



DETERMINANTS OF WOMEN'S COUPLE SATISFACTION: COMMUNICATION PATTERNS, AMBIVALENT SEXISM AND SEX ROLES

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Abstract

Couple satisfaction is a subject of interest for everyone that is in a romantic relationship and it deserves a great deal of attention from researchers. This study focused on the relations between communication patterns, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, sex roles, and couple satisfaction. We gathered data from 121 female participants aged between 19 and 26 years. The instruments used to assess the variables were: Communication Patterns Questionnaire - Short Form, Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, Traditional Egalitarian Sex Role Scale, and Relationship Assessment Scale. The results showed that communication patterns are significantly associated with couple satisfaction. Women who preferred the constructive communication pattern had a higher level of couple satisfaction compared with those who preferred the woman demands/man withdraws pattern or the man demands/ woman withdraws pattern. Also, the regression we computed revealed that the model is a significant one and explained a significant proportion of variance in couple satisfaction. This study didn't reveal any other significant results.

Keywords: couple satisfaction; communication; ambivalent sexism; sex roles

Introduction

Couple satisfaction is an essential aspect of a healthy romantic relationship (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Rusbult and Buunk (1993) defined it as the interpersonal evaluation of the positive feelings for the partner

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and the person's attraction to the relationship. Although romantic relationships differ from other human connections, in terms of satisfaction they are not so different. Therefore, couple satisfaction can easily take the relation satisfaction's definition, namely the balance between the positive and negative affect (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). However, men and women view their relationships differently and thus their paths towards satisfaction are not always similar (Fowers, 1991; Waller & McLanahan, 2005).

Power-related differences and sexism make the women's struggle to achieve satisfaction quite different from men's (Overall, Sibley, & Tan, 2011). Society has a particular set of rules when describing women's roles (compared to those of men) but is generally less willing to allow them access to greater power, thus perpetuating sexist attitudes (Williams & McBain, 2006). As a result, a stronger sex-role differentiation and their use of stereotypic traits become important factors that can determine the level of satisfaction women feel in their intimate relationships. Although women are perceived as being less powerful in many social interactions (Hammond & Overall, 2017), in many couples the partners tend to fight to achieve greater power (Day, 2014). Usually, the manners in which partners communicate, and the patterns they use, determine who becomes more powerful. This study uniquely examines how women's sex roles, sexist attitudes, and the communication patterns that exist in their couple account for changes in their level of couple satisfaction.

Ambivalent sexism: benevolent sexism and hostile sexism

Sexism is a type of prejudice, marked by ambivalence toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The concept of ambivalent sexism shows both sides of sexism: the hostile one, which is usually seen as sexism, where the prejudice against women is visible and the benevolent one, that sometimes is mistaken for chivalry. The hostile sexism, as it is described by Glick and Fiske (1996), fits the definition given by Allport (1954) to prejudice. Prejudice is the outcome of generalizations and oversimplifications based on wrong or incomplete information that targets a certain group (Allport, 1954). The benevolent sexism represents the attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of stereotypy and gender roles but have a positive tone (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Even though benevolent sexism might seem like it offers good outcomes for women, it can cause as much damage as the hostile one (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Also, it can be harder to combat because it is not as easy to

identify as hostile sexism is (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). The majority of people, both women, and men did not recognize benevolent attitudes as sexist because they do not fit the mental image of prejudice (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Glick et al., 2000). Even when benevolent sexist attitudes are observed, people are more prone to accept them due to their positive tone and possible advantages for women (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Previous research showed that ambivalent sexism has a significant relationship with couple satisfaction. Women tended to report a lower level of relationship satisfaction when they had a higher level of benevolent sexism (Casad, Salazar, & Macina, 2015; Hammond & Overall, 2013). Females that endorse benevolent sexist attitudes tend to prioritize their romantic relationships at the expense of their career ambitions, an aspect that makes them vulnerable to dissatisfaction (Hammond & Overall, 2017; Hammond, Cross, & Overall, 2020). Also, women who had more benevolent sexist attitudes reported greater fear of intimacy in romantic relationships and this may contribute to a poorer couple satisfaction (Yakushko, 2005). Women's hostile sexist views were also linked to lower levels of relationship quality (Dehlin & Galliher, 2019).

