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This study is an examination of the extent to which satisfaction with a main current romantic relationship is associated with negative conflict, demand for approval, self-esteem, and the 3 facilitative conditions of unconditional regard, empathy, and congruence. One or more of these conditions have been proposed as important determinants of relationship satisfaction by various relationship-enhancement approaches such as behavioral marital therapy and cognitive-behavioral marital therapy. College students (86 women and 58 men) completed S. S. Hendrick's (1988) Relationship Satisfaction Scale, a measure of negative conflict formulated by the author, R. G. Jones's (1969) Demand for Approval Scale (modified for a particular relationship), M. Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, and a shortened modified version of G. T. Barrett-Lennard's (1964) Relationship Inventory. Relationship satisfaction was most strongly related to the level of regard and empathy, which is consistent with approaches to relationships that emphasize empathy training.

Key words: demand for approval, facilitative conditions, relationship satisfaction, romantic relationships, self-esteem


VARIOUS THEORIES have been put forward to explain the development and enhancement of satisfaction in romantic relationships (Jacobson & Gurman, 1995). Among those shown to be effective in increasing couple satisfaction are relationship enhancement (Brock & Joanning, 1983), behavioral marital therapy (Snyder, Wills, & Grady-Fletcher, 1991), and cognitive-behavioral marital therapy (Baucom, Sayers, & Sher, 1990). However, the effectiveness of the processes underlying these approaches remains unclear. My aim in this research was to examine whether particular aspects of these theories are related to satisfaction with romantic relationships, as proposed by these earlier researchers, and to compare the relative strength of the associations between these aspects and relationship satisfaction.

The relationship-enhancement approach pioneered by Guerney (1977) was initially largely concerned with teaching couples the three facilitative or core conditions (unconditional regard, empathy, and congruence) that Rogers postulated were largely responsible for satisfying relationships (Meador & Rogers, 1973; Rogers, 1959). The three conditions are interrelated. For example, unconditional regard is considered stronger if the other person appears to understand the individual and if this understanding is experienced as being congruent or genuine. More recently, the relationship enhancement approach has also included conflict or problem-solving skills. (Guemey, Brock, & Coufal, 1986).
In the client- or person-centered approach, Rogers (1959) proposed that the influence of these three conditions is affected by an individual's perception of them. Consequently, when one is evaluating this person-centered proposition, it is essential to assess these conditions through self-report, particularly because the perception of these qualities may differ from person to person (McWirtter, 1973). In developing such a measure, Barrett-Lennard (1962) distinguished level of regard from unconditionality of regard. When the level of regard is negative, conditional regard may be more facilitative than unconditional regard, because regard may be less negative when particular behaviors are shown (Cramer, 1989).

Although positively correlated, these four conditions have been shown to be factorially distinct from one another (Cramer, 1986) as well as from other measures of love and liking (Cramer, 1992). And although various indices of love have been found to be positively correlated with satisfaction in romantic relationships (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988), the extent to which these person-centered constructs are related to relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships remains to be shown.

Among the components of behavioral marital therapy are communication and problem-solving training (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). According to this approach, marital dissatisfaction results partially from the inability to resolve differences. The more time partners spend together, the more these differences arise. I (Cramer, 2000) obtained support for this proposition in a cross-sectional study in which the duration of romantic relationships was positively related to the frequency of differences of opinion over minor issues and the frequency of negative experiences in trying to resolve these differences. Both self-report and observation measures of conflict resolution have been found to be predictive of relationship satisfaction (Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993) and stability (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; McGonagle, Kessler, & Gotlib, 1993) in romantic relationships.

Pasch and Bradbury (1998) found that observation measures of behavior in conflict and support tasks were independently related to subsequent marital dysfunction in newly weds. However, because the same coding scheme was not used in both types of task, it is unclear whether the association was related to the task, the coding scheme, or both. Being genuinely unconditionally accepted and understood may be viewed as showing social support (Cramer, 1990). Whether self-report measures of conflict and social support are independently associated with relationship satisfaction is not clear. Furthermore, the association between the facilitative conditions and negative conflict in relation to relationship satisfaction needs to be examined. It seems reasonable to assume that greater facilitativeness may lead to less negative conflict, which in turn may increase relationship satisfaction. However, it appears equally plausible to suggest that reduced negative conflict may bring about greater facilitativeness, which may then enhance relationship satisfaction.

