

Maintenance Strategies and Physical Affection as Predictors of Love, Liking, and Satisfaction in Marriage

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The purpose of this research effort is to examine five relational maintenance strategies and two measures of physical affection as predictors of love, liking, and satisfaction in marriage. The sample consisted of 200 married couples. Results indicate that perceptions of the partners' use of maintenance strategies and respondents' own satisfaction with physical affection were strong predictors of love, liking, and satisfaction. Moreover, the variables differed in their relative predictive ability of the relational characteristics.

■ The focus of this research effort is upon the prediction of the fundamental relational characteristics of love, liking, and relational satisfaction. Two sets of behavioral predictors are examined: maintenance strategies and physical affection. The question posed in this investigation is how these sets of independent variables predict the select relational characteristics.

In so doing, the typology of maintenance strategies developed by Stafford and Canary (1991) is employed. Specifically, Stafford and Canary's typology includes five maintenance strategies. Positivity assesses perceptions of the partner's cheerfulness and optimism. Openness refers to self-disclosure and discussion of the nature of the relationship. Assurances concerns the degree to which the partner stresses the future of the relationship. Use of social networks refers to the time spent with common affiliations, friends, and relatives. Finally, sharing tasks involves the extent to which the partner is perceived to help with day-to-day tasks. Stafford and Canary (1991) found that these maintenance behaviors were differentially related to relational characteristics such as commitment, liking, and control mutuality.

Despite the fruitfulness of the Stafford and Canary typology, it is argued here that behaviors other than such strategies predict fundamental relational characteristics. For example, physical affection has been identified by relational partners as a salient element of their relationships (Menaghan,

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1983). Moreover, previous research has indicated that physical affection might serve maintenance functions (e.g., Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Bell, Daly, & Gonzalez, 1987; Dainton, 1991; Dainton & Stafford, 1993). Indeed, it is through the use of touch that partners are perceived as warm, attentive, and loving (Sabatelli, Buck, & Dreyer, 1983). Thus, it is likely that the use of and/or the satisfaction with physical affection will play an important role in determining relational properties.

At issue, then, is the manner in which maintenance strategies and physical affection predict relational properties. Specifically, the question becomes which of these seven independent variables, or combination of these variables, best predicts assessments of love, liking, and relational satisfaction. Each of these three characteristics will be examined in turn.

RELATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Love

It is peculiar that research on relational maintenance has overlooked love. For most people, love is the very foundation of romantic involvements in general, and marriage in particular (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983). One reason communication researchers may have shied away from utilizing love as a relational characteristic is the plethora of contradictory conceptualizations of love. For example, love has been operationalized as behaviors, as physiological responses, and alternatively as a relational construct (see Marston, Hecht, & Robers, 1987, for an overview).

Although there are competing conceptualizations of love, Rubin's (1970, 1973) conceptualization of love is one of the most utilized and validated (Tardy, 1988). Rubin (1970) defined love as an interpersonal attitude that predisposes someone to think, feel, and behave in a certain way. Specifically, Rubin proposes that love is comprised of three interdependent elements: attraction, caring, and intimacy. Rubin's work has been utilized by numerous investigations into the nature of love (e.g., Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989; Richardson, Medvin, & Hammock, 1988). Based upon this research history, it has been adopted in the present study.

Most research to date has focused on the definitive answer to "what is love?" or "why do people fall in love?" rather than looking at an alternative question: what aspects of interaction predict love? One exception to the general preoccupation with the question of "what is love?" is a study by Marston et al. (1987; Hecht, Marston, & Larkey, 1988) that asked respondents how they communicated love to their partner. Responses included telling the partner how they felt, touching the partner, being supportive, doing things for the partner, and spending time with each other. Of relevance here is the striking similarity of these behaviors to those identified as maintenance and/or physical affection (e.g., Dainton, 1991; Dindia, 1989). Given the limited evidence as to how relational partners maintain feelings of love, and

which behaviors might best predict feelings of love, the following research question is posed:

RQ₁: Which of the five maintenance strategies and two physical affection measures, or combination thereof, best predict romantic love?

