



Relationship Satisfaction in Couples: Receipt and Provision of Social Support

Katja Antoniw & Manja Vollmann

University of Greifswald, Germany



Objectives

Many studies have revealed a positive association between spousal support and marital satisfaction, particularly when confronted with a stressful life event (e.g., Hagedoorn, Kuijter & Buunk, 2000). However, less attention was paid to the influence of various types of support and the influence of reciprocity in support exchanges on marital satisfaction in daily life of healthy couples. According to previous research on equity theory, reciprocity in support exchanges is indicated by a balance of support provision and support receipt (Gleason, Iida, Bolger & Shrout, 2003; Knoll, Burkert & Schwarzer, 2006; Walster, Walster & Berscheid, 1978).

The first aim of the present study was to examine the associations between several types of social support (emotional, practical, and informational support) and relationship satisfaction by investigating everyday support exchanges from both the recipient's and the provider's perspective. The second question was whether the reciprocity in support exchanges of healthy couples would account for more variance in relationship satisfaction than support receipt and support provision. Therefore, we assessed reciprocity (1) as the difference between participants' provided and received support and as validation of this outcome (2) as the difference between participants' provided support and partners' provided support.

Method

Sample

111 couples, living in a steady relationship for at least one year
 $N = 222$ participants
 Length of partnership: 1-29 years, $M = 4.9$ years ($SD = 4.6$)
 56% were living together
 7% were married
 15% had children

Females

$N = 111$
 Age: 19-47 years, $M = 24.2$ years ($SD = 5.6$)
 81% students

Males

$N = 111$
 Age: 18-53 years, $M = 25.9$ years ($SD = 6.1$)
 57% students

Measures

Social support received from the partner within the last 6 month: Inventory of Social Support in Dyads (ISU-DYA, Winkler & Klauer, 2003)

emotional: 15 items, $\alpha = .85$, "My partner consoled me when I was upset"
 practical: 7 items, $\alpha = .69$, "My partner assisted me with severe problems"
 informational: 12 items, $\alpha = .76$, "My partner gave me advice how to behave"

Social support provided to the partner within the last 6 month: Inventory of Social Support in Dyads (ISU-DYA, Winkler & Klauer, 2003)

emotional: 15 items, $\alpha = .89$, "I consoled my partner when he/she was upset"
 practical: 7 items, $\alpha = .74$, "I assisted my partner with severe problems"
 informational: 12 items, $\alpha = .82$, "I gave my partner advice how to behave"

Relationship satisfaction: Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS, Hendrick, 1981)
 7 items, $\alpha = .83$, "How satisfied are you with your relationship"

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS, Watson et al., 1988)

positive affect: 10 items, $\alpha = .84$, "In general, I feel interested"
 negative affect: 10 items, $\alpha = .85$, "In general, I feel afraid"

Results and Discussion

Multiple Regression

Predictors	Relationship satisfaction (P1) beta coefficients
Step 1 $R^2 = .12^{**}$	
sex (P1)	.05
positive affect (P1)	.17*
negative affect (P1)	-.25**
Step 2 $R^2 = .43^{**}$ $\Delta R^2 = .31^{**}$	
received support (P1)	
- emotional	.38**
- informational	-.08
- practical	.06
provided support (P1)	
- emotional	.24**
- informational	-.07
- practical	-.16*
provided support (P2)	
- emotional	.20**
- informational	.00
- practical	-.04
Step 3 $R^2 = .45^{**}$ $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ns	
Reciprocity (1)	
- emotional	.02
- informational	-.12 ⁺
- practical	.00
Reciprocity (2)	
- emotional	-.04
- informational	.14*
- practical	-.02

Note. P1 = Partner 1, P2 = Partner 2.
 Reciprocity (1) = Difference provided support (P1) and received support (P1).
 Reciprocity (2) = Difference provided support (P1) and provided support (P2).
 ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ⁺ $p < .10$

Results

Types of support

Participants who received and provided more emotional support as well as participants whose partners provided more emotional support reported a higher relationship satisfaction. Moreover, participants' provision of practical support was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction.

Reciprocity

Unexpectedly, reciprocity (1) indicated by differences between provided support (P1) and received support (P1) as well as reciprocity (2) indicated by differences between provided support (P1) and provided support (P2) did not explain any additional variance in relationship satisfaction.

Discussion

Not all types of social support contributed equally to relationship satisfaction. Results highlighted the distinction between emotional, practical and informational support and are consistent with findings suggesting that emotional support is the most relevant type of support. In line with previous research, the best predictor of relationship satisfaction in healthy couples was the receipt as well as the provision of emotional support. Thus, previous results could be generalized to social functioning in the daily life of healthy couples.

Previous research on the positive association between reciprocity in supportive interactions and relationship satisfaction by investigating couples facing a stressful life event could not be generalized to healthy couples in daily life. This result suggests that non-reciprocity, represented by larger differences in support exchanges, does not necessarily decrease the relationship satisfaction of healthy couples.

References

- Gleason, M.E.J., Iida, M., Bolger, N. & Shrout, P.E. (2003). Daily supportive equity in close relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 1036-1045.
- Hagedoorn, M., Kuijter, R.G. & Buunk, B.P. (2000). Marital satisfaction in patients with cancer: Does support from intimate partners benefit those who need it most? *Health Psychology*, 19, 274-282
- Hendrick, S.S. (1981). Self-disclosure and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 50, 93-98.
- Knoll, N., Burkert, S. & Schwarzer, R. (2006). Reciprocal Support Provision: Personality as a Moderator? *European Journal of Personality*, 20, 217-236.
- Watson, D., Clark, L.A. & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 1063-1070.
- Walster, E., Walster, G.W. & Berscheid, E. (1978). *Equity: Theory and research*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Winkler, M. & Klauer, T. (2003). Inventar zur sozialen Unterstützung in Dyaden (ISU-DYA): Konstruktionshintergrund und erste Ergebnisse zu Reliabilität und Validität. *Diagnostica*, 49, 14-23.

Contact Details

Dipl.-Psych. Katja Antoniw
 antoniw@uni-greifswald.de

Dipl.-Psych. Manja Vollmann
 vollmann@uni-greifswald.de

University of Greifswald,
 Germany