Changing irrational or dysfunctional beliefs is a feature of both behavioral marital therapy (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979) and cognitive-behavioral marital therapy (Baucom & Epstein, 1990). Ellis and Harper (1961) have suggested that relationship dissatisfaction
may be associated with five general irrational beliefs that Jones (1969) called (a) demand for approval, (b) high self-expectations, (c) blame proneness, (d) frustration reactivity, and (e) emotional irresponsibility. Subsequently, Eidelson and Epstein (1982) proposed that relationship dissatisfaction may be related to the following five relationship-specific irrational beliefs: (a) Disagreement is destructive; (b) mindreading is expected; (c) partners cannot change; (d) there must be sexual perfectionism; and (e) the sexes are different.

Of these relationship-specific irrational beliefs, disagreement is destructive has generally been found to have the strongest negative association with relationship satisfaction in couples (e.g., Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). However, Cramer (2001) found that although disagreement is destructive and was positively related to relationship dissatisfaction in romantic relationships, there was no evidence that this belief leads to relationship dissatisfaction. The association between the general irrational beliefs and relationship satisfaction seems to have been investigated less often. Epstein and Eidelson (1981) noted that demand for approval was as strongly related to relationship dissatisfaction as disagreement is destructive was in couples undergoing marital therapy.

Of the general irrational beliefs, demand for approval may appear to be the most directly relevant to romantic relationships, because the relationship itself may depend largely on the extent to which mutual approval exists. The demand-for-approval items are worded in terms of other people rather than one's partner. The association between relationship dissatisfaction and demand for approval may be stronger when the demand-for-approval items refer to the romantic partner specifically rather than to people in general.

Furthermore, the association between relationship satisfaction and level of regard may be moderated by demand for approval. This association may be stronger in those with a high (compared with low) demand for approval. Relationship satisfaction may be highest in those with a great demand for approval that is met by receiving high regard and lowest in those for whom this demand is not met. Relationship satisfaction may be intermediate in those with a weak demand for approval, whereas it may be stronger in those receiving high rather than low regard.

Finally, both person-centered (Rogers, 1959) and rational-emotive (Ellis, 1977) theories have suggested that greater self-acceptance should bring about greater relationship satisfaction. Person-centered theory has postulated that self-acceptance facilitates accepting others, which results in more satisfying and enriching relationships, including romantic relationships. Rational—emotive theory has claimed that global evaluation of oneself, others, or both is irrational. One reason for this is that global evaluation seems to imply that this judgment is a composite index made up of evaluating all the activities a person has engaged in. Conducting such an evaluation would be a formidable, if not impractical, task. Global evaluation is also reflected in the irrational belief that people should be punished for their errors (blame proneness), which Eidelson and Epstein (1982) found inversely associated with relationship satisfaction.
Hendrick et al. (1988) found a significant association between self-esteem and satisfaction with the romantic relationships in male but not in female partners. Although the Hendrick et al. Self-Esteem Scale had previously been reported to be moderately correlated with the more widely known Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, the construct validity of the Hendrick et al. two-item measure is not known. Furthermore, the mean, standard deviation, and alpha reliability of this scale was not presented. Thus, it is unclear whether the absence of a significant association for women was due to lower variance and reliability. The replicability of this association needs further study using the better validated Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

In this study, my main aim was to determine the relative strength of the associations between relationship satisfaction and the following variables to which it has been theoretically related: the four facilitative conditions of level of regard, unconditionality of regard, empathy, and congruence; and the other variables of negative conflict, demand for approval, and self-esteem. In addition, I addressed the following three questions: First, to what extent is the association between relationship satisfaction and the facilitative conditions mediated by negative conflict? Second, to what extent is the association between relationship satisfaction and negative conflict mediated by the facilitative conditions? And third, is the association between relationship satisfaction and level of regard stronger in those with a higher rather than a lower demand for approval?

Method

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of British students at a public university. Of the 261 participants, 160 responded in terms of a current romantic relationship. The analyses were conducted with 86 women (mean age = 20.36, SD = 4.62) and 58 men (mean age = 21.78, SD = 6.20) who provided data on the main variables of interest. Because the results were similar for women and men, I have not presented them separately. The mean duration of the current romantic relationship was 3.14 years (SD = 4.27). There was one gay relationship.

Measures

Relationship satisfaction was measured with the Hendrick (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale. This scale has a .80 correlation with the longer and more widely used Spanier (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale and an alpha reliability of .86 (Hendrick, 1988). It consists of 7 items (e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?") to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale. In this study the last item ("How many problems are there in your relationship?") was excluded from analysis because it overlapped conceptually with the content of the questions on conflict. Higher scores indicate greater relationship satisfaction.