Liking

Much interpersonal communication literature emphasizes the importance of liking within romantic relationships (Burgoon & Hale, 1984). Rubin (1973) has theorized that without liking, a romantic relationship may have a rocky future at best. Indeed, liking has been related previously to maintenance behaviors. Bell et al.'s (1987) research is based on the assumption that affinity-maintenance functions to improve and maintain marital quality, and that the use of affinity maintenance strategies increases the stability of close relationships. Further, Stafford and Canary (1991) found that four of their maintenance strategies predicted 54% of the variance in liking, with perceptions of the use of positivity as the primary predictor. However, the question as to the relative influence of the maintenance strategies and physical affection remains unexplored; hence the following research question is offered:

RQ₂: Which of the five maintenance strategies and two physical affection measures, or combination thereof, best predict liking?

Satisfaction

Research on satisfaction has a strong legacy; in fact, it is the most studied relational variable (Spanier & Lewis, 1980). Relational satisfaction is generally defined as an individual's attitude toward the partner and the relationship, typically in terms of the perceived quality of the relationship. Generally, a measure of satisfaction provides a global assessment of the state of the relationship.

Most researchers examining marital satisfaction have compared satisfied to unsatisfied couples on the variable of interest. To illustrate, Vangelisti and Huston (1994) found that husbands' and wives' assessments of communication were good predictors of their marital satisfaction over time; those that remained satisfied with their marriage were generally those that remained satisfied with the nature of their interactions. Similarly, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) found that satisfied couples use less defensiveness, stubbornness, and withdrawal in interaction than do dissatisfied couples. Indeed, Gottman and Carrere (1994) have found that these negative patterns of interaction affect the longterm stability of the relationship. Finally, research indicates that more satisfied couples engage in more positive communicative patterns. For example, Kirchler (1988) found that satisfied couples talk about more subjects, and they display more sensitivity and understanding than do dissatisfied couples. Further, Fineberg and Lowman (1975) found that adjusted couples express more affection than do maladjusted couples.

Looking specifically at the degree to which maintenance behaviors predict marital satisfaction, Bell et al.'s (1987) investigation of wives found that 52%

of the variance of their marital satisfaction could be explained by sensitivity, spirituality, physical affection, self-inclusion, and honesty. In a similar vein, Stafford and Canary (1991) found that 56% of the variance of satisfaction could be explained by assurances, positivity, sharing tasks, networks, and openness. Despite these connections between maintenance behaviors and satisfaction, Dindia and Baxter (1987) did not find evidence of an association between strategy type and marital satisfaction. However, this may be a function of methodology; Dindia and Baxter simply asked participants to list maintenance strategies, whereas other researchers have asked participants to indicate the frequency with which they use maintenance strategies.

In addition, none of these studies have included an alternative class of behavior besides maintenance in their examinations of relational satisfaction. With these factors in consideration, the final research question is posed:

RQ₃: Which of the five maintenance strategies and two physical affection measures, or combination, best predict relational satisfaction?

METHOD

Sample

A total of 200 married couples were recruited for participation by students at a large, Midwestern university. Students were offered extra credit for soliciting a married couple to fill out questionnaires. If students were married they were offered extra credit if both they and their spouse completed questionnaires. To prevent student fabrication of responses, participants were asked for their home phone number "for purposes of verification only."¹ Responses were mailed directly to the researcher. The return rate was 70%.

This study sampled both partners of the marital dyad. The average length of marriage was 14.27 years (range = 6 months to 40 years, SD = 11.82), and the average age was 39 years (range = 19 to 74, SD = 11.88). The majority of the sample had received a college degree (55.7%), while 28.7% had completed some college, and 14% had graduated from high school. Of the total sample of 400 individuals, only 167 were students.

Instrumentation

Several established scales were utilized on the questionnaires, all of which used a 1 to 7 Likert scale. The maintenance items, physical affection items, and the relational characteristics items were counterbalanced to guard against order effects.

Relational maintenance behaviors were operationalized through the use of Canary and Stafford's (1992) maintenance scale. Physical affection was operationalized via modified versions of Dainton's (1991) routine physical affection and satisfaction with physical affection scales. Specifically, questions from Dainton's (1991) routine physical affection scale utilized here included "My partner physically comforts me when I am feeling down," "My partner

touches me while watching television," "My partner hugs/kisses me good-bye," "My partner touches me without sexual intent," "My partner cuddles with me," "My partner initiates hugs/kisses," "My partner physically arranges/repairs my physical appearance," and "My partner kisses me before leaving the house in the morning." Questions from Dainton's (1991) physical affection satisfaction scale included: "My partner hugs me as frequently as I would like," "My partner kisses me the way I prefer to be kissed," "My partner kisses me as frequently as I would like," "My partner and I engage in sexual relations at the frequency I like," and "I am satisfied with the amount of physical affection in our relationship."