Communication and communication patterns

Communication is an important factor for satisfactory relationships. Its importance came from the benefits that it brings, like building and maintaining productive and strong relations (Herriot, 2002). In romantic relationships, quality communication can be defined as the interpersonal, transactional, and symbolic process through which partners obtain and maintain mutual understanding (Montgomery, 1981). Communication can have a significant role in the management of conflicts. In this type of situation, we use certain patterns of communication (Christensen, 1988; Gottman & Notarius, 2000). In this study, we chose the classification created by Christensen (1988), who identified three major patterns of communication in conflict situations. Firstly, there is the pattern in which the woman demands and the man withdraws. Secondly, there is the man demands/ woman withdraws pattern. Thirdly, we have the constructive communication pattern, which is considered to be the most adaptive one due to its capacity to lead to solutions (Christensen, 1988).

The communication patterns are associated with couple satisfaction. The woman demands/man withdraws pattern was shown to predict the couple satisfaction for man, lowering it over time (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey,

Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). The man demands/woman withdraws pattern didn't have an impact on relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995). The mutual communication pattern was revealed to raise the level of couple satisfaction (Gottman & Kronkoff, 1989; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Madahi, Samadzadeh, & Javidi, 2013).

Sex roles

Sex roles are defined by a series of attributes, behaviors, attitudes, abilities, and interests (Bem, 1974). There are different classifications of sex roles and even if the most famous one is the one created by Sandra Bem (1974), we decided to use the traditionalist/egalitarian classification created by Larsen and Long (1988). The traditionalist view proposes that women should be just mothers and housewives like they used to be in the past. The modern or egalitarian view proposes that women should have the same opportunities as men.

Romantic relationships can be shaped by the image that people have on sex roles (Williams & McBain, 2006). Society permanently sends messages on how women and men should behave according to their specific gender (Williams & McBain, 2006). Accordingly, society and culture can have a great impact on sex roles perception and relationships. Therefore, researchers found a significant relationship between sex roles and couple satisfaction (Forste & Fox, 2012; Lye & Biblarz, 1993; Stevens, Kiger, & Riley, 2001; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2013).

In the traditional view of sex roles, women are the ones that take care of children and household duties while the men are bringing resources. Shiftings in this pattern might bring a higher couple satisfaction for both men and women (Forste & Fox, 2012). In this study was stressed that men's willingly implication in the household duties was related to a greater couple satisfaction in both women and men (Forste & Fox, 2012). Another study that investigated the relation between sex roles and couple satisfaction showed that the number of hours spent by women doing household tasks was linked to their couple satisfaction (Stevens et al., 2001). The fewer the hours spent doing chores the higher the couple satisfaction. Also, women showed a greater relationship satisfaction when they perceived the share of the chores with their partners as being fair (Stevens et al., 2001).

Although these studies show that the egalitarian view on sex roles might have a positive outcome in the couple satisfaction, other studies contradict these findings. Women that had egalitarian attitudes saw life outside

marriage as being more appealing and their current relationship more likely to end (Lye & Biblarz, 1993). Also, they reported more conflicts with their partners and a lower level of couple satisfaction (Lye & Biblarz, 1993).

In contrast, men showed a greater level of relationship satisfaction when they endorsed more egalitarian views (Lye & Biblarz, 1993). In Taniguchi and Kaufman's (2013) study the results followed the same direction, women with egalitarian views had a lower level of couple satisfaction. Also, it was shown that women that had more traditional sex roles attitudes revealed a higher relationship satisfaction (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2013).