Facilitativeness was assessed by a shortened, modified version of the revised Relationship Inventory (Barrett-Lennard, 1964) that has been widely used to measure the
four conditions (Gurman, 1977). The four scales have been found to be factorially distinct (Cramer, 1986), have an alpha reliability of .79 or more, and have a 15-week test-retest reliability of .61 or more (Cramer, 1988) when answered in terms of one's current closest relationship. I selected the six items loading highest on their respective dimensions in a previous factor-analytic study (Cramer, 1986) to measure the three facilitative conditions of level of regard (e.g., "He or she really values me"), empathy (e.g., "He or she doesn't understand me"), and congruence (e.g., "He or she is openly her/himself in our relationship").

Items chosen to assess the unconditionality of regard were those most clearly indicating that regard was either conditional (e.g., "Whether I'm feeling happy or unhappy makes a real difference to how much he or she likes me") or unconditional (e.g., "I can be openly critical or appreciative of her/him without really affecting her/his feelings towards me"). The meanings of half the items for each scale were reversed to control for response bias. Items are answered on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly untrue (1) to strongly true (6). I combined the four scales to form an overall score. Higher scores denote greater facilitativeness.

Demand for approval was ascertained with the 10-item Demand for Approval Scale of the Jones (1969) Irrational Beliefs Test. This scale has been found to be factorially distinct (Cramer, 1985), to have an alpha reliability of .77 (Cramer, 1993), and to show increased irrationality when participants are asked to repeat irrational statements to themselves (Cramer & Fong, 1991). The items were modified to refer to the romantic relationship rather than relationships in general (e.g., "I can like myself even when she or he doesn't always like me"). The meanings of half the items were reversed to control for response bias. Items are answered on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly untrue (1) to strongly true (6). Higher scores signify a greater demand for approval.

Negative conflict was determined with the 21-item Differences of Opinion Scale, which has been found to have an alpha reliability of .85 and a -.49 correlation with the Relationship Assessment Scale (Cramer, 2002a). The 1st item asks about the frequency of having different opinions over minor issues. Subsequent items concern discussion avoidance (e.g., "You try to discuss them with her/him"), handling evaluation (e.g., "You don't react negatively to the way they're handled"), resolution (e.g., "They are resolved for you"), outcome evaluation (e.g., "You are satisfied with the result"), and subsequent resentment (e.g., "You don't feel resentful afterwards"). The number of positively and negatively worded items was equal. All items were phrased in terms of differences over minor issues to maximize the relevance of the scale for participants. Items were answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to always (7). Higher scores indicate more negative conflict.

Self-esteem was measured with the widely used 10-item Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, which has been found to have an alpha reliability of .90, a 15-week test-retest reliability of .82 (Cramer, 1988), and a .67 correlation with a self-ideal self-discrepancy measure (Silber & Tippett, 1965). Items (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself") are answered on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly
disagree (4). The meanings of half the items were reversed to control for response bias. The scale was scored according to the recommended and more usual Likert-type format (Crandall, 1973), which uses the full range of responses and is strongly related to the Guttman procedure. Higher scores represent greater self-esteem. The score for each of the scales was averaged across items so that the scores corresponded to the Likert scale used.

The scales were presented in the order in which they have been introduced here, starting with the Relationship Assessment Scale and ending with the Self-Esteem Scale. Participants were asked to answer the questions in terms of their current main romantic relationship or their current closest friend if they did not currently have a romantic partner. The latter relationship was included to avoid having to ask participants the potentially embarrassing question of whether they were currently in a romantic relationship and to exclude them if they were not. The gender and age of the participant and of the person in the relationship were obtained together with the duration of the relationship in years and months.

Results

The alpha reliabilities, means, and standard deviations for the nine scales are contained in Table 1. Alpha reliabilities were least satisfactory for unconditionality-of-regard and demand-for-approval measures and could not be increased by excluding items. The means of the measures indicated that generally participants were satisfied with their romantic relationships; felt that their partners showed them regard, empathy, unconditionality of regard, and congruence; did not often experience negative conflict; were close to the midpoint on demand for approval from their partners; and evaluated themselves positively. Only 4% of the respondents had a level of regard score at the midpoint of 3.50 or less, indicating that level of regard was generally positive. Consequently, unconditionality of regard largely reflected unconditionality of positive regard.

