

Romantic partner's behaviour and willingness to sacrifice as predictors of couple's relationship quality: a mixed methods study

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Abstract

The present study was designed to explore the intersection of a romantic partner's behaviour, willingness to sacrifice and relationship quality through qualitative and quantitative analyses. Sixty-eight adults aged 18-65 in a continuous relationship of one year or over completed the Partner Behaviours as Social Context (PBSC) Scale and the Relationship Quality (RQ) scale; listed the three most important activities in their life other than their relationship and asked if they would end the relationship if they cannot engage in these activities - to measure their Willingness to Sacrifice (WTS). Four participants were then selected to answer two open-ended questions about relationship satisfaction and their relationship experiences. Regression analyses indicated that both PBSC and WTS variables predicted relationship quality. Qualitative data coding revealed that positive partner behaviour and willingness to sacrifice increase romantic relationship quality if reciprocated and respectively decrease it if a partner behaves negatively and is unwilling to compromise. These findings illustrate the interpersonal dimensions of relationship quality and highlight the value of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Introduction

Romantic relationships play a crucial role in people's lives. Even though divorce rates are rising and many people choose to live together without marrying, establishing a close romantic relationship is a prerequisite for adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Theory and research suggest a significant correlation exists between the quality of the relationship, personal emotional wellbeing (Hills & Argyle, 2001) and physical health (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Therefore, understanding how couples create a lasting connection is essential for research and practice, and establishing a way to measure relationship quality (RQ) is crucial. Relationship or marital satisfaction are often used as synonyms for RQ and are possibly the most researched aspects of intimate relationships as they are linked with an individual's welfare (Graham et al., 2011).

A person's psychological wellbeing and good individual performance correlate with the communication with a romantic partner, the behaviour of each partner, and the overall quality of a committed romantic relationship (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006). The first theory that will serve as a guiding framework in this paper is Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (2000). Based on their theory, research identifies six key elements of romantic partner behaviours (RPB) linked with fulfilling psychological needs, wellbeing and development. Three of these elements are associated with positive behaviour, i.e. warmth - the expression of love/affection; autonomy support - supporting a partner's personal goals; and structure - being consistent and reliable. The other three elements are negative: rejection - ignoring the partner's needs; coercion - being controlling/demanding; and chaos - unpredictability. Many studies exploring RQ are based on Self-Determination Theory (e.g. Zimmer-Gembeck & Ducat, 2010) and prove a correlation between positive partner's behaviour and RQ.

However, Gable et al. (2003) employ a different approach to studying a romantic partner's behaviour. They pose the question of whether displaying more positive behaviour and less negative is sufficient to increase relationship satisfaction. Using a diary method in their naturalistic daily experience study of 58 heterosexual dating

couple's diaries, they tracked that both men and women neglect about 25% of the positive behaviours their partner reported doing. So, partner behaviour and perceived partner behaviour are not necessarily the same. Which partner's behaviour is perceived and will be recognised as positive, or respectively negative, and how it affects RQ requires further research attention. If intimate partners align their behaviour to achieve good results and individual needs are met, RQ should be relatively easy.

Nevertheless, what happens if one partner's behaviour does not correspond with the other person's definition of desirable RQ? In other words, a partner's needs and desires do not always match; what one partner wants in the relationship is not necessarily what the other wants. In such scenarios, one or both partners might feel the necessity, or ideally, the honest desire to sacrifice their own needs for their partner's needs. What makes partners willing to sacrifice, and is this willingness related to RQ? Several theoretical stances of behaviour in romantic relationships indicate that sacrifice might be a determining factor of RQ. Specifically, a partner's willingness to sacrifice (WTS) increases RQ (Holmes & Boon, 1990). However, very little empirical research has been dedicated to gaining insight into what stimulates individuals to sacrifice for their partner and whether the consequences of such sacrifice are only positive, i.e. does it affect RQ positively or negatively? This is one of the gaps the present study aims to fill.

In situations concerning noncorrespondence, interdependence theory implies that individuals must choose between their interests and sacrifice (Kelley & Thibaut, 1987). Thus, this will be the second pillar theory that will guide the present research. Van Lange et al. (1997) are the pioneers of empirical research on WTS in close relationships, exploring both benefits and costs of the act of sacrifice. While a partner's WTS might enhance RQ, interdependence dilemmas may result in negative emotions like anger and insecurity, and continuous noncorrespondence might end the relationship. However, the link between a partner's emotions and behaviour and WTS needs more research.