It should be noted that the physical affection satisfaction measure, though not concerned exclusively with sexual satisfaction, does have sexual connotations and thus may be biased toward assessing satisfaction with more intimate contact, rather than satisfaction with overall physical affection. Additionally, note that both the Canary and Stafford scale and the routine physical affection scale measure perceptions of the partner's use of behaviors, while the physical affection satisfaction scale assesses the respondent's own feelings of satisfaction with physical affection.

The means and reliabilities of the scales are: husbands' perceptions of wives' use of positivity, $M = 5.51$ ($\alpha .91$, $SD = 1.08$); openness, $M = 5.27$ ($\alpha .86$, $SD = 1.22$); assurances, $M = 6.09$ ($\alpha .77$, $SD = .96$); network, $M = 5.38$ ($\alpha .73$, $SD = 1.30$); and tasks, $M = 6.12$ ($\alpha .91$, $SD = 1.07$).

The means and reliabilities for wives' reports of their husbands' maintenance strategies were: positivity, $M = 5.50$ ($\alpha .90$, $SD = 1.21$); openness, $M = 4.68$ ($\alpha .86$, $SD = 1.43$); assurances, $M = 6.14$ ($\alpha .81$, $SD = 1.13$); network, $M = 5.43$ ($\alpha .80$, $SD = 1.45$); and tasks, $M = 5.58$ ($\alpha .90$, $SD = 1.49$).

The means and reliabilities for husbands' perceptions of their wives' use of routine physical affection, $M = 5.60$ ($\alpha .85$, $SD = 1.51$); husbands' own physical affection satisfaction, $M = 5.07$ ($\alpha .88$, $SD = 1.60$). Means and reliabilities for wives' perceptions of their husbands' use of routine physical affection, $M = 5.51$ ($\alpha .90$, $SD = 1.53$); wives' own physical affection satisfaction, $M = 5.11$ ($\alpha .88$, $SD = 1.66$).

Love, liking, and relational satisfaction were measured by: Rubin's (1973) Love scale, Rubin's (1973) Liking scale, and Norton's (1983) Quality Marriage Index, respectively. The means and reliabilities for the scales were as follows: husbands' love, $M = 6.21$ ($\alpha .84$, $SD = .79$); husbands' liking, $M = 5.73$ ($\alpha .79$, $SD = .75$); and husbands' satisfaction, $M = 6.22$ ($\alpha .96$, $SD = .79$); wives' love $M = 6.11$ ($\alpha .86$, $SD = .87$); wives' liking $M = 5.71$ ($\alpha .81$, $SD = .84$); and wives' satisfaction $M = 6.22$ ($\alpha .96$, $SD = 1.18$).

Intercorrelations between the three dependent variables were as follows: The Pearson correlation between an individuals' report of love and his or her report of satisfaction was $.73$ ($p < .01$, 2-tailed); the correlation between reported love and reported liking was $.65$ ($p < .01$, 2-tailed); and the correlation between reported liking and reported satisfaction was $.67$ ($p <$

.01, 2-tailed). These correlations are sufficiently high to indicate the possible use of canonical correlation. However, because it was of concern to predict these variables separately, and because multiple regression provides more interpretable results, we have opted to utilize regression analyses.²

RESULTS

Before directly addressing the research questions, it is important to report the first order correlations among the independent and dependent variables. These are reported in Table 1.

The three research questions were addressed using stepwise partial regressions, with $\alpha = .05$ for inclusion in the final equation. Each question was examined separately for husbands and wives.³ It should be noted that for all three dependent variables, the final equations report a substantial amount of explained variance. Specifically, R^2 's ranged from .35 to .59. The average variance explained was 48 percent for husbands and 44 percent for wives.

RQ₁: Which of the five maintenance strategies and two physical affection measures, or combination thereof, best predict romantic love?