The correlations of relationship satisfaction with the eight other variables are also contained in Table 1. Age and relationship duration were excluded because they were not significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction. At the one-tailed .05 level, all the correlations were significant except that for self-esteem (which was significant at the .051 level) and demand for approval. Only negative conflict was significantly correlated with relationship duration (r = .15, one-tailed p = .04). When relationship satisfaction was regressed stepwise on all the variables
apart from overall facilitativeness, only level of regard, empathy, and congruence explained a significant increment of the variance in relationship satisfaction.

Because the correlations of these three variables with relationship satisfaction are almost the same size, the order in which the variables are entered is effectively determined by very small differences in magnitude. Because there was no clear theoretical rationale for determining their order, I entered all three variables in a single step, explaining about 57% of the variance in relationship satisfaction.

To control for measurement error, I used LISREL 8.30 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1999) to compute standardized path coefficients between relationship satisfaction and the other variables (excluding overall facilitativeness). I corrected for measurement error using the alpha reliability of the variables (James, Mulaik, & Brett, 1982). The path linking each construct (the latent variable) to its indicator (the measured variable) was set equal to the square root of the indicator's alpha coefficient, whereas the random error variance for each indicator was set equal to the quantity of minus the reliability. The predictor variables were free to covary. These standardized path coefficients are shown in Table 1. Relationship satisfaction had the strongest pathways with level of regard and empathy.

I also used path analysis to examine the extent to which negative conflict mediated the association between these two facilitative conditions and relationship satisfaction (Figure 1) and the extent to which the two facilitative conditions mediated the association between negative conflict and relationship satisfaction (Figure 2). With negative conflict as the mediator (Figure 1), both level of regard, \( \beta = .48, t(142) = 4.62, p < .001 \), and empathy, \( \beta = .42, t(142) = 3.47, p < .001 \), had a significant direct effect on relationship satisfaction. The indirect effect via negative conflict was not significant for either level of regard, \( \beta = .01, t(142) = 0.66, \text{ns} \), or empathy, \( \beta = .05, t(142) = 0.96, \text{ns} \). Furthermore, the direct effect of negative conflict on relationship satisfaction was not significant, \( \beta = -.09, t(142) = 0.97, \text{ns} \). With level of regard and empathy as mediators (Figure 2), negative conflict had a significant indirect effect on relationship satisfaction, \( \beta = -.58, t(142) = 5.73, p < .001 \), but not a significant direct effect, \( \beta = -.05, t(142) = 0.41, \text{ns} \). Both level of regard, \( \beta = .54, t(142) = 6.16, p < .001 \), and empathy, \( \beta = .48, t(142) = 4.69, p < .001 \), had a significant direct effect on relationship satisfaction.

Baron and Kenny (1986) suggested that a moderator effect is most appropriately tested with multiple regression. In this case such an effect is indicated if the interaction between level of regard and demand for approval explains a significant increment in the variance of relationship satisfaction when level of regard and demand for approval are
controlled. This analysis showed that demand for approval moderated the association between level of regard and relationship satisfaction. The interaction of demand for approval and level of regard accounted for a significant increase in the proportion of variance of relationship satisfaction ([R.sup.2] change = .05, p < .0005) after demand for approval and level of regard were controlled.

Multicollinearity was not considered problematic because the correlation of this interaction term with demand for approval and level of regard was not high. The correlation between relationship satisfaction and level of regard was significantly stronger (z = 1.72, one-tailed p < .05) for those above the midpoint of 3.50 of the demand for approval scale (r = .73, df = 80, one-tailed p < .001) than for those at or below it (r = .56, df = 60, one-tailed p < .001).

Discussion

I found all four facilitative conditions to be positively associated with relationship satisfaction, a finding that is consistent with person-centered theory. The weakest of these four associations was for unconditionality of regard, which also did not explain a significant increment of the variance of relationship satisfaction. A path analysis indicated that level of regard and empathy had the highest associations with relationship satisfaction. The finding for empathy is consonant with the relationship-enhancement approach and therapy approaches incorporating empathy training such as behavioral marital therapy.

The sample consisted of people who were predominantly satisfied with their romantic relationship, which is generally the case (Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981). The extent to which similar results may be found in people who are largely dissatisfied with their romantic relationship and who are seeking relationship therapy needs to be determined. The causal direction of the association between relationship satisfaction and the facilitative conditions cannot be ascertained from data collected at one point in time.

