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Swimming serenely in a sea of words: Sexism, communication, and precarious couples

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Abstract
When critical, verbally disinhibited women pair with verbally inhibited men, relationship quality suffers, rendering the relationship precarious. The interpersonal and personal antecedents of this *precarious couple effect* were examined. It was found that the precarious couple effect was partially mediated by unhealthy communication patterns, specifically, the absence of mutual constructive criticism and the presence of a woman-demand/man-withdraw pattern. It is proposed further that such unhealthy communication patterns emerge because inhibited men who endorse traditional conceptions of sex roles are dissatisfied with relatively disinhibited women who are also critical, setting in motion a chain of unhealthy communication patterns. Results were generally consistent with this prediction. Implications for understanding the role of sexism and personality mismatch in relationships are discussed.

For some couples, the path to relationship satisfaction is a steep and thorny one. Consider couples in which verbally inhibited men pair with critical, verbally disinhibited women (Swann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2003). In such "precarious couples," the loquaciousness of women seems to amplify their criticalness and alienates men, resulting in low relationship quality (e.g., Swann et al., 2003; Swann, Guinn, & Larsen, 2006). Degraded relationship quality is not the only problem for members of precarious couples; they have difficulty coping with stressors (Swann, McClarty, & Rentfrow, 2007) and evoke disapproval by outside observers, who rate both the man and woman as relatively dislikable and the man as incompetent (Sellers, Woolsey, & Swann, 2007). In this article, we seek a clearer understanding of the roots of this precarious couple effect. Because this effect emerges only within couples in which the woman is more verbally disinhibited than the man, we begin with a discussion of verbal disinhibition.

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Verbal disinhibition

Verbal disinhibition is marked by a tendency to respond to others quickly and effusively (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Verbally disinhibited persons express themselves without hesitation or lengthy consideration, while verbally inhibited persons respond to others more slowly, after giving it some thought. Swann and Rentfrow (2001) developed a scale to measure individual differences in verbal disinhibition, the Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Rapidity Test (BLIRT). Verbally disinhibited persons (high blirters) agreed with statements such as "I never have a problem saying what I think," while verbally inhibited persons (low blirters) agreed with statements such as "It often takes me a while to figure out how to express myself."

BLIRT scores are moderately correlated with the extraversion factor of the Big Five personality measure and inversely correlated with the neuroticism factor (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001, Study 1). Scores on the BLIRT predict a wide range of behaviors (e.g., speed

and effusiveness during conversation, the hallmarks of verbal disinhibition), even after controlling for extraversion and neuroticism (e.g., Swann & Rentfrow, 2001; Swann et al., 2003). Similarly, during initial phone conversations, high blirters are rated as more intelligent, likable, and desirable as a friend by partners (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001, Study 4). Across an academic semester, however, verbal disinhibition seems to be a liability for students who are relatively incompetent: At the end of the course, classmates viewed disinhibited students with low grades as particularly incompetent and dislikable (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001, Study 5).

Individual differences in verbal disinhibition also predict how people respond to conflict. When taunted by a confederate, high blirters simply asked him or her to stop and experienced relatively little increase in blood pressure. In contrast, low blirters kept to themselves while their blood pressure soared (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001, Studies 6 and 7).

Of particular interest here, the quality of a relationship can be degraded when men pair with women who are more disinhibited than they are. Specifically, several studies provided evidence for a *precarious couple effect,* wherein relationship quality suffers when inhibited men pair with disinhibited, and critical, women (e.g., Swann et al., 2003; Swann et al., 2006; Swann et al., 2007). This effect is gender specific; couples wherein a disinhibited and critical man paired with an inhibited woman did not suffer diminutions in relationship quality. In addition, relationship length did not predict criticalness in these couples, suggesting that the precarious couple status is a cause rather than effect of relationship disharmony. Thus, the combination of the inhibited man with a disinhibited, critical woman seems uniquely problematic.

Communication patterns underlying the precarious couple effect

One concern here was with the behavioral mediators of the precarious couple effect. There is considerable evidence that certain communication patterns undermine relationship satisfaction (e.g., Caughlin, 2002; Honeycutt & Brian, 2010; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998; Sanford, 2003). With such evidence in mind, we hypothesized that communication problems might degrade the interactions within man-more-inhibited couples, especially during conflicts (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Wieselquist, Rusbult, & Foster, 1999). Ineffective conflict communication, in turn, might undermine relationship satisfaction.

