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The Capitalization Process in Stable Couple Relationships: Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Benefits

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Abstract

Capitalization is the process through which people share good news with a significant other (e.g., a friend, the partner, a family member), which in turn responds in an “active” way in order to maximize the benefits deriving from the event. Previous daily experience studies found associations between capitalization responses and both intrapersonal and interpersonal well-being in young couples, but only one study have examined these longitudinal associations in more mature. The purpose of the study was to extend the knowledge on the capitalization process by analyzing the longitudinal associations between the four types of capitalization responses (active-constructive, passive-constructive, active-destructive, passive-destructive) and interpersonal and intrapersonal outcomes in stable couples. One hundred and seventy-three married couples (Mean relationship duration = 18 years) completed two self-report questionnaires (at a four-month interval) containing scales designed to measure the perception of partner’s capitalization responses, relationship satisfaction, and individual well-being. Findings from hierarchical regressions showed that, for women and men, the partner’s active-constructive responses positively predicted the individual’s relationship satisfaction over time, whereas the active-destructive responses negatively predicted the relationship satisfaction, but only for women. Moreover, for men, active-constructive responses predicted an increase in individual well-being as well. Capitalization responses, in particular the active-constructive style, are associated with changes in individual and relational well being also in stable couples.

Keywords: stable, capitalization, longitudinal

1. Introduction

How couples cope with negative events has drawn the attention of scholars of close relationships for many years

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[e.g., 1; 2], but the way in which partners respond to positive events and the effect of these positive events on individual and relational well-being require an adequate examination as well [e.g., 3; 4]. The reasons of this choice lie in the fact that there is a 3:1 ratio between positive events and negative events [5], and that positive events have shown to decrease depression [6] and to promote people’s self-esteem and perception of control [7]. Moreover, people are happier and feel better when the positive events are shared with another person [e.g., 8]. For these reasons close relationships researchers have recently devoted attention to the so-called capitalization process that is the social sharing of positive events. Capitalization is defined as a process through which people share good news with a significant other (e.g., a friend, the partner, a family member), who in turn responds in an “active” way in order to maximize the benefits of the event [9; 10].

The attempt to communicate the positive event allows the other person to provide a response to this communication. The intersection between an active-passive dimension and a constructive-destructive dimension generates four types of response [11]: An active-constructive response reflects the partner’s enthusiasm and happiness. The partner usually requests for further details or asks questions about future benefits. In a passive-constructive response the partner shows positive attitude toward the shared event, but at the same time he/she does not say much, does not ask questions or keeps quiet. With an active-destructive response the partner returns a negative feedback to the discloser (e.g., highlighting the negative implications that the event may have) although he/she is involved and interested. A passive-destructive response shows that the partner is indifferent to the positive event and that its importance is minimally recognized. The more or less responsive partner’s reactions (i.e., attentive and supportive) [12] are then perceived and evaluated by the discloser who can be more or less benefited by the sharing of the positive event.

1.1. The capitalization benefits

Previous daily experience studies found associations between capitalization responses and intrapersonal well-being [e.g., 11]: The studies showed that receiving an active and constructive answer from others in response to capitalization attempts is associated with an increase in positive emotions and in personal well-being. On the contrary, passive or destructive answers reduce the benefits gained from sharing a positive event and they could even predict a decrease in positive emotion and well-being [11]. Moreover, in a series of experimental studies by Reis and colleagues [13, Study 2 and 4], participants were randomly assigned to four groups in which they received by a trained investigator an active-constructive, a passive-constructive, an active-destructive, or a passive-destructive response to their communication of a positive event. The results showed that participants who received an active-constructive responses increased the level of importance they attached to the positive event as compared to those who received passive-destructive responses respectively.

The capitalization benefits, however, are also interpersonal: in a series of studies conducted by Gable and colleagues [11, Study 2 and 3] on dating and married couples, couples in which subjects perceived their partner’s reactions as more responsive (active-constructive) turned out to have more satisfying, intimate, and trusting relationship than subjects that perceived their partner’s responses as more indifferent and unsupportive.

It could be argued that receiving positive reactions from a significant other, when communicating one’s luck, brings numerous benefits. However, more longitudinal research is needed to analyze the association between capitalization process and individual and relational satisfaction over time. Moreover, only one study has examined these associations in more mature couples, that is couples with an average duration of marriage of 10 years [11, Study 3], while research has shown that young and mature couples present different associations between couple’s processes and satisfaction [14].

The purpose of this study was to extend the knowledge on the capitalization process in an Italian sample by analyzing the longitudinal associations between the four types of capitalization responses (active-constructive, passive-constructive, active-destructive, passive-destructive) and interpersonal (relationship quality) and intrapersonal (individual well-being) outcomes in stable couples. In particular, we hypothesized that:

1. active-constructive responses would predict an increase in relationship satisfaction, while passive-constructive, active-destructive and passive-destructive responses a decrease in relationship satisfaction;
2. active-constructive responses would predict an increase in individual well-being, while passive-constructive, active-destructive and passive-destructive responses a decrease in individual well-being.

