Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research

Volume 3   Article 3

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Satisfaction in Similarity:

The Association Between Perceived Communication Styles and Relational Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study hypothesized that people in romantic relationships who reported higher levels of perceived similarity in their communication would also express higher levels of relational satisfaction. It focused on the aspect of Martin Buber's theory of dialogic communication which infers that people are attracted to others who are similar to them and are therefore attracted to others with similar communication styles. This study analyzed people in dating relationships at Pepperdine University to examine the correlation between perceived similarity and relational satisfaction, focusing on the four elements of humor, introversion, conflict management, and criticalness. Although the results were not strong enough to conclude a definite correlation between perceived similarity and relationship satisfaction, the results showed positive correlations between the two variables. Additionally, the researchers executed a post hoc analysis to further analyze the data. Finally, the study concludes with possible explanations for the weak correlations and suggestions for future research.

Key Words: *relational satisfaction*, *dialogical communication*, *similarity*, *perceived similarity*, *romantic relationships*

Satisfaction in Similarity:

The Association Between Perceived Communication Styles and Relational Satisfaction

Long have people heard the two relationship sayings "opposites attract" and "birds of a feather flock together." Yet, pausing to consider the implications of these two contradicting truisms stimulates a person to question the truth about how romantic relationships are established and maintained. Past research suggests that those with high communication satisfaction have higher levels of relational satisfaction (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006; Martin & Anderson, 1995). For example, in her study analyzing the effects of communication quality and quantity indicators on intimacy and relational satisfaction, Emmers-Sommer (2004) determined that "numerous individual communication quality indicators significantly related to relational satisfaction. Specifically, partners being satisfied with their interactions related to their being satisfied with their relationships" (p. 408). In addition to the Emmers-Sommer (2004), Martin Buber suggested that people are satisfied in conversation that represents both the self and acknowledges the other, thus resulting in high communication satisfaction and high relational satisfaction (Buber & Smith, 2002). In other words, couples who are satisfied with their communication tend to also be satisfied with their relationship. However, current research lacks sufficient knowledge about the effects of whether or not *similarity* in communication, as opposed to merely communication satisfaction, leads to higher relational satisfaction. Therefore, the goal of this study is to fill this missing gap in research and explore the connection between similarity in communication and relational satisfaction. Before analyzing the findings of this study, it is essential to review the relevant bodies of literature, including dialogic communication, relational satisfaction and communication satisfaction, similarity in communication styles, and perceived similarity in communication styles.

Review of Literature

Dialogic Communication

Inspiration to conduct this study arose from the theory of dialogical communication. According to dialogical theorist Martin Buber, to successfully build strong relationships, partners must conduct genuine conversation where both people are mindful of one another "with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them" (Buber & Smith, 2002, p. 22). Dialogical communication is the idea that one should speak in a manner that makes others want to listen and listen in a way that makes others want to speak, because all "conversation derives its genuineness only from the consciousness of the inclusion—even if this appears only abstractly as an 'acknowledgment' of the actual being of the partner in the conversation" (Buber & Smith, 2002, p. 115). In other words, when engaging in dialogical communication, couples should be striving to communicate in a way that represents the self and acknowledges the other, in order for the partners to feel valued as they speak, resulting in mutual participation and inclusion. In doing this, partners will achieve a mutual sense of relational satisfaction through their communication process.

Relational Satisfaction and Communication Satisfaction

Relational satisfaction is "the degree to which an individual is content and satisfied with his or her relationship" (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006, p. 155). In fact, communication plays a vital role in relational satisfaction because communication is the fundamental component of relationships (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006; Levine et al., 2006; Hect & Sereno, 1985).

Therefore, communication satisfaction promotes relational satisfaction. For example, when a partner feels heard and understood by his or her partner, this person expresses increases

relational satisfaction and happiness (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Incidentally, Buber's dialogical communication theory suggests that people are attracted to those who are similar to them, including their communication styles. Therefore, applying his theory, if both partners' communication styles are similar, their expectations in their communication styles are congruent. When expectations are met and fulfilled, relational satisfaction is achieved (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Ultimately, similar communication styles in partners will result in communication satisfaction which will dictate overall relational satisfaction.