The present study investigates the relations between ambivalent sexism, communication patterns, sex roles, and couple satisfaction. Firstly, this study will verify the correlations between sex roles, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, communication patterns, and couple satisfaction. Secondly, this study will assess whether the level of couple satisfaction differs or not based on communication patterns (constructive communication, woman demands/man withdraws pattern and man demands/woman withdraws pattern). Also, this study will verify if sex roles, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and communication patterns predict couple satisfaction.

Method

Population

This study had 121 female respondents with ages between 19 and 26 years. The mean age for the respondents was 22.76 (SD=2.06). All the participants were students and volunteered to participate in this study. They were involved in a romantic relationship, not married and the mean length of the relation was 14.70 months (SD=7.16).

Measures

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) has two subscales, one that assesses the Hostile Sexism and one that assesses the Benevolent Sexism. Ambivalent Sexism Inventory is composed of 22 items that are distributed equally between the two subscales, 11 items for each subscale. In the Benevolent Sexism subscale are items such as: "Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess", "A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man". Items 3, 6, 7, 13, 18 and 21 are reversed. Each item can be rated on a six-

point Likert type scale (from 1 - disagree strongly to 6 - agree strongly). The reliability coefficient for the Hostile Sexism Subscale was 0.749, which means this subscale is fit for research. The Benevolent Sexism subscale had a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.806, which means that this subscale is also fit for research.

Communication Patterns Questionnaire - Short Form was developed by Christensen and Heavey (1990). It assesses the perceived interactions in terms of communication inside the couple in times of conflict. The questionnaire has three subscales (woman demands/man withdraws, man demands/woman withdraws and constructive communication) and each of them has three items. In this scale we can find items as such: "Female tries to start a discussion while male tries to avoid a discussion", "Male pressures, nags, or demands while female withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further", "Both spouses express feelings to each other". Each item can be rated on a nine-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1 - very unlikely to 9 - very likely. The reliability coefficients were as it follows: for the Constructive Communication subscale was 0.793, for the Woman demands/man withdraws subscale was 0.736 and the Man demands/woman withdraws subscale the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.631. Even though the reliability coefficient for the Man demands/woman withdraws subscale was smaller than 0.7, we decided not to eliminate any items because this subscale has just three items. Also, it had been previously used for research despite showing a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient lower than 0.7 (Heavey et al., 1993).

Traditional Egalitarian Sex Role Scale (Larsen & Long, 1988) assesses a person's attitudes toward the sex roles. The items cover four domains: parental roles ("I would not allow my son to play with dolls"), personality characteristics ("Men make better leaders"), education ("It is just as important to educate daughters as it is to educate sons") and marital roles ("Almost any woman is better off in her home than in a job or profession"). Items can be rated on a five-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1 - strongly agree to 5 - strongly disagree. This scale showed a good reliability coefficient of 0.814.

Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988) was developed to assess a person's global couple satisfaction for the present relationship. This scale contains seven items ("To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?"; "How good is your relationship compared to most?") that can be rated on a five-point Likert scale. A higher score means that the respondent has a

greater couple satisfaction. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for this scale is 0.886.

Procedure

Each participant received a set of instruments, which were arranged in this order: Communication Patterns Questionnaire, Traditional Egalitarian Sex Role Questionnaire, Ambivalent Sexism Scale and Relationship Assessment Scale. They completed them in about 20 minutes. The respondents were informed by the researcher about the anonymity of their responses and that these would be used only for research purposes.