2. Method
2.1. Participants and procedures

The sample was composed of 173 heterosexual couples (N = 346 subjects) from the North of Italy who had 3 years of relationship behind. Partners were between 26 and 73 years of age: Men were slightly older (M = 48.35, SD = 7.47) than women (M = 45.18, SD = 6.32). Most couples were married at their first marriage (90.2%) and only the 1.7% of women and the 1.2% of men were separated or divorced. The average duration of marriage was 18 years. Participants completed two self-report questionnaires at a four-months interval. They took part in the research voluntarily and gave informed consent. Anonymity and data confidentiality were guaranteed.

2.2. Measures

Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts (PRCA) [11;15]. 12 items that represent the four typical responses to capitalization attempts compose this scale: active-constructive, passive-constructive, active-destructive, and passive-destructive. Participants rated each item using the stem: “When I tell my partner about something good that has happened to me . . . ” and a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). Items examples are: “My partner usually reacts to my good fortune enthusiastically” for active-constructive dimension, “My partner says little, but I know he/she is happy for me” for passive-constructive dimension, “He/she points out the potential down sides of the good event” for active-destructive dimension, “My partner often seems disinterested” for passive-destructive dimension. Reliability was good for all the subscales for both women and men (αs ranging from .78 to .94 at Time 1 and from .79 to .93 at Time 2). Self-perceptions of one’s own responses were added to the scale in line with similar measures [16] but they were not used for the present analyses.

Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) [17]. It is a 6-item measure of couple satisfaction. Five items use a 7-point scale (from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree; item example: “The relationship with my partner makes me happy”) and the last item, measuring a global perception of couple satisfaction (“Cross the number that better identify how happy you feel in your relationship”), a 10-point scale (from 1 = very unhappy to 10 = very happy). A global index of quality of marriage was calculated by averaging the standardized scores of the six items. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was equal to .96 at Time 1 and .97 at Time 2 for women and to .94 at Time 1 and .96 at Time 2 for men.

Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) [18]. It is a short 5-item instrument designed to measure global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one’s life. Items use a 7-point scale (from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree; item example: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was equal to .87 at Time 1 and .97 at Time 2 for women and to .88 at Time 1 and .90 at Time 2 for men.

3. Results

We conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses with SPSS 18.0. All analyses were conducted separately for women and men. To test our first hypothesis we regressed the four capitalization responses as perceived by women on Time 2 relationship satisfaction, while controlling for Time 1 relationship satisfaction. The overall model was significant (R² = .37, F(5, 172) = 19.46, p < .05). Time 1 relationship quality was a significant predictor of Time 2 relationship quality. Moreover, we found that the active-constructive response (β = .12, p < .05) and the active-destructive response (β = -.12, p < .05) of the partner were significant predictors of Time 2 women’s relationship satisfaction in the hypothesized directions. This indicates that if the partner was perceived as more active-constructive when women shared a positive event, the women’s relationship satisfaction increased from Time 1 to Time 2. Women’s relationship satisfaction decreased from Time 1 to Time 2 if the partner was perceived as more active-destructive. For men, the overall model was not significant (R² = .46, F(5, 172) = 29.12, p = .18). Results are presented in Figure 1.
To test our second hypothesis we regressed the four women’s capitalization responses onto Time2 individual well-being, while controlling for Time 1 individual well-being. The overall model was not significant ($R^2 = .29$, $F(5, 170) = 13.57$, $p = .27$). For men, however, the overall model was significant ($R^2 = .20$, $F(5, 172) = 8.76$, $p < .05$). The active-constructive response ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$) of the partner was a significant predictor of Time 2 men’s individual well-being, above and beyond the effect of men’s Time 1 individual well-being. This indicates that if the partner was perceived as more active-constructive when men shared a positive event, men’s individual well-being increased from Time 1 to Time 2 (see Figure 2).

4. Discussion

In this study, our aim was to analyze the longitudinal association between the four capitalization responses and individual and relational outcomes. Findings from hierarchical regressions confirmed that women are sensitive to the reaction of the partner and the partner’s active-constructive and active-destructive reactions could change for the better or the worse the quality of relationship experienced by women over time, while, for men, the positive effect of active-constructive reaction of their partner affects their individual well-being only.

In conclusion, we could say that especially the active-constructive style is associated over time with the increase of individual and relational well-being in stable partners. The active-constructive responses, indeed, transmit two types of information: positive information about the event itself and about the relationship with the partner [19].
References


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