According to Gottman (1994), dysfunctional relationships are produced by a series of faulty communication patterns including criticism, contempt, and defensiveness. These communication patterns progressively degrade relationship quality until the final step in the decline of the relationship, "stonewalling" or withdrawal. Although these other factors are important contributors to relationship breakdown, previous research (e.g., Swann et al., 2003; Swann et al., 2006; Swann et al., 2007) has demonstrated that precarious couples already display significant relationship deterioration. We accordingly focused on the end stage of withdrawal in the research we report here.

Research on the tendency to withdraw while interacting with close relationship partners has shown that withdrawal is particularly corrosive when it is coupled with demand (e.g., Caughlin, 2002; Denton & Burleson, 2007; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). In demand–withdraw scenarios, one member of the couple pressures the other through emotional requests, criticism, and complaints while the other member "retreats" through defensiveness and passive inaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990, p. 73). Demand–withdraw communication is associated with distress in married couples (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993) and dating couples (Vogel, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999), both in the United States and in other cultures (Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2006).

Although either relationship partner can initiate demand–withdraw communication, women are typically the initiators in male–female relationships (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Apparently, women take on the demanding role because they have a less advantaged position in the

social structure, a position that they are motivated to improve. Men, in contrast, enjoy an advantaged position that they wish to maintain. As such, when women make demands, men strive to maintain the status quo by withdrawing from the conversation (Christensen & Heavey, 1990).

The woman-demand/man-withdraw pattern is both more common and more relationally damaging than the man-demand/woman-withdraw pattern. Specifically, the wife's demanding behaviors (but not her withdrawing behaviors) and the husband's withdrawing behaviors are negatively correlated with marital satisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). In contrast, the man-demand/woman-withdraw pairing degrades immediate satisfaction slightly, but actually predicts an improvement in long-term satisfaction (e.g., Heavey et al., 1993).

Research has also identified communication patterns that are beneficial. One such pattern is mutual constructive communication, which involves discussing a problem, expressing feelings, and negotiating without resorting to blaming or verbal aggression. Couples that engage in mutual constructive communication during conflict run a lower risk of marital distress (e.g., Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Jacobson & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1986).

Both woman-demand/man-withdraw communication and mutual constructive communication may help explain why precarious couples experience lower relationship satisfaction (Swann et al., 2003). For example, disinhibited, critical women may be relatively demanding, which causes inhibited men to withdraw, which frustrates the woman and triggers more demands, which further alienates the man. Alternatively, or in addition, precarious couples might display lower levels of mutual constructive communication, which impairs their ability to resolve disputes and leads to lower relationship satisfaction.

In short, one of the goals of our research was to determine if two communication styles (the woman-demand/man-withdraw pattern and mutual constructive communication) might mediate the relationship between the precarious couple effect and relationship satisfaction. We predicted that high levels of woman-demand/man-withdraw communication and low levels of mutual constructive communication would degrade relationship satisfaction among precarious couples.

The precarious couple effect and gender stereotypes

We were also interested in the gender specificity of the precarious couple effect. That is, relationship quality remains high when the genders are reversed and inhibited women pair with disinhibited, critical men; it is only when critical *women* are more disinhibited than men that relationship quality suffers (e.g., Swann et al., 2003). Although the reasons for this disparity have not yet been established, it seems likely that sex-role expectations could play a role. That is, because verbalization is a powerful means of exerting social control (e.g., Ng, Brooke, & Dunne, 1995), women who speak more quickly, effusively, and critically than their partners will tend to dominate their relationships. This will violate the expectation that men are more powerful than women (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and that women will be deferent and verbally submissive to men (Eagly, 1987; see also Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). An expectation-violation process would explain why outside observers derogate members of precarious couples and impute relatively low levels of competence to verbally inhibited men (Sellers et al., 2007). This explanation also fits nicely with Glick and Fiske's (1999, 2001) contention that those who challenge the status quo by laying claim to power that has traditionally been accorded to men will foster conflict. Consistent with this notion, there is evidence that men who attempted to persuade loquacious women tended to derogate those women (Carli, 1990; Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995).

If sex-role expectations do indeed underlie people's negative responses to loquacious women, then those individuals who do not hold such expectations will not experience such negativity. That is, men with relatively progressive conceptions of sex roles may be accepting of highly disinhibited women. In contrast, men with traditional conceptions of

sex roles may be dissatisfied with highly disinhibited women. Another goal of our research was to test this hypothesis.

In summary, our research was designed to test two hypotheses. First, high levels of woman-demand/man-withdraw communication and low levels of mutual constructive communication would mediate the link between precarious couple status and lower relationship satisfaction. Second, verbally inhibited men with nonprogressive sex-role attitudes would be more troubled by disinhibited, critical female partners than would relatively progressive men.