Similarity in Communication Styles

Anderson and Emmers-Sommers (2006) suggests that a "variable that has been shown to influence relational satisfaction is similarity, the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as similar to others" (p. 156). Research suggests that similar personal characteristics between dyads such as attitudes, backgrounds, and interests stimulate attraction and satisfaction (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Furthermore, past research has examined different individual aspects of communication styles and the affects toward relational satisfaction in dyads. For example, a study by Martin and Anderson (1995) shows that communication styles such as willingness to communicate, interpersonal communication competence, and verbal aggressiveness all correlate with relational satisfaction among roommates (positively for the first two and negative for the last). Although this study was conducted among roommates and not dating couples, the high levels of interaction and relative form of commitment between both types of dyads allow relational satisfaction. Therefore, understanding that similar communication stimulates relational satisfaction, this study predicts that when partners *perceive* their communication styles to be similar, partners will still express relational satisfaction.

Perceived Similarity in Communication Styles

Perceived similarity in communication is a result the partners' perception of the communication styles, not actual behavior. For example, Morry, Kito, and Ortiz (2011), in their study with dating couples and similarity in attraction, determine that relationship quality is positively correlated to perceived similarity among dating couples. Similarly, in their research Cann, Davis, and Zapata (2011) observed partner's humor styles and relational satisfaction and found no significant relationship between the two variables. However, the researchers suggested that this seemingly insignificant correlation was actually affected by the fact that the couples may have perceived to have more similar humor styles than they actually possessed. In other words, the couple's perception of having higher humor styles may have contributed to their relational satisfaction, even if that perception was inaccurate. In conclusion, when these studies examined the correlation between relational satisfaction and actual similarity, they found little evidence supporting the association. However, both of these studies found that a couple's perceived communication similarity directly influenced the couples' relational satisfaction. Therefore, *perception* may be the real key in predicting relational satisfaction in terms of similarity. Recognizing the limited research regarding perceived similarity and communication, this study proposes the hypothesis:

> H1: Partners in dating relationships who perceive higher levels of similarity in overall communication also experience more relational satisfaction.

Communication Elements in Relationships

In order to effectively analyze the relationship between perceived similarity and relational satisfaction, this study specifically observed the communication elements of humor, criticalness, conflict management, and introversion.

Humor. This study focused on how partners use humor in conversational settings because humor generally positively contributes to relationships. Pennington and Hall (2014) describe the idea of humor as a way to "charm a potential romantic partner with an anecdote or share jokes among friends, [because] we value humor not only in ourselves, but in the company we keep" (p. 2). Many individuals desire to find a partner with a good sense of humor. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, in their study, Cann, Davis, and Zapata (2011) determined little correlation between actual similarity in humor style and relational satisfaction among couples. Therefore, this study felt it important to explore the element of humor to yield further understanding.

Criticalness. Nomura and Barnlund (1983) describe criticalness as expressing discontent toward another's personal qualities or behaviors. This element was chosen inferring that it plays a crucial factor in regards to attitudes toward the level of relational satisfaction.

Conflict Management. Conflict management is also an important communication aspect to observe because the way people manage conflicts in a relationship directly affects the quality and the satisfaction of the relationship. For example, a study examining conflict management and job satisfaction concluded that when a collaborative conflict management culture is present in an organization, characterized by having cooperation and open discussion during an issue, job satisfaction will be positively affected (Choi, 2013). Therefore, in regards to this study, the researchers hypothesized:

H2: Higher perceived similarity in conflict management style will have the highest

correlation with relational satisfaction out of all the communication aspects in the study.