Results

Prior to the main analysis, we run descriptive statistics. The means and standard deviations can be found in Table 1. In order to verify the first assumption, that there are correlations between sex roles, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, communication pattern and couple satisfaction we computed a Pearson's Correlation coefficient. The results show that couple satisfaction is correlated with communication patterns, $r(121)=-.386$, $p=.000<.01$. The other variables, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism and sex roles did not show significant correlations with couple satisfaction.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations between the study's variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Satisfaction	28.5289	5.77217	1			
2. Benevolent Sexism	42.6612	9.83578	-.104			
3. Hostile Sexism	39.5702	8.56721	-.001	.300**		
4. Sex Roles	35.3471	9.88156	-.004	.466**	.321**	
5. Communication patterns	1.7686	.92880	-.386**	.308**	.097	.224*

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

To verify the second assumption, we used ANOVA One Way. The results show that communication patterns have a significant effect on couple satisfaction, $F(2, 118)=17.05$, $p=0.001$, $p<0.01$. The post hoc test shows that individuals that usually use constructive communication pattern have a higher level of couple satisfaction when compared with individuals that use mostly woman demands/man withdraws pattern ($M=7.768$, $p<.001$) or man

demands/woman withdraws pattern ($M=4.524$, $p<.001$). Also, the couple satisfaction is not different ($M=3.243$, $p=.154$) between the individuals that prefer to use either woman demands/man withdraws pattern or man demands/woman withdraws pattern.

Even though the correlations were not significant in all cases we decided to verify if sex roles, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism and communication patterns, when they are analyzed together, predict couple satisfaction through Linear Regression. The variable communication patterns is a categorical one, with three categories, constructive communication, man demands/woman withdraws pattern and woman demands/man withdraws pattern and it cannot be used in this form. Therefore, we created two dummy variables. In the first one (D1) we coded with 1 man demands/woman withdraws category and with 0 the other two categories. In the second one (D2), we coded with 1 the woman demands/man withdraws pattern and with 0 the other two categories.

Table 2. Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Women Couple Satisfaction (N=121)

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>sig</i>
(Constant)	28.633	2.722		10.519	.000
D1	-7.977	1.694	-.399	-4.708	.000
D2	-4.742	1.073	-.390	-4.420	.000
Benevolent Sexism	-.014	.057	-.024	-.247	.806
Hostile Sexism	.019	.059	.028	.319	.750
Sex Roles	.059	.055	.101	1.061	.291

The results of the regression show that the used model explain a significant proportion of variance in couple satisfaction, $R^2=.234$, $F(5,115)=7.04$, $p<.001$. Although the model is a significant one, just the dummy variables significantly predict the couple satisfaction as it can be seen in Table 2. From the information obtained in the output, we can write the following regression equation: *couple satisfaction* = 28.63 - 7.97(man demands/woman withdraws) - 4.74(woman demands/man withdraws).

Discussion

This study verified the correlations between sex roles, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, communication patterns, and couple satisfaction. Also, this study aimed to test whether different communication patterns have a

different impact on couple satisfaction. Besides, it verified if a model including sex roles, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and communication patterns would significantly predict couple satisfaction.

As we can observe from the results, only communication patterns significantly correlate with couple satisfaction and also predict it. These results are in line with those highlighted by other studies which also found a strong connection between communication patterns and couple satisfaction (Heavey et al., 1993; Heavey et al., 1995; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Madahi et al., 2013). Women that prefer to use a constructive communication pattern in times of conflict tend to have a higher romantic relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Madahi et al., 2013). These results can be explained through the nature of the constructive communication pattern. It is solution seeking oriented, a fact that can lead to a more satisfactory relationship (Heavey et al., 1993). Also, women that use more a woman demands/man withdraws pattern or a man demands/woman withdraws pattern tend to have a lower couple satisfaction compared to those that use constructive communication pattern (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1993; Heavey et al., 1995). A possible explanation for this study's results can be observed in communication dynamics. By using these types of communication patterns, one of the partners is trying to reach out to the other to make him or her engage in communication and the other is avoiding it. This outcome can lead to frustration with the situation and, in time, to dissatisfaction with the romantic relationship (Heavey et al., 1993).