Method

Participants

One hundred four heterosexual dating couples ($N = 208$) participated. Flyers posted around a Southwestern city were used to recruit couples. Each couple received $25. The average age of participants was 22.1 years ($SD = 3.4$, range = 18–34). Ethnicity was 56.3% Caucasian, 1.4% African American, 24.5% Asian, 14.4% Hispanic, and 2.9% Other. Most of the participants (74%) were university students. Couples had been dating for an average of 20.7 months ($SD = 16.2$, range = 1–73).

Measurements

Verbal disinhibition

The BLIRT is composed of eight items that focus on how rapidly and effusively people respond to their conversation partners (e.g., "If I have something to say, I don't hesitate to say it"). Participants indicate the extent to which they agree with each item on 5-point scales. The coefficient α for this scale was .77.

Criticalness

Participants also completed a subset of nine items from the Interpersonal Qualities Scale (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). On 9-point scales ranging from *not at all characteristic* to *completely characteristic*, participants responded to each of the items (e.g., complaining, warm [reverse scored]). Swann and colleagues (2003) dubbed this subscale "Criticalness" because principal components analysis revealed that "critical and judgmental" had the highest factor loading of the scale's nine items. The coefficient α for this scale was .70.

Sex-role attitudes

Participants completed the 20-item Traditional-Egalitarian Sex Role Questionnaire (Larsen & Long, 1988). Each item was accompanied by 5-point response scale. This scale measures the progressive or egalitarian nature of participants' sex-role attitudes (e.g., "Men are better leaders"). The coefficient α was .91.

Conflict communication patterns

Participants also completed the Communication Patterns Questionnaire, Short Form (Christensen, 1987; Christensen & Heavey, 1990). This 11-item, 9-point scale assesses levels of helpful behaviors such as discussion, expression, and negotiation (e.g., "Both members try to discuss the problem"). It consists of two subscales. The first subscale consists of six items (three paired items) assessing demand–withdraw communication. The woman-demand/man-withdraw communication score is the sum of three of the items (e.g., "woman tries to start a discussion while man tries to avoid a discussion"). The reliability for the demand–withdraw subscale was .73. The mutual constructive communication score is the sum of scores for five items pertaining to mutual avoidance of discussion, mutual discussion, mutual expression of feelings, mutual blame, and mutual negotiation. The reliability for this subscale was .82. Both members of each couple completed both scales and the male and female scores were summed to provide a within-couple average score.

Relationship satisfaction

Finally, participants completed the seven-item Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998). Each item was accompanied by a 5-point response scale (e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?"). The coefficient α was .87.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables*

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	22.05	3.37		−.03	.08	−.2*	−.03	−.16
2. Verbal disinhibition	3.01	0.62	.07		.08	−.08	.24*	.2*
3. Criticalness	3.74	1.04	.02	−.01		.36**	−.3**	−.3**
4. Demand–withdraw communication	26.00	8.29	−.1	−.04	.4**		−.6**	−.4**
5. Mutual constructive communication	15.50	5.04	.02	.21*	−.36**	−.58**		.5**
6. Relationship satisfaction	4.34	0.50	−.26**	.11	−.31**	−.29**	.25*	

Note. Females reported above the diagonal, males below.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Procedure

Couples reported to the laboratory together. After completing consent forms, participants completed the scales in separate rooms. Upon completion, participants were paid, thanked, and debriefed.

Results

The precarious couple effect

To test for the presence of the precarious couple effect in a manner that avoided spurious findings due to interdependency, we conducted a multiple regression at the couple level. Predictors were BLIRT difference scores (male–female), female criticalness, and their interaction as predictors, and aggregated relationship satisfaction as the criterion.[1] Descriptive statistics and correlations for variables used in all analyses are given in Table 1. In all analyses, the interaction term was constructed as the cross-product of the two independent variables. The model contained only these three factors—no other variables were entered.

The regression of aggregated satisfaction revealed main effects of criticalness, $\beta = -.01$, $p < .01$, and BLIRT difference, $\beta = -.31$, $p < .05$. Consistent with prediction, these main effects were qualified by a (marginally) significant interaction between criticalness and BLIRT difference, $\beta = .07$, ΔR^2 $F(1, 100) = 3.47$, $p = .07$, $R^2 = .10$. As shown in Figure 1, when the woman was more disinhibited than the man, higher female criticalness was associated with lower aggregated satisfaction.[2] In contrast, when the man was more disinhibited than the woman, higher levels of female criticalness were unrelated to satisfaction.

