

THE EFFECT OF THE SENSE OF RELATIONAL ENTITLEMENT ON RELATIONAL SATISFACTION, POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

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Abstract

Previous correlational studies suggest that the sense of relational entitlement is related to relational satisfaction and emotional problems. In this study, we used a priming manipulation to assess the causal effect of relational entitlement on satisfaction, positive and negative affect. One hundred eighty-four participants were randomly distributed in three conditions. They wrote a narrative on a past situation from their romantic relationship, either on assertive entitlement, on excessive entitlement, or on restricted entitlement. The participants who wrote about being assertive entitled experienced a higher level of relational satisfaction and positive affect and the lowest level of negative affect. Those from the excessive entitlement condition experienced the lowest relational satisfaction, lowest positive affect and the highest negative affect. The findings support the link between the sense of relational entitlement and different couple outcomes using a novel approach in this field of study.

Keywords: relational entitlement; experiment; relationship satisfaction; positive and negative affect

Introduction

Psychological entitlement affects a wide range of individuals in a variety of ways. People feel entitled to better jobs, better education and a more stable financial situation (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman,

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2004). Of course, people also feel entitled to better relationships and recently, the entitlement theory has found its way in explaining the dynamics of intimate relationships (Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011). Given that romantic relationships are the perfect context for emotional fulfillment, people may develop a sense of relational entitlement (SRE) that manifests mainly in relation with a romantic partner (Candel & Turliuc, 2017). The theory states that excessive relational entitlement, which refers to a negative evaluation of the partner, and a negative response towards his/her imperfections, is related to lower relationship satisfaction. Restricted relational entitlement, which is characterized by the lack of assertiveness and deservingness, contributes less to someone's satisfaction, but the association remains a negative one. Finally, assertive relational entitlement might not be related to a higher level of satisfaction, but it does not damage it (George-Levi, Vilchinsky, Tolmacz, & Liberman, 2014). Nevertheless, similar associations can be found between the three factors of the sense of relational entitlement and positive and negative affect (Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011). The major purpose of this study was to use experimental primes to examine whether the sense of relational entitlement has a causal effect on emotional affect and relationship satisfaction.

Psychological entitlement and the sense of relational entitlement

Freud described psychological entitlement based on the observations of his patients (Bishop & Lane, 2002). People felt more entitled to preferential treatment on the part of the therapists when they considered that they encountered more hardships during their lives. Jacobson (1959) elaborated more on Freud's ideas adding that the individuals feel more entitled when they consider they have extraordinary traits. Outside the psychoanalytic theory, in the field of personality psychology, entitlement is seen as a component of narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Although generally perceived as a negative trait, some contemporary authors (Levin, 1970; Moses & Moses-Hmshovski, 1990) reevaluated the theory of entitlement and added another dimension that includes the healthy assertion of needs and rights. As such, people can be characterized by three attitudes towards the others: they can be assertive, excessively or restrictively entitled (Levin, 1970; Moses & Moses-Hmshovski, 1990). Assertive entitlement is the adaptive form of entitlement where the individual is able to demand what is proper and negotiate about new rights. Excessive entitlement is characterized by a lack of care towards other

people's feelings and describes those individuals who think they are more entitled to positive results compared to other people. Finally, restricted entitled individuals are reserved, timid, and fearful to ask for their rights.

Some authors (Campbell et al., 2004) consider that entitlement is a general trait, manifesting in any kind of situation. Contrary to this opinion, Tolmacz and Mikulincer (2011) proposed a different view on the sense of entitlement. Drawing from the fact that people are differently entitled to emotional needs compared to social or financial needs, they pointed out that a romantic relationship is a perfect context where emotional needs are fulfilled. As such, people develop a sense of relational entitlement that manifests mainly in relation to a romantic partner (Candel & Turliuc, 2017). The sense of relational entitlement is viewed, as such, as a different concept, because people can feel different types of entitlement at home or at work.

Evidence on the association between the sense of relational entitlement and relational satisfaction

The sense of relational entitlement is a relatively new concept and it has been tested in a reduced number of studies. Still, the associations between it and relational satisfaction remain constant across studies. Individuals who report a more excessive entitlement are also less satisfied in their intimate relationship. Restrictive entitlement is also related to lower satisfaction, but the association is weaker. Generally, assertive entitlement is not associated with satisfaction (Candel, 2018; George-Levi et al., 2014; Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011). Tolmacz and Mikulincer (2011) considered that assertive entitlement does not contribute to relational satisfaction, but unlike excessive and restricted entitlement, it also does not represent a risk factor. Higher entitlement has also been associated with more dating abuse (Warrener & Tasso, 2017), selflessness in romantic relationships (Campbell et al., 2004) and higher divorce rates (Sanchez & Gager, 2000). In addition, the relationship between relational entitlement and attachment is well-documented. The individuals with more maladaptive types of relational entitlement also have higher levels of insecure attachment (Tolmacz, 2011; Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011).