Is making constant sacrifices for a romantic partner always good, however? Consciously or subconsciously, people strive for reciprocity in social relationships. One explanation might be rooted in probably the most significant social exchange theories. Equity theory

states that individuals pursue reciprocity in social relationships. What they devote and benefit from a relationship should be proportionate to what the other person devotes and benefits (Adams, 2005). An important question is: 'What are the motives for a sacrifice, and is the other partner aware of those sacrifices?' (Curran et al., 2015). Does the sacrifice come as a sincere gesture, or is something expected in return? Furthermore, individuals overestimate how much they contribute to the relationship and underestimate their partner's efforts. Mandal (2020) makes a further point in a study with 144 participants in close heterosexual relationships that women are more willing to sacrifice and compromise for love and family, while men are more willing to sacrifice in changes to their lifestyle.

After reviewing the literature on RQ/satisfaction, it became evident that certain aspects of the romantic partner's behaviour discussed above and WTS appear to be at the forefront of significant determinants of relationship satisfaction. Most studies examine the effect of one of the variables or the other on RQ/satisfaction. However, no empirical research was found examining the implications of these specific characteristics of partner's behaviour discussed earlier and WTS on RQ. And this is precisely what this study will do, in a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques. The hypothesis that an increase in positive partner behaviour and willingness to sacrifice will increase RQ will be tested. Also, a thematic analysis will reveal 'What makes a relationship satisfying?' from participants' experiences and perspectives.

Methods

Design

This research used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design combining a quantitative online survey using Likert-type scales. Qualitative semi-structured interviews then followed to help explain the quantitative data. As it is a mixed method design, the quantitative research adopted the realist epistemological perspective. Then, thematic analysis was used with an inductive approach, working with latent themes and a

constructionist epistemology to gain detailed insight into the experiences of relationship satisfaction of four participants' romantic relationships.

The quantitative section used the following predictor variables: PV1 is the RPB, measured using the Partner Behaviours as Social Context Scale. It employs six critical dimensions of partner behaviours, which are associated with individual psychological need fulfilment, wellbeing and development. PV2 is WTS, measured by assessment of activities that are relatively central to the individual's wellbeing by asking each participant to list, in order, the three most important activities in their life other than their relationship. The outcome variable (OV) is relationship quality, measured using the Relationship Quality (RQ) scale, which is operationalised as the degree to which a commitment exists, mutual enjoyment (including companionship) is present, and a sense that this person is the "right" one. Multiple regression analysis will examine the relationship between the PVs and the OV.

Participants

A GPower calculation determined the number of participants needed (for a medium effect, .80 power and probability set at .05). A sample of 68 participants across the United Kingdom, ages 18 to 65 years (average age 33.5), currently in a romantic relationship, completed the online survey. Participants have confirmed that they are not suffering from mental health conditions that make them vulnerable and are not in abusive relationships. The gender breakdown was 58.00% (39/68) female and 42% (29/68) male. The race and ethnicity breakdown of the sample was 64.00% (44/68) white, 22.00% (15/68) Asian and 14.00% (12/68) black/African American. Exclusion criteria were clinical population and people that suffered from brain injury, brain cancer, Alzheimer's disease, dementia, epilepsy and other seizure disorders, mental disorders, Parkinson's and other movement disorders. Participants were recruited via online forums (Facebook and Instagram), opportunity samples and data collected through Qualtrics. See Appendix A for text for social media posts.

Materials

The survey questionnaire was constructed of the three above mentioned scales, comprising 43 items. The PBSC had 30 items divided into six dimensions of partner behaviours – three positive and three negative. Six items were generated for each of the six expected subscales. Response options range from 1 (Not at all true) to 6 (Very true).

The WTS was assessed by firstly listing, in order, the three "most important activities in your life, other than your relationship." Participants were then asked to "imagine that it was not possible to engage in Activity 1 and maintain your relationship with your partner. To what extent would you consider ending your relationship with your partner?" (0 = would definitely not consider, 8 = would definitely consider, reverse scored).

The RQ had nine items, which asked participants to rate statements on a five- point scale from 0-5 to measure commitment, mutual enjoyment, and a sense that this person is the "right" one. A higher score indicates higher relationship quality (satisfaction). See Appendix B for all the questionnaires.

The qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out in person and transcribed manually. The interview questions were: Q1. What makes a relationship satisfying? Q2. Tell us about your relationship experience.

Procedure

Participants were given a link to a webpage with an information sheet and terms and conditions in a consent form (see Appendix C). They were informed that participation is voluntary, they could withdraw at any time during the experiment (each person was allocated a randomised ID to be identified), and how their data will be used (Appendix D). A link then took them to the questionnaire in Qualtrics that they had to fill in a randomised order. All participants were debriefed at the end with information about the

study, how it would be tested, the hypothesis and research questions, why it is this important to study the topic, and contact details were provided for any questions.

Four participants (two male and two female) were then randomly chosen from the group of 68 that completed the questionnaires and were contacted on a later day to arrange times for semi-structured interviews. Before the interviews, they consented again and were debriefed at the end. The interviews were carried out by an interviewer (male) and a co-interviewer (female) - both members of the UDOL research team. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Participants answered two open-ended questions (see Materials section above). The researcher began the session by giving a brief presentation and overview of the research aims and the interview.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Before conducting multiple regression analyses, data was screened to ensure it met the critical assumptions of multiple regression. A summary of the descriptive statistics is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Means (M), standard deviations (SD), 95% confidence intervals (CI), skewness and kurtosis with standard errors (SE) for romantic partner's behaviour, willingness to sacrifice and relationship quality

Variables	M	SD	95% CI Lower/Upper	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)	K-S test (sig.)	S-W test (sig.)
RomanticPartner'sBehaviour	145.93	2.95	(145.21, 146.64)	-0.02 (0.29)	-1.29 (0.57)	0.00	0.00

Willingness to Sacrifice	24.69	2.6 0	(24.06, 25.32)	0.41 (0.29)	-0.77 (0.57)	0.00	0.00
Relationship Quality	34.60	3.3 5	(33.79, 35.41)	(0.35, 0.29)	(-0.23, 0.57)	0.00	0.00

The data has skewness z-scores of -0.07, 1.41 and 1.21 and kurtosis z-scores of -2.26, -1.35 and -0.40. For small samples of under 100 participants ($n < 100$), the z-scores should fall between -1.96 and +1.96. RPB kurtosis z-score of -2.26 does not meet the assumption of normality. The data has a Kolmogorov-Smirnov significance value < 0.001 (applied for sample sizes of more than 50 participants) and Shapiro- Wilk significance value < 0.001 , both of which are smaller than 5% ($p < 0.05$), meaning that the data deviates and does not meet the assumptions of normality. This is also illustrated on the histograms showing the normal distribution curves for the variables in Appendix E (Figures 1,2 and 3). Data was transformed, but it did not make any difference in normality assumptions. Therefore, the original data was used.

After data screening, no outliers were identified (no z-scores were greater than ± 3 standard deviations). Scatterplots (Figures 4 and 5 in the Appendix F) revealed a linear relationship between the predictor variables and the outcome variable, meaning there is no issue with homoscedasticity. Also, the Durbin-Watson score of 1.54 indicates no correlations between adjacent residuals. Visual inspection of the normal P-P plot indicated that the residuals were normally distributed (Appendix G, Figure 6). VIF scores of less than 10 indicated no issues with multicollinearity (1.78 for both predictors). Both scores showed that the assumptions of normality are not violated, and therefore multiple regression test was conducted because the test is robust enough to deal with minor anomalies (Field, 2017).

A correlational design was used to examine the hypothesis that RPB and WTS predicted RQ. Correlations between the variables are shown in table 2.

Table 2:

Correlations coefficients (and significance levels) for the predictors and outcome variables

	PBSC	Willingness to Sacrifice (WTS)
Relationship Quality	.84 (<.001)	.92 (<.001)
Romantic Partner's Behaviour (PBSC)		.66 (<.001)

Data was analysed using multiple regression with the Enter Method. The regression equation produced a large effect size ($R^2 = 0.94$, $R^2_{Adj} = 0.94$), indicating that RPB and WTS were significant predictors of RQ ($F(2,65) = 496.60$, $p < 0.001$).