We speculated that the precarious couple effect was only marginally significant in the couple-level analysis because it was weaker for one gender than the other. Although a three-way interaction including BLIRT difference scores, female criticalness, and gender was not significant, we assumed that this could reflect a lack of power and conducted some exploratory analyses to determine if there was any evidence of gender differences. Specifically, we repeated the foregoing analysis separately for women and men.

1. While the use of difference scores is generally inadvisable (e.g., Edwards, 1994a, 1994b; Griffin, Murray, & Gonzales, 1999), previous work has shown that they can be appropriate and useful in work on the precarious couple effect (Swann et al., 2003; Swann et al., 2006; Swann et al., 2007). For a detailed account of why the use of difference scores is not problematic in our specific sample, see the Appendix.

2. For graphically depicting the data, we trichotomized the data using the same cutpoints as in earlier research on the precarious couple effect (e.g., Swann et al., 2003; Swann et al., 2006; Swann et al., 2007). Specifically, couples in the upper 20th percentile and lower 20th percentile in BLIRT difference score were considered the man-more-blirtatious and woman-more-blirtatious groups, respectively, and the remaining 60% of couples in the sample comprised the equal-blirtatiousness group.

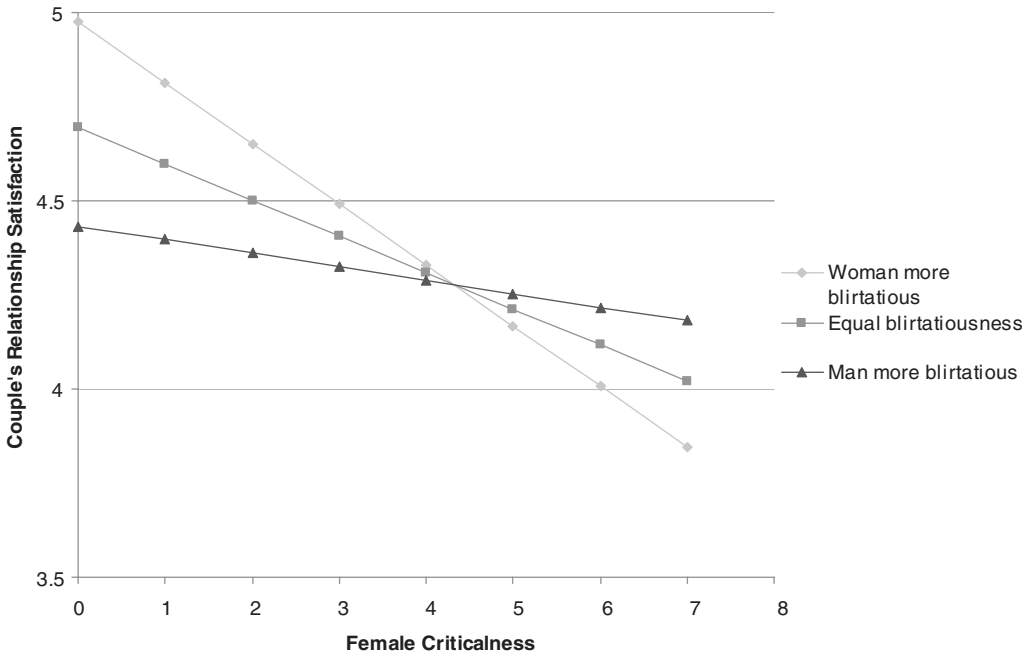

Figure 1. Precarious couple effect: Couple-level relationship satisfaction by inhibition difference and female criticalness.

Among women, a multiple regression analysis (with BLIRT difference scores, female criticalness, and the interaction as predictors, and women's relationship satisfaction as the criterion) revealed main effects for criticalness, $\beta = -.14$, $p < .01$, and for BLIRT difference was $\beta = -.51$, $p < .01$. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, $\beta = .11$, ΔR^2 $F(1, 99) = 5.64$, $p = .02$, $R^2 = .17$, with a pattern of slopes that was virtually identical to those plotted in Figure 1. In couples in which the woman was more disinhibited than the man, higher female criticalness was associated with lower female satisfaction. In contrast, when the man was more disinhibited than the woman, higher levels of female criticalness was unrelated to female satisfaction.

When we conducted a parallel analysis of men's satisfaction in an effort to uncover evidence of the precarious couple effect, the interaction between BLIRT difference and female criticalness was not significant, $\beta = .05$, ΔR^2 $F(1, 100) = .99$, $p = .32$. One possible explanation of the relative weakness of the precarious couple effect among men was that it emerged among men who were nonprogressive but not among those who were progressive. We will return to this possibility below.