A limitation of the literature on relational entitlement and satisfaction is that most of the previous results come from cross-sectional studies. Although we found no longitudinal study to use specifically the concept of the sense of relational entitlement, there are studies that use general entitlement in relation

to other couple-specific outcomes. In a longitudinal study, Moeller, Crocker, and Bushman (2009) found that entitlement predicted chronic relationship conflict over a period of 10 weeks. In a daily diary study that took 35 days, the sense of relational entitlement predicted perceived partner responsiveness (Bar-Kalifa, Bar-Kalifa, Rafaeli, George-Levi, & Vilchinsky, 2016). Finally, although not the same, entitlement and equity are considered related concepts (Major, 1993). Van Yperen and Buunk (1990) found that women's perceived inequity predicts their subsequent relational satisfaction.

The sense of relational entitlement and affect

Excessive and restricted entitlement can put people at risk for emotional problems (Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011). Both these facets of relational entitlement were associated with higher negative mood and with lower positive mood (Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011). In addition, general entitlement is associated with more depressive symptoms and act as a vulnerability toward emotional distress (Fast & Funder, 2010; Grubbs & Exline, 2016). Once again, these relationships were tested using cross-sectional design so we cannot infer causality.

Causal effect of entitlement. Experimental evidence

As noted above, the majority of the evidence that supports the relationship between relational entitlement and relational satisfaction comes from cross-sectional studies. As such, we cannot infer a causal effect between them. In addition, longitudinal studies exist, but they do not concentrate on relational entitlement and relational satisfaction. Another way to determine causality is the use of experimental designs. Previous experiments utilizing entitlement exist (Holderness Jr, Olsen, & Thornock, 2016; Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1984; Zitek & Vincent, 2015), but they do not concentrate on the relational context. In order to address these limitations, we developed an experimental priming design to test the relationship between the sense of relational entitlement and relational satisfaction, positive and negative affect.

Objectives

The main objective of this study was to find out whether the priming of different types of relational entitlement (excessive, restricted, or assertive) lead to differences in relational satisfaction, positive and negative affect. The

participants were asked to engage in a writing task that primed the recall of one of the states of relational entitlement (excessive, restricted, or assertive) in their own current or past relationship. The participants who were currently in a relationship were asked to respond about their current relationship. Those who were not in a relationship were asked to recall their past relationship and to respond according to it. An actual situation of relational entitlement cannot be practically or ethically manipulated in real context so asking people to recall and write about a past situation, and manipulating the situation that they are asked to recall can act as a suitable substitute for experimental design. After the completion of the writing task, the participants responded to a set of items about the emotions that were elicited based on the situation. In a later one, participants completed a relationship satisfaction scale.

To examine evidence of a causal effect of the relational entitlement prime on relational satisfaction, we first compared the three primed relational entitlement groups on relational satisfaction reported to be experienced in response to recalling the particular entitlement situation. Consistent with relational entitlement theory (George-Levi et al., 2014; Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011), we hypothesize that those who write a narrative about a moment when they felt assertive entitlement will report more relational satisfaction relative to those who write about either a moment when they felt excessive entitlement or one when they felt restricted entitlement (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, we hypothesized (Hypothesis 2) that those who write about restricted entitlement will report more satisfaction in comparison to those who write about excessive entitlement. We also compared the three relational entitlement-primed groups on the specific emotions that they reported. Consistent with past research (Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011), writing about assertive entitlement in one's relationship should result in higher scores on a measure of positive affect and lower scores on one of negative affect than writing on restricted or excessive entitlement (Hypothesis 3); furthermore, writing about restricted entitlement should lead higher positive and lower negative affect than writing about excessive entitlement (Hypothesis 4). Finally, in examining the differences across the primed conditions, we considered whether current relational status (participants who were in a relationship during the study vs. those who ended their relationship before the study) might moderate the effect of relation entitlement on relationship satisfaction and affect.