Introversion. Introversion and extroversion are two characteristics that define the way people observe the inner and outer world of experience (Opt & Loffredo, 2003). Introversion

means focusing more on the "inner world of experience" and extroversion means focusing on the "outer world of experience" (Opt & Loffredo, 2003, p. 562). Neither introversion nor extroversion is inherently better than the other (Conklin, 1923), and both are influential in the way partners communicate with each other and others. However, this study chose to primarily focus on introversion, predicting that introversion would correlate the least strongly with relational satisfaction in comparison to the other communication elements. Therefore, it hypothesized:

> H3: Higher perceived similarity in introversion will have the lowest correlation with relational satisfaction than the other communication aspects in the study.

Method

Procedure

This study used a survey methodology to determine how couples perceived their personal communication style and their partner's communication style. After the participants signed a consent form, hardcopy questionnaires were distributed to the participants. All questionnaires remained anonymous to help limit the problem of social desirability.

Participants

The convenience sample consisted of Pepperdine University students currently in romantic relationships. The study did not discriminate gender, age, relationship time duration, or any other relevant characteristics. The researchers gathered the student sample through word of mouth among the numerous campus groups and organizations. Reaching out to various students in different activities expanded the variation in the total sample. The final sampled total was 100 students. Each researcher surveyed 25 students each.

Research Design

In order to examine the variable of perceived communication style, the questionnaire incorporated questions with the four important communication elements of humor, criticalness, conflict management, and introversion. Humor was defined by measuring how the participant perceived his or her humor in all communication contexts and how often humor was used. Criticalness was defined as the participant's tendency to acknowledge the flaws of his or her partner and defined by the level of patience the individual has with his or her partner. Conflict management was defined as the ability of the participant to handle conflict by being intentional and honest, while respecting his or her partner's wishes and advocating for his or her own. Finally, introversion was defined as the respondent's tendency to create relationships and the willingness to communicate in social environmental contexts.

Measures

The questions used a Likert scale of 1 to 7 ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" with 4 being "neutral." The questions were compiled from seven different scales, six on communication and one on relational satisfaction, all having been tested for reliability. The first set of 12 questions was answered by the participants about their perceived communication style. In the next set, the questionnaire had those same 12 questions, but, instead directed toward the participant's perceptions of their partner's communication style. Lastly, the participants answered 7 questions regarding their overall relational satisfaction.

Specifically, the element of humor was imbedded in the questionnaire with three questions about an individual's ability to incorporate humor into conversation (Richmond, Wrench, & Gorham, 2001). The element of criticalness was incorporated with three questions from a criticalness scale developed by Levine et al. in response to their study on the communication traits symmetry and complementarity (Levine et al., 2006). Conflict management

was integrated with three questions that measured the participant's tendencies when resolving

conflicts (Chakrabarty, Brown, & Gilbert, 2002). Introversion was included with three questions

measuring the participant's overall level of introversion (Eysenck, 1971). Finally, relational

satisfaction was measured using the 7-question Relationship Assessment Scale developed by

Hendrick (Hendrick, 1988). The complete questionnaire can be found in the appendix at the end.

Results

After conducting the study and collecting the data over the course of approximately two

weeks, the researchers executed the necessary coding and statistical calculations. First, the

researchers computed the average score of the participants' personal perception of their

communication style and the average score of the participants' perception of their partner's

communication style, and found the difference between both scores (self – partner). Next, the

researchers found the average score of the participants' relational satisfaction. Finally, the

correlations between the two calculated scores (self – partner and relational satisfaction) were

compared, resulting in a value of −.037. The researchers recognized that the negative value of

−.037 actually represented the correlations between the perceived *difference* in self-partner

communication style and the relational satisfaction, instead of the perceived *similarity* and

satisfaction. To correct this, the original correlation score was inverted to better reflect the

perceived similarity, the variable in question in this study. Therefore, the correct correlation

value yielded .037.

After computing communication style, the researchers calculated the relationship

between the participants' personal perception of their communication style and the average score

of the participants' perception of their partner's communication style for each component of

humor, introversion, conflict management, and criticalness. After following the same procedure,

including inverting the scores, the results were as follows: humor = .118; criticalness = −.226;

conflict management = .166; and introversion = .033.