Did communication styles mediate the precarious couple effect?

We hypothesized that lower levels of mutual constructive communication and higher levels of woman-demand/man-withdraw communication might cause difficulties in precarious couples. To test this possibility, we asked if each of these communication patterns mediated the relationship between precarious couple status and relationship satisfaction.

We first considered woman-demand/man-withdraw communication using the model displayed in Figure 2. The foregoing analysis indicated that precarious couple status was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. In addition, precarious couples were more likely to display woman-demand/man-withdraw communication, $\beta = -1.10$, $t(96) = -2.35$, $p < .05$. Further, woman-demand/man-withdraw communication was

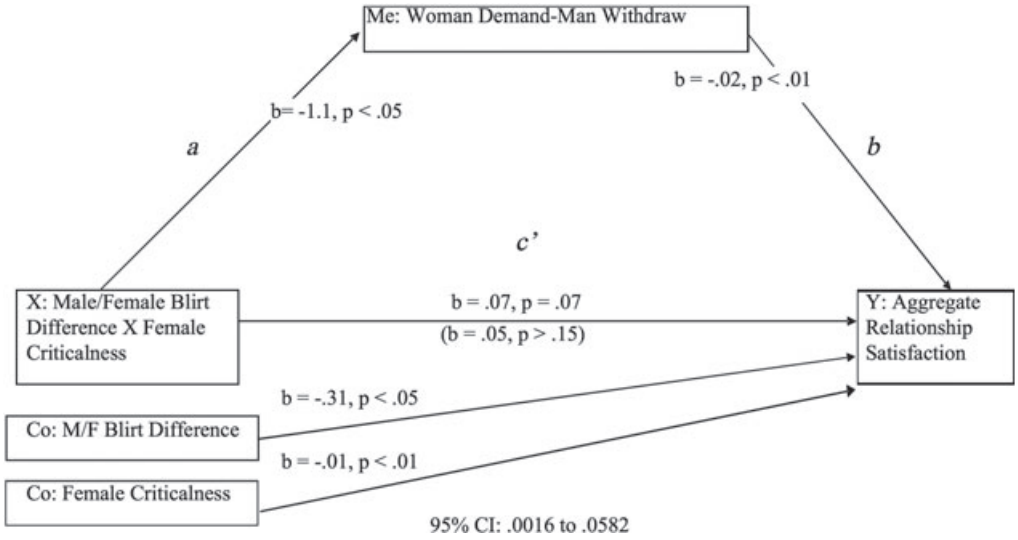

Figure 2. Woman-demand/man-withdraw communication mediates interactive effects for Male/Female BLIRT Difference × Female Criticalness on relationship satisfaction.
Note. BLIRT = Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Rapidity Test.

associated with lower relationship satisfaction, $\beta = -.02$, $t(98) = -2.79$, $p < .01$. To test for partial mediation, we entered woman-demand/man-withdraw communication as an additional predictor into the full regression model (male/female BLIRT difference, female criticalness, and the interaction term predicting relationship satisfaction). As expected, woman-demand/man-withdraw communication remained a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction, $\beta = -.02$, $t(95) = -2.09$, $p < .05$, and the interaction term dropped to nonsignificance, $\beta = .05$, $t(95) = 1.33$, $p = .19$. To further establish partial mediation, we used an SPSS macro provided by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to conduct a bootstrapping test (n boots $= 5,000$) of our mediated moderation analysis. Woman-demand/man-withdraw was entered as the mediator, with relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable and the interaction term of Male/Female BLIRT Difference × Female Criticalness as the independent variable (with the two component terms of the interaction entered as covariates). The 95% CI [.0016, .0582] did not cover zero, providing further evidence of partial mediation (see Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Next we asked whether mutual constructive communication might also partially mediate the precarious couple effect. As above, we used multiple regression analyses to establish each of the component paths displayed in Figure 3. The primary analysis reported above indicated that precarious couple status was associated with relationship satisfaction. In addition, precarious couple status was associated with lower levels of mutual constructive communication, $\beta = 1.06$, $t(96) = 2.68$, $p < .01$, and mutual constructive communication was associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction, $\beta = .04$, $t(98) = 4.75$, $p < .001$. Finally, when mutual constructive communication was added as a predictor to the primary regression (which included male/female BLIRT difference, female criticalness, and the interaction term as predictors and aggregate relationship satisfaction as the criterion), mutual constructive communication remained a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction, $\beta = .04$, $t(95) = 3.68$, $p < .001$, but the interaction term dropped to nonsignificance, $\beta = .04$, $t(95) = .91$, $p = .36$. To further establish the meditational role of mutual constructive communication, we used Preacher and Hayes's (2008) bootstrapping

