and 40 and then gradually increase until age 65, at which point it plateaus (Bühler et al., 2021).

Interestingly, age is more related to relationship satisfaction than is relationship duration (Bühler et al., 2021). Perhaps that is because the decline in relationship satisfaction observed at midlife also co-occurs with the primary reproductive years. This is no coincidence; a large body of research suggests that having children can temporarily reduce feelings of relationship satisfaction (Lawrence et al., 2008). Shifts in mate retention tactics may provide an explanatory framework for this drop in relational quality (Buss, 1988). Research suggests that men are most likely to retain female partners when they regularly demonstrate love and kindness and provide their partner with economic/material resources. Conversely, women are more likely to retain male partners by taking steps to enhance or maintain their appearance. The importance placed upon resource bestowal and appearance enhancement is sexually differentiated; however, both men and women equally prefer partners who are kind, caring, generous, and loving (e.g., Buss, 1989). Given the sheer time investment required by early parenthood, in addition to experiences of financial strain, both male and female partners may feel less able to engage in these retention strategies, consequently experiencing a drop in perceptions of relationship satisfaction (Buss, 1994).

Correlates of Relational Satisfaction from Non-Evolutionary Perspectives

Communication

Throughout the extant literature, communication is the variable most studied in connection with relationship satisfaction. From an operational perspective, communication has been defined as a combination of interpersonal perspective-taking and self-disclosure (Meeks et al., 1998). Patterns of communication across these domains are consistently associated with relational quality, even after controlling for factors such as attachment style or problem-solving skills (i.e., Woodin, 2011; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006, 2011). This association has long been considered a function of conflict resolution; given that conflict is a strong predictor of relational distress, it stands to reason that effective communication may mitigate potential threats to relational stability and quality (Valsiner et al., 1992). More generally, effective communication—even outside of conflict—may serve to help couples better understand each other and to feel more intimate in their relationship over time (Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006). While it is undisputed that patterns of communication are important for experiences of relational health, more recent research has questioned the utility of communication as a predictor of *future* relational functioning. Indeed, a recent study found that a reduction in

negative communication (e.g., criticism, defensiveness, hostility) was associated with concurrent increases in relationship satisfaction, but that such patterns were not predictive of relationship satisfaction at a later point in time (Johnson et al., 2022). This suggests that communication may covary with, rather than predict, relationship satisfaction.

Dyadic Coping

Historically, stress has been conceptualized as an individual-level phenomenon occurring when environmental demands outstrip personal resources. It was previously thought that individuals coped with such stress through independent problem-solving skills across emotional and cognitive domains (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). More recently, researchers have acknowledged that stress and coping are often experienced interpersonally rather than individually (Bodenmann, 1997; Falconier et al., 2015). To that end, dyadic coping refers to a couple's pattern of responding to stressors through stress communication, individual strategies to help a partner cope with stress, and partner-level strategies to cope together (Falconier et al., 2015). It seems that increased patterns of dyadic coping robustly predict relationship satisfaction. Indeed, a meta-analytic review of over 72 studies found a strong relationship between dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction, even while holding variables like age and relationship duration constant (Falconier et al., 2015). In particular, the domains of dyadic coping most strongly related to relationship satisfaction include: (1) common coping, in which couples collaborate on the best strategies to approach stressors and (2) supportive coping, in which the non-stressed partner provides emotional or instrumental support to the partner experiencing stress. Relationship satisfaction was inhibited by patterns of hostile or ambivalent dyadic coping (e.g., directing feelings of stress toward one's partner) (Falconier et al., 2015). Taken together, the literature on dyadic coping suggests that couples are more relationally satisfied when they employ intentional strategies to address stressors as a team.

Physiological Linkage

Physiological linkage has been defined as a pattern of biological coregulation in which individuals with close, interpersonal relationships demonstrate similar patterns of physiological responding over time (for example, synchronized patterns of heart rate or respiration during social interactions; for a review, see Palumbo et al., 2017). Across the developmental literature, physiological linkage between mother/infant dyads has been identified as an important predictor of later well-being throughout childhood (Feldman, 2003, 2007). It seems that such covariation provides the scaffolding for optimal emotion regulation development (for a review, see Davis et al., 2018).

More recently, this literature has been extended to adult romantic relationships, with research suggesting that individuals who are more attuned to their partner physiologically are also more satisfied in the context of their relationship (Helm et al., 2014). There is some evidence that this relationship is moderated by dyadic empathy (Coutinho et al., 2019), related to overall levels of physical attraction to one's partner (Prochazkova et al., 2022), and moderated by sexual satisfaction (Freihart & Meston, 2019).

In any case, researchers theorize that there are two general types of physiological linkage: (1) morphostatic linkage, in which couples coregulate around a homeostatic physiological setpoint, and (2) morphogenic linkage, in which couples amplify each other's physiological responses (Helm et al., 2014). The former is associated with increased feelings of love, connectedness, and relationship satisfaction, and the latter is a robust predictor of divorce (Helm et al., 2014; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Taken together, these findings suggest the importance of examining the physiological correlates of functioning in romantic relationships. Certainly, it seems that romantic partners impact each other on a physiological level and that such influence is related to overall perceptions of relational well-being.

Attachment Styles

In both the communication and sexual satisfaction literature, attachment styles consistently emerge

as a potential moderator for associations with relationship satisfaction (e.g., Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006, etc.). Notably, attachment itself seems closely linked to experiences of satisfaction in romantic relationships. Individuals with secure attachment styles tend to be more satisfied in their relationships (Madey & Rodgers, 2009). It is possible that this pattern results from reactivity to short-term behavioral shifts. Those with secure attachments are less likely to catastrophize or react strongly to small, negative shifts in their partner's behavior given their more balanced and trusting attitude toward relationships in general. Conversely, those with insecure attachment styles may be less trusting of relationships, consequently over-attending and practicing hypervigilance toward cues for instability. This hypervigilance may result in reactivity and conflict that, over time, can degrade relationship satisfaction (Feeney, 2002). To that end, it seems the association between attachment and relationship satisfaction may be moderated by patterns of interpersonal forgiveness. Securely attached individuals may be more likely to forgive their romantic partner for a transgression, regardless of the severity, thereby facilitating relationship satisfaction and stability over time (Kachadourian et al., 2004).

Summary and Conclusion

Relationship satisfaction is hypothesized to be an evolved mechanism motivating humans to sustain fruitful romantic relationships or to seek other, more reproductively favorable relationships. This hypothesized mechanism is designed to produce relationship satisfaction through a cost-benefit analysis across relevant mating domains (e.g., mate value, parental ability). When total benefits outweigh relational costs, individuals view themselves as being satisfied and are thus motivated to maintain relational quality and longevity, a pattern which likely confers stability and resources to potential offspring. Importantly, relationship satisfaction is important for experiences of health and well-being and can be maximized by attending to relationship dynamics such as communication and dyadic coping.

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