There was a significant positive relationship between RPB and RQ ($\beta = 0.41$, $t = 10.09$, $df = 67$, $p < 0.001$), with the model predicting that one unit change in RPB predicted a 0.47 increase in RQ. There was also a significant positive relationship between WTS and RQ ($\beta = 0.64$, $t = 15.71$, $df = 67$, $p < 0.001$), with the model predicting that one unit increase in WTS would result in an additional 0.83 RQ. The results indicated that greater RPB and WTS increase RQ in long-term adult relationships.

Qualitative Analysis

In line with the social constructionist approach, the language used in the follow-up interviews was emphasised to construct an analysis of relationship satisfaction. The initial analysis of the transcriptions of the interviewed participants identified four main themes

with three sub-themes each (Figure 1) related to relationship satisfaction in an ongoing romantic relationship. These themes are fundamental to gaining insight into the participants' experiences in their relationships. These categories have been labelled as "Positive Partner's Behaviour", "No Negative Partner's Behaviour", "Openness", and "Feeling content". A point to consider is that when 'relationship satisfaction' and 'personal relationship experience' are the research topics, it is impossible to isolate concepts relative to each other precisely. Therefore, aspects of participants' attitudes and emotions might overlap across these categories. The results section examines two aspects of one theme ("Positive Partner's Behaviour"), i.e. 'affection and acts of love' and 'willingness to sacrifice'.

Positive Partner's Behaviour

What was evident throughout all interviews was that RPB, being positive or negative, affects participants' relationship satisfaction, respectively in a good or bad way. Regardless of the size of an act of love, the display of positive emotions and expression of love construct positive experiences and relationship satisfaction. This theme was divided into three subthemes: affection and acts of love, romantic partner's support and willingness to sacrifice. The relationship between these and the theme is displayed below.

The themes and sub themes.

Positive Partner Behaviour

Support

Willingness to Sacrifice

Affection & Acts of Love

Openness

Vulnerability

Open Communication

Freedom of Expression

Feeling Content

Appreciation

Commitment from both partners

Needs are met

No Negative Partner's Behaviour

Not demanding controlling

Not blaming

Inconsistency

Affection and Acts of Love

This sub-theme discusses the importance of displaying affection and feeling loved in a relationship to make it satisfying reported by the interviewees. Extremes are used to present the importance of affection in a relationship. Expressions like "affectionate love are the keys", "love (.) is a very vital key", and "love makes you feel alive" (P1) construct affection as being very important, something you cannot live without. The relationship is described as "like a vessel in which people can (.) you know, sort of, erm (.) show affection" (P2) – and if they do not, the vessel might sink, i.e. the relationship might end. It is evident what crucial element participants think affection is for a relationship; it can even be "what causes breakdown in relationships is that feeling of lack of support or affection" (P3). The language participants used to express their emotions is very strong: "how the hell are you ever going to make anybody else happy? That's the thing (.) be supportive and affectionate and prepare to fight..." (P3). Swearing is a socially-sanctioned way to express anger and frustration. Frustrating is also if "one person is a definite "closed book", I think that can be dissatisfying" (P4). The expression constructs a desire

for openness and "willingness to (.) listen or to, make the effort to do things" (P4). Those participants exhibit motivation and desire for a satisfying relationship. Willingness to listen and make efforts in a relationship is a predisposition for a WTS, leading directly to the next theme.

Willingness to Sacrifice

There was a consensus amongst participants that the willingness to put your partner's needs and emotions first and not having your needs met at times is a vital aspect of a satisfying relationship. "Being able to sacrifice" is described by two of the participants as "the greatest thing" that in an unexplained, as if almost 'magical' way "has its way of bringing us closer" (P3), "takes out all negative and stressful feelings" and has the power to make a romantic partner "smile back and feel supported" (P2). The act of sacrifice is constructed as a 'universal remedy' that can 'fix' problems in the relationship. However, while it 'cures' one aspect of the relationship, it might also do some damage. The social rule of reciprocity dictates that in order "to sacrifice or compromise on some of the choices, then my partner should show some appreciation" and that "it's hard to compromise and sacrifice without the respect"(P1). Social exchange is constructed by "demonstration of appreciation", "not putting your emotion first while neglecting your partner", and not taking "each other for granted" (P1). Social reality is further constructed in the realm of gender: "men are less likely to sacrifice 'things' in a relationship and to make the effort to open up and discuss everything" (P4). This statement suggests a conscious or sub-conscious pre- conception that women should be more willing to compromise if a sacrifice from one side needs to be made.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to learn more about the relationship between RPB, WTS, and RQ through quantitative and qualitative analysis. The author sought to test the

hypothesis that an increase in positive and supportive partner's behaviour and WTS increase the overall quality of the romantic relationship.