It is possible that the causal influence is reciprocal. Greater facilitativeness may lead to greater satisfaction, and increased satisfaction may bring about increased facilitativeness. To determine the causal direction of these associations, true experiments need to be conducted in which these variables are manipulated, although attempts to do so in ongoing relationships may appear contrived. However,
the temporal direction of these associations may be further explored in longitudinal studies.

Although negative conflict was inversely associated with relationship satisfaction in this study, and as has been previously shown (Cramer, 2000; Heavey et al., 1993), this result did not explain a significant increment in the variance of relationship satisfaction when the facilitative conditions were taken into account. If the provision of these facilitative conditions is interpreted as showing the extent to which the romantic partner is perceived as giving social support (Cramer, 1990), these results suggest that being generally supportive may be more important than engaging less in negative conflict.

Whether these facilitative conditions in both more specific conflict and support interactions will independently account for variance in relationship satisfaction remains to be investigated. In a previous study (Cramer, 2002b), I found that relationship satisfaction was equally strongly related to minor and major conflicts, suggesting that the association between relationship satisfaction and negative conflict may not have been higher if conflict had referred to differences over major rather than minor issues.

I used path analysis to explore the association of relationship satisfaction with negative conflict and the two facilitative conditions of level of regard and empathy, in which either negative conflict or both facilitative conditions were modeled as mediators. With negative conflict as the mediator, level of regard and empathy were significantly and directly associated with relationship satisfaction. The direct association between negative conflict and relationship satisfaction was not significant. With the two facilitative conditions as mediators, negative conflict had a significant but indirect association with relationship satisfaction through both facilitative conditions. Once again, the direct association between negative conflict and relationship satisfaction was not significant.

These results suggest that negative conflict may reduce relationship satisfaction by lowering the extent to which a partner feels accepted and understood by the other. It is these two facilitative qualities rather than negative conflict itself that seem to determine relationship satisfaction. As cautioned before, the causal direction of these associations cannot be ascertained from cross-sectional data.

Contrary to rational--emotive theory, the demand for approval from a partner was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction. The failure to find a significant association may have been because the majority of respondents were satisfied with their romantic relationships. Only 4% scored below the midpoint of the relationship satisfaction scale, indicating that they were dissatisfied with their relationship. As relationship satisfaction was strongly correlated with level of regard, most of the participants also felt accepted by their partner. About 4% scored below the midpoint of the level of regard scale, showing that they did not feel accepted by their partner.

Because most participants felt accepted by their partners, those with a strong demand for approval would have had this demand met. If this demand had not been fulfilled in more of the participants, demand for approval may have been found to be inversely related to
relationship satisfaction as Epstein and Eidelson (1981) reported in couples dissatisfied with their relationship and undergoing marital therapy.

However, the positive association between relationship satisfaction and level of regard was moderated by the demand for approval, as I hypothesized. This association was stronger in those with a high rather than a low demand for approval. This result was statistically significant in both groups and was moderately strong in those with a lower demand for approval, indicating that level of regard is an important correlate of relationship satisfaction, even when the demand for approval is not high.

The association between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction did not reach statistical significance; it was weak and accounted for only about 2% of the variance in relationship satisfaction. Although the association was stronger in men than in women, as reported by Hendrick et al. (1988), the difference in the size of these correlations was not significant. Assuming that the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale is an adequate measure of self-acceptance, which it appears to be, this finding does not provide strong support for the person-centered and the rational–emotive hypothesis that self-acceptance is related to relationship satisfaction. The causal direction of this association cannot be inferred from these cross-sectional data, but these results also indicate that having a satisfactory romantic relationship may not generally have a marked effect on how one evaluates oneself.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that how satisfied one is with one's romantic relationship may depend more on how accepted and understood by one's partner one feels than on how frequently one engages in negative conflict with one's partner. Although negative conflict may reduce how accepted and understood by one's partner one feels, it does not appear to have a direct or independent effect on how satisfied one is with one's romantic relationship. These findings imply that encouraging or teaching people to be more accepting and understanding of their romantic partner may increase their partner's satisfaction with the relationship more than focusing on how to reduce the negative conflict.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>[alpha]</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>[gamma]</th>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship satisfaction</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of regard</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>.66 **</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>.65 **</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconditionality of regard</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>.49 **</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruence</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>.65 **</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
facilitativeness   .91  4.53  0.64  .75 ***
Negative conflict .89  3.44  0.73  -.48 ***  -.08
Demand for
approval        .72  3.70  0.61  .08   -.04
Self-esteem     .88  3.08  0.48  .14   -.02

*** p < .001 (one-tailed).

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REFERENCES


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