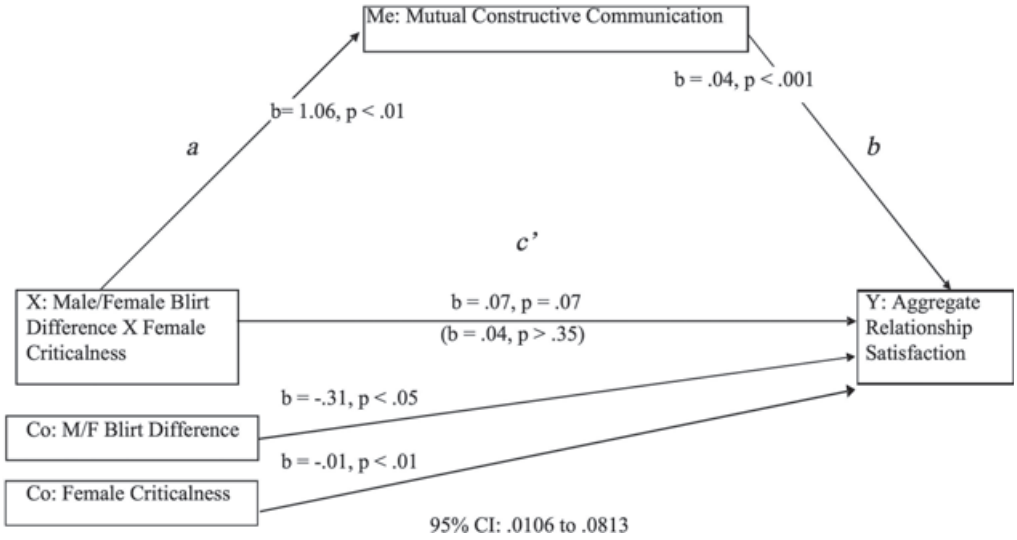

Figure 3. Mutual constructive communication mediates interactive effects for Male/Female BLIRT Difference × Female Criticalness on relationship satisfaction.

test. Mutual constructive communication was entered as the mediator, with relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable and the interaction term of Male/Female BLIRT Difference × Female Criticalness as the independent variable (with the two component terms of the interaction entered as covariates). Once again, the 95% CI [.0106, .0813] for the beta did not cover zero, indicating partial mediation.

Was the precarious couple effect moderated by the sex-role attitudes of men?

As noted above, the precarious couple effect was significant for women but not men. Further analyses suggested, however, that some men—those with nonprogressive sex-role attitudes—did show signs of the precarious couple effect. In the regression, the predictors were BLIRT difference scores, female criticalness, male sex-role attitude score, all two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction of BLIRT Difference × Female Criticalness × Male Sex Role Score as predictors, and the criterion was male relationship satisfaction. Results revealed main effects for sex-role attitude ($\beta = .82$, $p < .01$) and female criticalness ($\beta = .35$, $p < .05$), and a significant two-way interaction of sex-role attitude and female criticalness ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .01$). More important, a marginally significant three-way interaction emerged, $\beta = .13$, ΔR^2 $F(1, 96) = 3.37$, $p = .07$, $R^2 = .11$.

The triple interaction reflected a tendency for the precarious couple effect to emerge only for nonprogressive and moderately progressive men. That is, when the regression (male/female BLIRT difference, female criticalness, and the interaction term) was repeated after excluding the most egalitarian quarter of our sample, the precarious couple effect was marginally significant, $\beta = .11$, ΔR^2 $F(1, 72) = 3.28$, $p = .07$, $R^2 = .10$ (and the pattern of slopes was virtually identical to Figure 1). In contrast, when we conducted the same regression focusing on relatively inhibited men with progressive sex-role views, relationship satisfaction was not influenced by the degree to which their partners were disinhibited and critical, $\beta = -.01$, ΔR^2 $F(1, 24) = .01$, $p = .92$.