No significant relation was revealed between benevolent sexism and couple satisfaction. Although benevolent sexism maintains inequality between men and women, it does it by keeping the relationships between them friendly (Fischer, 2006). Therefore, women might not feel affected by their or by the others' benevolent sexist attitudes. In this case, that could mean that women's level of benevolent sexism may not influence their couple satisfaction. Also, women's benevolent sexist attitudes tend to affect their relationship satisfaction when their romantic myths are contradicted by reality (Casad et al., 2015). The fact that the respondents' relationships were rather recent, with a mean length of 14 months, may explain the non-significant relation between benevolent sexism and couple satisfaction. It is possible that there was not enough time for the participants to experience important contradictions to their beliefs related to romantic myths. In addition, women that hold benevolent sexist attitudes tend

to disregard their career ambitions, a fact that, in turn, affects their relationship satisfaction (Hammond & Overall, 2017; Hammond et al., 2020). The participants were all students, an aspect that shows their interest in their studies and possible career. Therefore, they may not prioritize their relationships, disregarding their interests and, as a result, may not be affected by their benevolent sexist beliefs. Overall, it was observed that the impact of benevolent sexism on relationship satisfaction may be linked to its interactions with other couple related variables (Casad et al., 2015; Dehlin & Galliher, 2019; Overall et al., 2011). Therefore, we can conclude that the benevolent sexist attitudes can be suppressed by other intrapersonal and interpersonal variables, an aspect that needs further investigation.

This study did not find any significant relation between hostile sexism and couple satisfaction. Some women believe that hostile sexism attitudes are normal and they have to exist and therefore, they are not significantly affected by them (Swim, Mallett, & Stangor, 2004). The relation between women's hostile sexism and their romantic relationship quality is understudied and the results are contradictory. Some studies' results are in accord with our results (Hammond & Overall, 2013), while others show a significant relation between hostile sexism and couple relationship quality (Dehlin & Galliher, 2019). Therefore, the influence of women's hostile sexism on romantic relationships' outcomes should be studied more to identify a more stable pattern.

Finally, this study did not find a significant relationship between sex roles and couple satisfaction. The relationship between these two variables can be affected by the discussion of problems. Those who talked about their relational conflicts had improved couple satisfaction, but those who didn't communicate about them suffered no shift in their relationship satisfaction (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2013). Therefore, the participants in our study may not discuss with their partners the problems that appear in their couples and that might offer an explanation for our results. The perceptions about sharing household chores may also interfere between sex roles and couple satisfaction. When women believe that the household tasks are equally shared, they report an increased couple satisfaction (Stevens et al., 2001). There is a possibility that the participants in our study might feel that the chores were not equally shared. As such, these perceptions might make the sex roles influence an insignificant one.

Although this study has some strong points and its results can bring a better understanding of the domain, it also has several limits that have to be discussed. Firstly, this is a cross-sectional study, thus preventing us to obtain strong causal results. Therefore, a longitudinal study might bring more useful information for the subject. Secondly, the participants were voluntarily involved in this study. Thirdly, in this study the variables were assessed just for one side of the couple. A dyadic approach could bring more information about the mechanisms involved in couple satisfaction. Fourthly, this study did not take under consideration variables like perception about the sharing of household chores or discussion of couple problems that might influence the relations between the variables we have studied.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first research that reunites in one study communication patterns, ambivalent sexism, sex roles, and couple satisfaction. Although, this study shows that only communication patterns have a significant relation with couple satisfaction, it is relevant to highlight that the other variables have a weak impact on couple satisfaction. The fact that constructive communication pattern is strongly and positively associated with couple satisfaction can be used with success by the professionals in their domains. Our results show that the women who prefer to use constructive communication in moments of conflict with their partners tend to have a high level of couple satisfaction. When compared with those who prefer constructive communication pattern, those who usually use woman demands/man withdraws pattern or man demands/ woman withdraws pattern have a lower couple satisfaction. Therefore, this evidence can be used by psychotherapists and marriage counselors to focus their attention and efforts in specific directions, as helping the clients to strengthen their constructive communication abilities.

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