Method

Participants

The sample for the analyses in this study consisted of 184 students from an Eastern Romanian University who completed the survey as an in-class activity, in several classroom settings, under anonymous and voluntary conditions. One hundred and seventy (92.4%) were females and 14 (7.6%) were males. Male participants were approximately equally distributed across conditions. The mean age of the participants was 22.6 ($SD=5.7$). In the directions to the survey, participants were told that if they were in a current dating, romantic, or marital relationship, they should think of that relationship as they answered the survey questions, but if they were not currently in such a relationship, they should think of their last relationship. One hundred thirty-eight (75%) completed the survey concerning a current romantic relationship and 46 (25%) completed the survey concerning a past one. The medium length of the relationships for those who were in a current relationship was 42.74 months.

Measures

Emotional Response. To measure positive and negative emotional response, we used the 10 items short-form of the Positive and Negative Affectivity Scale developed and validated by Thompson (2007). Participants rated each adjective, five for positive affect (Active, Determined, Attentive, Inspired, and Alert) and five for negative affect (Upset, Hostile, Ashamed, Nervous, Afraid) with regard to how they felt in that situation on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). For the Positive Affect factor, Alpha was .66. For the Negative Affect factor, Alpha was .49, which we considered insufficient. After eliminating one item (Nervous), the coefficient had grown to .69.

Relationship Satisfaction. The four items version of the Couple Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007) was used to measure relationship satisfaction. It measures how respondents feel within their couple relationship. The items (*e.g.*, "I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner") are rated on a scale from 1 to 6 and higher scores indicate a greater level of couple satisfaction. The participants who were in a relationship were asked to write about their current relationship. The participants who were not involved in a relationship were asked to write in regard to their former relationship. The

scale demonstrates a very good internal consistency for the current sample ($\alpha=.93$).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to describe one of several possible situations in their current or past relationship. Below is a description of the assertive entitlement prime:

Please think about your current relationship. Unless you are currently involved in a romantic relationship, please think about your last relationship. Please describe a situation where you felt that you had received exactly what you wanted and were entitled to from that relationship, in which the partner had offered everything you wanted him / her to offer to you. Describe the experience in as much detail as possible, specifying both the behaviors you had and the emotions that you have felt.

The exaggerated entitlement prime directed the participants to think of a time when they believed they received much less than what they were entitled in their relationship. The restrictive entitlement prime asked them to think of a time in their relationship when they received much more than they were entitled to from their partners.

The participants were then given the remainder of the page to write their narrative. In case some participants decided not to comply to the priming, each narrative was read by the researchers who judged whether the participants had written a narrative consistent with their assigned directions. Those participants who did not write anything or did not follow directions were not included in the analyses. Dropped from these analyses were 23 participants. Therefore, the sample was $N=184$, as noted above (the original sample assigned to the three entitlement conditions was $N=207$). The number of participants in each condition after the eliminations was assertive entitlement ($n=61$), exaggerated entitlement ($n=60$), and restrictive entitlement ($n=63$).

Results

Table 1 presents the correlation coefficients between the measurements. Relational satisfaction is negatively related to negative emotions ($r=-.34$, $p<.001$). The participants who reported greater levels of satisfaction reported lower levels of negative emotions. However, relational satisfaction was not

related to positive emotions ($p=.48$). The correlation between positive and negative emotions was also not significant ($p=.14$).

Table 1. Correlation matrix between the measurements used in the analysis.

	1	2	3
1. Relationship Satisfaction	1.00		
2. Negative Affect	-.347**	1.00	
3. Positive Affect	0.05	-0.11	1.00

Note: ** $p<.001$

To test the first two hypotheses, we conducted a one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni comparisons (*see* Table 2). The main effect was significant, with $F(2.181)=13.62$, $p<.001$. The participants from the assertive entitlement condition displayed significant greater couple satisfaction ($M=20.72$) than those who were in the exaggerated entitlement condition ($M=16.83$) and then those who were in the restrictive entitlement condition ($M=18.53$). The participants from the exaggerated entitlement condition displayed near-significant differences compared to those from the restrictive entitlement condition ($p=.06$).

Table 2. Relational Satisfaction, Positive and Negative Affect as a result of being primed for relational entitlement.