Such evidence of the importance of men's sex-role views led us to ask if the same pattern would be true for women. Specifically, we wondered if critical, disinhibited women with inhibited partners would be immune to the

precarious couple effect if their partners were progressive. Reanalysis of the relationship satisfaction of women with progressive partners offered no support for this hypothesis. A multiple regression analysis (with BLIRT difference scores, female criticalness, and the interaction as predictors, and women's relationship satisfaction as the criterion) revealed a main effect of male/female BLIRT difference, $\beta = -.64$, $p < .05$, as well as a significant interaction, $\beta = .15$, ΔR^2 $F(1, 24) = 4.91$, $p = .04$, $R^2 = .22$. This interaction indicated that the precarious couple effect emerged even when the sample was restricted to women whose partners had progressive sex-role views. Not surprisingly, women also displayed the precarious couple effect when the partner was nonprogressive or moderately progressive. Conducting the primary analysis including only such couples reveals main effects for male/female BLIRT difference, $\beta = -.53$, $p < .05$, and female criticalness, $\beta = -.18$, $p < .01$. These were qualified by the interaction, although the effect was only marginally significant, $\beta = .11$, ΔR^2 $F(1, 75) = 3.56$, $p = .06$, $R^2 = .19$. Overall, these results indicate that the sex-role attitudes of men moderate the precarious couple effect for men but not for women.

Discussion

Our research was designed to illuminate the mechanisms underlying the precarious couple effect, wherein relationship quality suffers when disinhibited, critical women pair with verbally inhibited men. Consistent with past evidence of the role of poor communication in relationship difficulties (e.g., Caughlin, 2002; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Honeycutt & Brian, 2010; Gottman, 1994; Sanford, 2003), we discovered that two communication patterns contributed to the precarious couple effect. Specifically, precarious couples displayed higher levels of woman-demand/man-withdraw communication and lower levels of mutual constructive communication. Both of these communication patterns were associated with relationship quality, and both served as partial mediators of the relationship between the precarious couple effect and relationship satisfaction.

This study thus confirms earlier work by providing additional evidence of the detrimental effects of poor communication in romantic relationships. In addition, however, our findings indicate what types of couples are most apt to experience communication difficulties in the first place. In particular, an inhibited man and a critical, disinhibited woman may be at risk for maladaptive communication patterns. In addition, such patterns may, in turn, foster relationship discord.

Evidence of the meditational role of the woman-demand/man-withdrawal pattern in our study may help explain why the precarious couple effect only occurs when the woman is critical and disinhibited, but not when the man is (Swann et al., 2003; Swann et al., 2006). Conceivably, sex-role expectations lead members of our society to react adversely to interactions in which the woman is repeatedly placing demands on the man. Consistent with this possibility, in contrast to a *woman*-demand/man-withdraw pattern, a *man*-demand/woman-withdraw pattern predicts *improvement* in relationship satisfaction (Heavey et al., 1993). In addition, our findings indicate that men with traditional, and even moderately traditional, sex-role attitudes expressed dissatisfaction with disinhibited, critical women but men with very progressive sex-role attitudes did not. Together, these findings provide further evidence that relationship communication patterns must be understood within the context of sex roles.

In addition to suggesting a link between communication styles and sexism, our findings also offer new insights into the manner wherein sexism may operate in romantic relationships. A bevy of researchers have recently pointed out that subtle and pervasive forms of sexism have harmful effects on romantic relationships and on women's career and economic success (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1997; Glick et al., 2000; Glick et al., 2004; Viki, Abrams, & Hutchison, 2003). In part, the corrosive power of these sexist beliefs lies in the fact that people may not consider them sexist at all. As a result, they may unwittingly yet frequently enact behaviors

which are sexist and sustain gender inequality. People high in modern sexism, for example, think of themselves as egalitarian but nevertheless feel anger toward women who make demands for political and financial equality (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter. 1995). Similarly, Glick and colleagues (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1997; Glick et al., 2000; Glick et al., 2004; Viki et al., 2003) have noted that contemporary sexism often has a benevolent component wherein men put women on a pedestal, seeing them as pure and good, but only insofar as women behave in ways which are conventional and which sustain male dominance. Moreover, Rudman and Glick (2001) have shown that when women display agentic traits such as dominance, they are derogated by others unless they simultaneously behave in a communal, "nice" manner. Such a tendency for female agency to be acceptable only when accompanied by displays of communality could explain why the disinhibited women in our sample suffered diminished relationship quality only when their disinhibition was accompanied by a deficiency in communality (i.e., criticalness). Finally, our findings suggest one mechanism that may have mediated Rudman and Phelan's (2007) evidence that feminist women paired with "feminist" men showed greater relationship quality and stability than women paired with nonfeminist men. Conceivably, like our progressive men, feminist men may have been more accepting of assertive behavior by their partners.