Overall, the quantitative data confirms that the greater the positive aspects of a partner's behaviour and the more he/she is willing to make sacrifices for the relationship, the greater the relationship satisfaction. Notably, the data analysis revealed that increased WTS would result in an almost double increase in relationship satisfaction compared to the effect of improvements in RPB. This is in line with Holmes and Boon's (1990) statement "that sacrifice may be a determinant of healthy couple functioning." All interviewees also highlighted the importance of sacrifice on RQ (e.g., "Being able to sacrifice and to support your partner is the greatest thing and has its way of bringing us closer...", P3). The qualitative data, however, also revealed that if WTS is one-sided and not reciprocated, or if continuous sacrifices are required over a long period, it might have negative consequences on the relationship. This supports Van Lange et al.'s (1997) statement that "partners may respond to persistent noncorrespondence by avoiding or terminating a relationship." One possible explanation might be that from a psychological perspective, a sacrifice is rarely a selfless act and reciprocity is expected in return (Adams, 2005). This can be observed in participant's 1 statement that her "contribution just hasn't felt appreciated enough." The questions that require further attention and future qualitative research are what makes people want to sacrifice and whether the other partner is aware of the sacrifices that participants make. Because if the partner is not aware, is the sacrifice worth it and does it help the relationship? These questions were initially posed by Curran et al.'s (2015) research. Such investigation will bring light to the healthy level of sacrifice that should be made in a relationship and at what point it starts jeopardising it. Another area for further investigation is gender differences in willingness to sacrifice. Recent research by Mandal (2020) and qualitative data suggest that women are more willing to sacrifice in romantic relationships and for the family than men.

Consistent with previous research in this field, specific traits of RPB also proved to be a predictor of RQ. Three positive dimensions - warmth, autonomy support and structure were discussed earlier, along with three negative – rejection, coercion and chaos (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The interviewees provided an excellent foundation on which larger-scale

qualitative research that will examine RPB in greater detail could be based. One of the strengths of the inductive thematic approach applied when analysing qualitative data is that it allows the data to guide the analysis and does not need to fit any pre-existing frameworks or concepts. A deductive approach is recommended for future research as the current data strongly indicate that self-determination theory should be used as a theoretical framework for future theory-led research.

Another strength of this study is its application in both research and practice. The practical significance of the research outcome is further enhanced by the large effect size reported in the results section above. By developing a scale that measures both components (RPB and WTS), psychologists and psychotherapists might notice potential relationship problems early. Thus, identifying, addressing, and working on these issues that affect RQ should become more structured, and quicker results might be achieved. This suggestion awaits further research.

However, several limitations need addressing. First, the qualitative data comprise just four interviewees, affecting the generalizability of the findings. The themes and sub-themes that emerged in the qualitative data to a large extent confirm the findings from the quantitative data, i.e. an increase in RPB and WTS leads to an increase in RQ. However, this conclusion should be considered with caution. As discussed earlier and as found in the qualitative data, if compromises come mainly from one partner or if only one partner exhibits positive behaviour like affection and support and the other does not, that might build frustration and lead to conflicts. So, future research should investigate further the context in which these variables have a positive effect and at what point they can be detrimental to the relationship.

Another potential limitation involves the study's design, particularly the fact that the study presents only one side of each romantic story. Future researchers should investigate both partners' perspectives within each couple. This would also fill the gap that Gable et al. (2003) address in their study, i.e. if the positive behaviour that one partner demonstrates is actually noted and not neglected by the other partner. Furthermore, if yes, is it perceived as positive? Finally, response biases may have skewed the results;

participants' awareness of the study's specific aspects of RPB and WTS may have influenced their responses.

Despite these limitations, the present study offers a different perspective on one of the most researched relationship topics that are of interest to researchers, practitioners, or anyone who would like to understand what are the scientifically proven factors that affect the quality of relationships. Both previous research and the current study proved that specific dimensions of RPB and WTS are predictors of relationship quality. This study provides a foundation that hopefully future research will use and continue to explore the complex interaction between individuals' behaviour and eagerness to sacrifice in the name of love.

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