	Assertive Entitlement (N=61)		Restricted Entitlement (N=60)		Excessive Entitlement (N=63)		F
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Relationship Satisfaction	20.72	3.41	18.53	4.45	16.83	4.36	13.62**
Positive Affect	15.25	4.46	14.19	3.91	12.84	4.45	4.63**
Negative Affect	6.93	2.85	8.42	3.06	11.45	3.74	26.93**

Note: ** $p<.001$

We also examined whether relational status moderated the effects of entitlement on satisfaction. A 3 (version of entitlement prime) \times 2 (relational status) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with the couple satisfaction as the dependent variable, was conducted (*see* Figure 1) (insert Figure 1 around here). The interaction effect was significant, $F(2.184)=3.16$, $p=.04$. Subsequently, we conducted two separate One Way ANOVAs for those in a relationship and those who were not in a relationship. For those who were in a relationship, the participants from the assertive entitlement condition displayed the highest level of couple satisfaction ($M=20.83$). Those from the restrictive entitlement had the

second highest level of couple satisfaction ($M=19.58$), while the participants from the exaggerated entitlement had the lowest level of couple satisfaction (18.11). Overall, the effect was significant, $F(2.137)=5.35$, $p=.004$. There were significant differences between assertive entitlement prime and excessive entitlement prime ($p=.002$), but no significant differences between assertive entitlement and restrictive entitlement or restrictive entitlement and excessive entitlement.

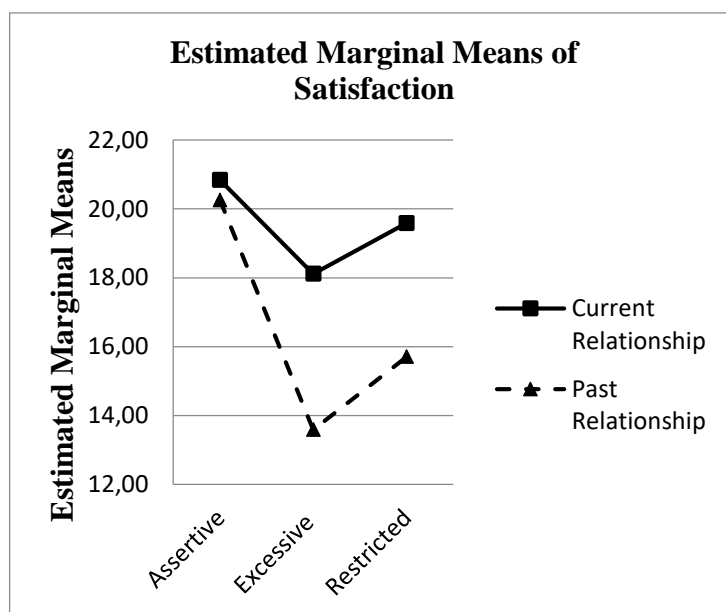


Figure 1. The level of relational satisfaction based on the interaction between entitlement prime and relational status

For the participants who were not in a relationship, the overall effect of the priming was significant, $F(2.45)=10.31$, $p<.001$. The participants from the assertive entitlement condition had higher couple satisfaction than those from the restrictive entitlement condition ($p=.01$), and then those from the exaggerated entitlement condition ($p<.001$) and the participants from the restrictive and excessive entitled conditions did not display significant differences.

We applied the same procedure for the last two hypotheses and we ran two separate sets of analyses for the positive affect and negative affect (*see* Table 2). For the positive affect, the main effect for the entitlement prime was significant, $F(2, 181)=4.63$, $p=.01$. The assertive entitlement primed group had the highest mean ($M=15.25$), followed by the restrictive entitlement primed group ($M=14.19$), and then the excessive entitlement primed group ($M=12.84$). A follow-up Bonferroni test indicated that there was a significant ($p=.008$) difference between the assertive group and the excessive group. Relational status did not moderate this effect, $F(2,182)=1.73$, $p=.17$.

For the negative affect, the main effect for the entitlement prime was significant, $F(2, 181)=26.93$, $p<.001$ (*see* Table 2). The assertive entitlement primed group had the lowest mean ($M=6.93$), followed by the restrictive entitlement primed group ($M=8.42$), and then the excessive entitlement primed group ($M=11.45$). The Bonferroni test indicated that there was a significant ($p=.05$) difference between the assertive group and the restrictive group, a significant difference between the assertive group and the exaggerated group ($p<.001$) and a significant difference between the restrictive and the excessive group ($p<.001$). Relational status did not moderate this effect, $F(2,182)=1.84$, $p=.15$.

A post-hoc power analysis was conducted using the G*Power software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Based on an alpha of .05, all the three Anova One Way analyses showed sufficient achieved power.