Discussion

Implications

The first hypothesis (H1) predicted that participants who perceived higher levels of

overall similarity in communication between them and their partner would also express higher

relational satisfaction, a positive association. The value of .037 slightly supports H1 in that it

shows a positive correlation between perceived communication similarity and relational

satisfaction. However, the weak numeric value does not allow the study to conclude a correlation

between the two variables.

The second hypothesis (H2) predicted that perceived similarity in conflict management

style would have a higher correlation with relational satisfaction in comparison to any of the

other communication elements in this study. With the score of .166, conflict management did

result in the highest correlation among the other components. However, similar to the score of

H1, the score of H2 also showed a fairly weak correlation.

Our third and final hypothesis (H3) predicted that higher perceived similarity in

introversion would have the lowest correlation with relational satisfaction in comparison to any

of the other communication aspects in our study. Interestingly, introversion yielded the second

lowest score (.033) with criticalness resulting in the lowest score (−.226). In other words, the

prediction that perceived similarity in introversion between partners would have the least

correlation with relational satisfaction did not yield true; rather, perceived similarity in

criticalness generated the least contribution toward relational satisfaction. Therefore, H3 was not

supported.

Post Hoc Analysis for Hypothesis 1

Because the results concluded weak correlations, but still supported the hypotheses, further calculations were conducted to detect more patterns from the collected data. Concentrating only on the first hypothesis, the researchers looked at the length of time in the dating relationship. For the relationships lasting the shortest amount of time (less than one month to 5 months), there was a positive correlation of .13 between perceived similarity in overall communication and relational satisfaction. This result supported H1 stronger than the original result, yet still generally weak. For the relationships ranging in the middle (5 to 24 months), there was a negative correlation of $-.126$, which did not support H1. And finally, for the relationships lasting the longest (2 to 7.5 years), the correlation yielded .262, resulting in the strongest correlation.

The researchers infer from these results that the way partners communicate changes as the relationship progresses. In newer relationships, each partner is striving to impress the other; thus, the couples are more likely to communicate in a way they think their partner would want them to communicate. As for the couples in the middle who have passed the initial impression stage, the results show a negative correlation because the partners are becoming more open and honest with each other, possibly revealing differences in communication styles. Finally, the researchers imply that the partners in the longest relationships yielded the strongest correlation because overtime the partners have negotiated and aligned communication styles that ensure the continuation of the relationship.

Limitations

There are some possible limitations to the study which could have contributed to the weak correlations. First, the participants consisted only of students of Pepperdine University.

The researchers recognize that the unique population of Pepperdine University could be a third variable affecting the relationship between the variables in observation. In other words, due to the possibility that another variable could affect relational satisfaction, the study cannot conclude causation between the two variables. Additionally, due to the nature of a convenience sample, the study cannot be generalized beyond the university population because the sample does not guarantee an accurate representation of the student body.

Second, in conducting a survey research method, there is the risk of participant bias. Although the questionnaires were kept anonymous, people nonetheless display a social desirability bias, meaning they answer the questions in a way that shows themselves in the best light. In addition, the researchers inferred that participants in recently established relationships might have answered in a bias manner. For example, those in newly established relationships could have been more likely to conform to the other person as a result of the "honeymoon" phase in which individuals view their relationship as perfect.

Third, due to lack of time and resources, the study only looked selectively at four communication elements. Although the four communication aspects are important in relational communication, other factors play a role in determining relational satisfaction. If contemplating on conducting this study in the future, more communication elements, such as verbal aggressiveness, talkativeness, and honesty should consist within the questionnaire to encompass a more detailed and accurate description of communication styles in dating relationships.

Future Research

The weak results plus the limitations suggest the need for future research, not only to improve this study, but to continue filling in the missing gap in current research. Parallel to the limitations of the study, some major changes could include surveying both partners in the

romantic dyad, expanding the population beyond the university to allow generalization, and finally, making it a longitudinal study. In this study, the only criterion established was that the participants were in a current dating relationship. There was no requirement that both partners in the dyad needed to participate in the survey process. Although there were times when both partners in the same dyad participated, it would be beneficial to collect data from both partners to compare their answers. In addition, expanding the sample to a larger population beyond the university would allow researchers to generalize their findings as a larger sample better represents the community at large. Finally, the results of the post hoc analysis suggested that length of relationship might affect the correlation of the study. Therefore, a follow-up longitudinal study should be conducted to measure the changes in communication styles and satisfaction levels over the time of the relationship.