The role of sexist beliefs in the precarious couple effect also dovetails nicely with work by Sellers and colleagues (2007). Participants watched videotaped conflicts of couples wherein either the man or the woman was more disinhibited. They then rated the couple members' likability and competence. In couples wherein the woman was more disinhibited, both members of the couples were rated as less likable. In addition, relatively disinhibited men were rated as more competent than their inhibited partners, as well as more competent than inhibited men and disinhibited women. This finding is troubling because it points to another problem confronted by agentic women. In Rudman and Glick (2001), agentic women were at least seen as competent job candidates. In the context of romantic relationships, however, the agentic and disinhibited woman was dismissed not only as unlikable but also as relatively incompetent.

Our findings are also relevant to the long search for personality traits that contribute to relationship quality. Although there is ample evidence that people are more attracted to attitudinally similar partners (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Condon & Crano, 1988) and report being more compatible with partners who have similar role preferences, leisure interests (Houts, Robins, & Huston, 1996), and sex-role orientations (Ickes & Barnes, 1978), efforts to extend the similarity principle to traditional personality constructs have been disappointing (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998; but see also Klohnen & Mendelson, 1998). Our findings suggest that perhaps some of the difficulty has been that personality researchers have tested relatively simple hypotheses involving the degree of match between the personalities of people rather than more complex, synergistic relationships. In addition, however, personality researchers have tended to conceptualize personality variables and communication behaviors as having separate influences on relationship satisfaction. This study suggests that these two aspects may be more intertwined than previously expected. A nuanced view of the interplay between personality traits such as verbal inhibition and communication behaviors may allow us to predict which couples will adopt flawed communication strategies that lead to the demise of the relationship.

Let us close with a potential practical implication of our findings. Specifically, our evidence suggests that couples should be aware that certain personality configurations are conducive to maladaptive communication styles that may degrade relationship quality. For example, before pairing, critical disinhibited women and nonprogressive inhibited men should consider the risks before beginning a romantic relationship with each other. That is, although such relationships may flourish if couple members strive to maintain healthy communication styles, the odds are that they will not. Furthermore, although progressive

men in our sample seemed satisfied with women who were critical and more disinhibited than they, their female partners expressed dissatisfaction with the relationship. Conceivably, although inhibited and progressive men are accepting of critical and disinhibited women, their verbal inhibition degrades the quality of communication and fosters the women-demand/men-withdraw pattern, which in turn sours women on the relationship. These and other possibilities should be considered by members of couples who are initiating a close relationship.

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Appendix

Considerations for using difference scores

1. *Using two components with different questions or using different scales can create problems for difference scores.* Our within-couple difference scores relied on the same items from the same scale.
2. *Differing levels of variance across the component variables can create problems for difference scores*. This does not apply. Using Levene's Test for Equality of Variances there was no difference in the variances associated with the components of our difference scores, $F < 1$.
3. *The possibility of low reliability among component measures or difference scores can create problems*. This concern grows out of the fact that profile variables, which integrate differences along multiple dimensions, can lose meaning if the dimensions are unrelated. In our case, we used the average of absolute differences across eight items that were substantially interrelated. That is, the Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Rapidity Test (BLIRT) scores of husbands and wives met or exceeded conventional

levels of reliability ($\alpha = .77$ for both males and females). Also, the alpha for the overall difference score was equally respectable ($\alpha = .77$), which is consistent with previous research on the precarious couple effect. Finally, were our differences scores unreliable, one would not have expected our findings to replicate earlier research on the precarious couple effect.

4. *Large differences between the proportion of positive versus negative scores can create problems for absolute difference scores*. There was no significant difference between BLIRT scores for men and women.
5. *People who tend to use the midpoints of the scale will tend to have lower difference scores; thus, the "center-hugging" people will have the lowest difference scores to that difference scores reflect a scale usage issues, not a substantive issue*. If our findings were purely an artifact of this phenomenon, woman-more-inhibited differences should have been just as problematic as man-more-inhibited differences, and they were not. Also, there is no theoretical reason to believe that center-hugging people should enjoy more relationship satisfaction than non-center-hugging people.
6. *The relation of the difference scores to the criterion variable may reflect only one of the variables that constitute the difference score.* To test this idea, we ran a series of two parallel regressions to determine the effect of male and then female BLIRT scores on the intimacy of the partner. First, we entered male BLIRT squared predicting female satisfaction, then female BLIRT squared predicting male satisfaction. The results of these analyses indicated that, of themselves, BLIRT scores had relatively little relationship to level of satisfaction among partners (βs $= .01$ and $.001$, *ns*; men and women respectively).