Discussion

Prior research indicates that both the excessive and the restricted sense of relational entitlement are associated with lower relational satisfaction, lower positive affect and higher negative affect (Candel, 2018; George-Levi et al., 2014; Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011). However, previous studies were correlational and could not indicate whether the sense of relational entitlement has a causal effect on relational satisfaction or affect. To our knowledge, there are no longitudinal or experimental studies to support the above-mentioned effect. The main contribution of the present study was to assess this relationship using an experimental design derived from the priming paradigm. For this research, the participants were randomly assigned to experimental groups and invited to write about a past event when they felt assertive, excessive or restricted relational entitlement. The findings suggest that the priming of

relational entitlement influence the level of relational satisfaction, positive and negative affect. To our knowledge, this is the first experimental design that shows support to previous correlational findings (George-Levi et al., 2014; Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011). More precisely, the participants who wrote about a situation when they experienced an assertive relational entitlement reported greater relational satisfaction, greater positive affect and lower negative affect than those who wrote about situations when they felt restricted or excessive entitlement. Also, those who wrote about excessive entitlement experienced the lower levels of relational satisfaction and positive affect and the highest level of negative affect.

All these findings are in line with the theory on the sense of relational entitlement (Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011). Excessive entitlement and restricted entitlement are detrimental to the quality of one's relationship and worsen the affective state. Previous studies (George-Levi et al., 2014) shown that assertive entitlement is not linked to satisfaction and emotional problems. In our study, people in this priming condition had the highest satisfaction and positive affect the lowest negative affect. Even though these variables were not related in correlational studies, assertive entitlement does not damage one's satisfaction and affect. As such, when people feel an assertive sense of entitlement they are not at risk of lowering their satisfaction and positive emotions. On the contrary, when people feel an excessive relational entitlement, they also report the lowest level of satisfaction and the highest level of emotional problems. Excessive entitlement is maladaptive, being related to narcissism and grandiosity and people displaying it shows highly conflictual responses (Moses & Moses-Hmshovski, 1990). Restricted entitlement, although also maladaptive, displayed a weaker negative relationship to satisfaction and emotional problems in previous literature (Tolmacz & Mikulincer, 2011). In our study, the participants from this priming condition shown a higher level of relational satisfaction and a lower level of negative affect compared to those from the excessive condition. People with a restricted entitlement are unusually modest and do not assume special rights, but they retained a better level of functioning (Moses & Moses-Hmshovski, 1990). As such, although it poses a risk, restricted entitlement is less damaging for one's relationship.

The effect of the entitlement prime on couple satisfaction was also moderated by the relational status of the participants. For the individuals who

are in a relationship, the difference between assertive entitlement and restricted entitlement, although existent, tuned out to be insignificant in terms of couple satisfaction. However, for the participants who were not currently involved in a relationship, their level of couple satisfaction was not different regardless of their prime in restricted or excessive entitlement. As such, people experience similar levels of satisfaction after recalling an experience when they received what they wanted, or more in their current relationship. On the contrary, when the relationship is over and they only imagine their possible level of satisfaction, their level of satisfaction is lower regardless of the fact that they received more or less than they thought they deserved.

Conclusion

The present study has some limitations. Firstly, the priming paradigm allows the researcher to test some causal effects that could be impossible to test in any other type of experimental design. However, it is not the same as having the situation experienced at that moment. Secondly, some participants did not comply with their task and were excluded from our research. The reason for their lack of compliance is unknown, but the exclusion of these participants may affect the internal and external validity of the study (Sakaluk, 2014). Thirdly, some participants responded to their task while not being involved in a relationship. Thus, they imagined their past relationship and reacted to it when responding to the items. Again, this is not the same as being currently involved in a relationship.

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, this research adds to the literature on the sense of relational entitlement by verifying the causal relationship between relational entitlement, on the one hand, and relational satisfaction, positive and negative affect on the other hand. We have shown that excessive and restricted forms of entitlement have a negative effect on satisfaction and emotional problems. Assertive entitlement, however, seems not to damage the quality of one's relationship. Moreover, these relationships were evaluated using an experimental design in which the types of entitlement were manipulated using the priming paradigm. This design allowed us to manipulate one's relational entitlement in an ethical way. To our knowledge, this was the first experiment to achieve such a task. Also, our study can be beneficial to future research that can assess the relationship between relational

assessment and different couple outcomes in manners that allow for causal explanations.

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