Significant multiple correlations were found for both husbands' and wives' reported feelings of love. For husbands, the partners' use of assurances (Beta = .34), then positivity (Beta = .15), and then sharing of tasks (Beta = .11) contributed to feelings of love (adjusted R^2 total = .47). Wives' feelings of love were predicted by their perceptions of their partners' use of positivity (Beta = .34) and assurances (Beta = .13; adjusted R^2 total = .35).⁴

RQ₂: Which of the five maintenance strategies and two physical affection measures, or combination thereof, best predict liking?

TABLE 1
First Order Correlations between Independent and Dependent Variables for Husbands and Wives

	Husbands			Wives		
	Dependent Variables					
	<i>Love</i>	<i>Liking</i>	<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Love</i>	<i>Liking</i>	<i>Sat.</i>
<i>Independent Variables</i>						
Positivity	.62	.60	.67	.57	.55	.63
Openness	.38	.51	.59	.37	.26	.36
Assurances	.65	.52	.74	.49	.51	.59
Network	.44	.54	.52	.39	.53	.55
Tasks	.50	.42	.45	.40	.47	.54
PA Satisfaction	.43	.40	.53	.38	.40	.42
Routine PA	.48	.44	.56	.46	.39	.47

NOTE: All correlations are significant at the .05 level, two-tailed.

Several of the independent variables predicted both husbands' and wives' liking for their partner. For husbands, the regression analysis indicated that their partners' use of positivity (Beta = .31), then use of networks (Beta = .25), and then openness (Beta = .18) were significant predictors of liking (adjusted R^2_{total} = .39). For wives, six of the seven variables were found to be significantly predictive. In order, these were partners' use of positivity (Beta = .28), networks (Beta = .27), openness (Beta = -.25), and assurances (Beta = .21), wives' own physical affection satisfaction (Beta = .13), and perceptions of the partners' sharing of tasks (Beta = .14, adjusted R^2_{total} = .44).

RQ3: Which of the five maintenance strategies and two physical affection measures, or combination thereof, best predict relational satisfaction?

Several of the independent variables predicted both husbands' and wives' feelings of relational satisfaction. Husbands' satisfaction was predicted by the reports of the partners' use of assurances (Beta = .53), then the husbands' own physical affection satisfaction (Beta = .14), followed by perceptions of the use of positivity by the partner (Beta = .18; adjusted R^2_{total} = .59). For wives, all five of the maintenance strategies were predictive of satisfaction, but neither physical affection variable significantly contributed to relational satisfaction. Specifically, wives' satisfaction was predicted by positivity (Beta = .36), tasks (Beta = .19), assurances (Beta = .26), networks (Beta = .18), and openness (Beta = -.16; adjusted R^2_{total} = .52).

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine the predictors of love, liking, and satisfaction in marriage. In so doing, this paper sought to ascertain the relative importance of relational maintenance behaviors and physical affection in predicting these relational characteristics. In general, the data revealed that maintenance behaviors were the strongest predictors of love, liking, and satisfaction. The specific findings are discussed below.

The first research question concerned the prediction of love. Results indicate that perceptions of the partner's use of assurances and positivity are consistent and strong predictors of an individual's own feelings of love. This is in line with Marston et al.'s (1987) finding that two of the ways individuals show love for their partner are actually telling them and being supportive. Clearly, the use of assurances is conceptually similar to verbally stressing an individual's feelings; one way that an individual might assure his/her partner of the importance of the relationship is to say "I love you." Similarly, the use of the maintenance strategy positivity entails supportive behaviors such as being patient and forgiving, cooperativeness during disagreements, and avoiding criticizing the partner.

Nevertheless, Marston et al. (1987) also found that individuals show love by doing things for the partner, spending time with the partner, and touching the partner. Despite the links between Marston et al.'s findings and the possible behaviors utilized in this research (e.g., sharing tasks, social

networks, and physical affection), however, only sharing tasks contributed to feelings of love in any way, and its contribution to the total equation was virtually negligible.

Neither the partners' use of social networks nor the demonstration of routine physical affection significantly contributed to the equation for husbands or wives. In the case of the use of networks, it may be that spending time together means spending time together alone. The use of networks is certainly different than spending time alone.