Conclusion

This study focused on the idea of perceived communication styles and relational satisfaction among romantic couples. The hypotheses were derived from the idea of Buber's dialogic communication that suggests that couples with similar communication styles will result in relational satisfaction because both partners will feel mutual participation and inclusion as they speak and listen to each other. Although the results showed weak numeric correlations, overall there was a positive correlation between perceived similarity and relational satisfaction. Finally, the purpose of this study was to continue to encourage future research to explore and determine the truth of whether or not satisfied relationships result from when "opposites attract" or when "birds of a feather flock together."

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Appendix

Communication Research: Relationship Questionnaire

This is a questionnaire for people who are currently in romantic relationships, that measures different aspects of communication between partners and relationship satisfaction. The questionnaire is anonymous and the responses given will not be connected back to you, the responder. The responses from every questionnaire filled out will be gathered together to compare and then the patterns will be summed up and analyzed. Thank you for contributing your time to help with our research.

Your Sex: M / F   Age: _____   Grade: _____   Age of significant other: _____

Length of relationship: _____   Does this person attend Pepperdine? Yes / No

Grade of significant other (if applicable): _____

Answer these questions about **yourself** on a scale of 1 to 7
1= Strongly Disagree   4= Neutral   7=Strongly Agree

1. I try to investigate an issue with my partner to find a solution acceptable to us.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

2. I am patient with my partner.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

3. Do you derive more satisfaction from social activities than from anything else?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

4. I am not funny or humorous.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

5. I often make negative comments to my partner.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

6. I try to integrate my ideas with my partner's to come up with a decision jointly.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

7. Being humorous is a natural communication orientation for me.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

8. Do you usually take the initiative in making new friends?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

9. I try to keep my disagreement with my partner to myself in order to avoid hard feelings.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

10. I use humor to communicate in a variety of situations.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

11. Are you inclined to limit your acquaintances to a select few?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

12. I try to make people feel good about themselves even when their ideas are stupid.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Answer these questions about **your partner** on a scale of 1 to 7

1= Strongly Disagree   4= Neutral   7=Strongly Agree

1. My partner tries to investigate an issue with me to find a solution acceptable to us.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

2. My partner is patient with me.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

3. Does your partner derive more satisfaction from social activities than from anything

   else?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

4. My partner is not funny or humorous.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

5. My partner often makes negative comments to me.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

6. My partner tries to integrate their ideas with my ideas to come up with a decision jointly.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

7. Being humorous is a natural communication orientation for my partner.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

8. Does your partner usually take the initiative in making new friends?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

9. My partner tries to keep their disagreement with me to themselves in order to avoid hard

   feelings.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

10. My partner uses humor to communicate in a variety of situations.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

11. Is your partner inclined to limit their acquaintances to a select few?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7

12. My partner tries to make people feel good about themselves even when their ideas are

stupid.

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Finally, with your opinion answer these questions on a scale of 1 to 5

	Low				High
1. How well does your partner meet your needs?	1	2	3	4	5
2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	1	2	3	4	5
3. How good is your relationship compared to most?	1	2	3	4	5
4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?	1	2	3	4	5
5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?	1	2	3	4	5
6. How much do you love your partner?	1	2	3	4	5
7. How many problems are there in your relationship?	1	2	3	4	5

Question Key:
Humor: Questions 4, 7, 10
Criticalness: Questions 2, 5, 15
Conflict: Questions 1, 6, 9
Introversion: Questions 3, 8, 11
Reverse coded questions: 2, 4, 9, 11, 12

Questions 4 and 7 are reverse coded for Relational Satisfaction

*excluded from survey given to participants