It is not clear why the use of routine physical affection did not predict feelings of love, especially given both Marston et al.'s (1987) findings and the bulk of research investigating touch. That is, research has established that it is through touch that one experiences one's partner as warm, attentive, and loving (e.g., Sabatelli et al., 1983). Indeed, the first order correlations indicate that physical affection is moderately, positively correlated with love. However, it may be that the use of physical affection provides the partner with messages that are interpreted as positive or assuring. Thus, it may be the message that is important, not the means of expressing it.

Additionally, the use of Rubin's (1973) love scale might have influenced the results. Rubin's scale assesses what may be described as companionate love (Hatfield & Walster, 1978) in that it ignores the passion element of some theories of love (e.g., Sternberg, 1986). A conceptualization and operationalization of love stressing passion may have been predicted by satisfaction with physical affection.

The second research question asked which behaviors predict feelings of liking for the partner. To some extent, all five maintenance strategies and the individuals' feelings of satisfaction with physical affection predicted relational liking. Again, the use of positivity as the primary predictor of liking comports with previous research. Stafford and Canary (1991) found similar results, and Bell et al. (1987) found that supportiveness (which is conceptually similar to positivity) was central to affinity-maintenance. Likewise, the use of social networks as a predictor of liking is reasonable given previous research. Not only did Stafford and Canary (1991) find the same, but compatibility models of relationships are based on the premise that individuals who are similar are more attracted to each other (e.g., Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962). Similar individuals may have more similar friends and network affiliations, and may make use of them more often.

Although the first order correlations indicate that openness was positively associated with the relational features overall, it was a negative predictor of wives' liking and satisfaction. This reversal of valence is due to the use of partial correlations and stepwise regression, both of which removed the variation shared with positivity and assurances. Conceptually, the only kind of open discussion that remains likely references negative and noncommittal statements. Direct discussion about the nature of the relationship that is void of positivity and assurances probably contributes to (and is reflective of) a dissatisfying relationship.

The third relational characteristic explored was relational satisfaction. Specifically, research question three asked which behaviors predict satisfaction. The results indicate that two maintenance behaviors, assurances and positivity, were the best predictors of satisfaction for both husbands and wives. This is consistent with previous research (Bell et al., 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

In sum, the maintenance behaviors accounted for a greater amount of the variance in relational characteristics than the physical affection measures. A potential reason for this was alluded to earlier; the Stafford and Canary (1991) maintenance typology collectively may address types of messages, while the physical affection measures simply may address alternative ways of sending the same messages. That is, since the meanings attributed to behaviors may account for more of the variance in satisfaction than the behaviors themselves (Broderick & O'Leary, 1986), the meanings associated with physical affection may have been subsumed under the maintenance categories. To illustrate, kissing someone hello might send an equivalent message as asking someone how his or her day went; they both might be ways of expressing positivity.

There are several directions for future research. First, future research should strive to establish individuals' unique needs for behaviors such as assurances, openness, or physical affection, and then attempt to predict relational characteristics based on met or unmet needs. The question is: if an individual has a strong need for physical affection, but he or she is not receiving it in the relationship, how does this impact feelings of love, liking, and relational satisfaction?

Second, there are many other relational characteristics that are important within marriage. This study focused upon three dependent variables. While these characteristics are undoubtedly vital to relationships, other characteristics deserve attention. Such characteristics might include commitment, trust, and intimacy.

In conclusion, this research has found that certain relational maintenance behaviors are strong predictors of relational love, liking, and satisfaction. Moreover, physical affection satisfaction is a predictor of some characteristics. Lastly, the results of this study did not find routine physical affection to significantly predict feelings of love, liking, and satisfaction.

ENDNOTES

1. Using similar methods, Dindia (1989) found that 100% of those she called confirmed that they had indeed completed her survey. In a different study, two of these authors have also found an excellent verification rate.
2. Dyadic level correlations are reported in Canary and Stafford (1992).
3. Despite Canary and Hause's (1993) recent argument that there is little reason to study sex differences in communication, all research questions are examined and reported separately for husbands and wives. We have done so because previous research has found sex differences in maintenance behaviors (e.g., Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia, 1989; Stafford & Canary, 1991), in physical affection (e.g., Dainton, 1991), and in the behaviors associated with satisfaction and love (e.g., Gottman & Carrere, 1994; Vangelisti & Huston, 1994).
4. More detailed results for all regressions are available from the first author.

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