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Impact of Social Comparison on Relationship Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how one's perception of someone else's romantic relationship influenced their satisfaction in their own romantic relationship, using 42 student volunteers from the McNeese State University psychology pool. Results supported the hypothesis that there is a higher level of relationship satisfaction reported by individuals that view a negative relationship in comparison to those that witness a positive relationship. The researchers used a YouTube video and two videos created by the researchers to demonstrate positive, negative, and neutral relationships. The researcher measured the dependent variable, relationship satisfaction, using Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (1976). After participants completed the questionnaire, the researchers scored them using the numerical values indicated in Appendix B.

Keywords: envy, influence, jealousy, observational learning, relationship satisfaction

Effect of Observed Relationships on Relationship Satisfaction

Some people want what they cannot have, but others may appreciate what they have more when they see that others have it worse. In the book, *The Psychology of Jealousy and Envy*, jealousy and envy are described as “resulting from the appraisal of certain provocative situations,” (*The Psychology*, 1991, p.1). In this research we aimed to identify whether seeing a happy relationship is a “provocative situation” that would incite jealousy and cause an individual to report a lower level of satisfaction in their own relationship because they want it to resemble the observed relationship more closely (*The Psychology*, 1991, p.1). We also aimed to identify whether seeing a negative relationship would help others to appreciate their own relationship more and report a higher level of relationship satisfaction, or if it would cause them to recognize the negative aspects of their relationship and rate their level of satisfaction in their relationship lower. I hypothesized that the group observing a negative relationship would be more appreciative of their own relationship, thereby causing them to report a higher level of satisfaction in regards to their own romantic relationship. If the individual observed a positive relationship, however, they would be jealous and would report a lower level of satisfaction regarding their romantic relationship.

Observation’s Effect on Attitudes and Behavior

In “Social Learning Theory”, Bandura explained that emotional responses can be learned through observing others (1971, p. 2). Likewise, individuals acquire most of their knowledge by observing others’ behaviors and reactions and the consequences of those behaviors and reactions (Bandura, 1971, p. 2). Therefore, it is plausible that observing a couple’s relationship can cause an “emotional response” such as happiness, anger,

disappointment, or jealousy regarding one's own relationship (Bandura, 1971, p. 2). Likewise, Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch stated that "people have similar information, face similar action alternatives, and face similar payoffs", and this causes individuals to base their attitudes and behaviors on observations of the experiences of others (1998, p. 2). Therefore, people may want a certain type of relationship if they see that others are happy in such a relationship, or one may become less satisfied in their relationship after observing others experience displeasure due to a similar relationship.

In a study by Fiorito and Scotto, octopi were placed in two groups in which the first group (demonstrators) selected from two objects that were identical except in color (1992). The second group (observers) watched as the demonstrators made their selections. When the demonstrators were removed and the observers were allowed to make their selection, they chose the object that they had observed the demonstrators select (Fiorito & Scotto, 1992). The demonstrators had been classically conditioned to choose the particular color (Fiorito & Scotto, 1992). Results from the study showed that observational learning by the observers occurred more rapidly than learning through classical conditioning (Fiorito & Scotto, 1992). This suggests that individuals and organisms learn through observing others more easily than learning through their own experiences, and that one's behavior is easily shaped through the observation of others.

According to Mihalic and Elliott, children and adolescents learn appropriate behaviors for intimate relationships by observing their parents as well as other couples (1997). The same principle can be applied to observations made by adults influencing their attitudes.

Importance of Relationship Satisfaction

Research shows that satisfactory relationships positively affect individuals' health. The research described in "You make me sick: Marital quality and health over the life course" showed that individuals that reported having good health, also had positive marital experiences (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2006). Those having negative marital experiences also experienced declines in self-reported health (2006). Similarly, studies by House, Landis, and Umberson revealed that individuals who do not experience relationships of high quality, also tend to live shorter lives (1988). Therefore, finding a way to help individuals to view their relationships more positively would be of utmost benefit.

Glenn and Weaver compared the effect of marital satisfaction to the effects of seven other aspects of life using data obtained from six national surveys (1981). The aspects studied included work, friendships, financial satisfaction, community, extracurricular activities, family life, and health). In all cases, except for that of black men, marital satisfaction influenced overall satisfaction more than any of the other seven aspects of life, including work satisfaction. These results demonstrated that intimate relationship satisfaction plays a large role in the overall satisfaction of Americans and that satisfaction in an intimate relationship heavily influences the psychological wellness of individuals (Glenn & Weaver, 1981).

Violence and Relationships

Violence is one of the many behaviors and attitudes that individuals learn through observation and exposure. Children who observe violence between their parents are more likely to be violent in their own romantic relationships as adults (Ehrnesaft et al., 2003). Individuals also find higher levels of violence and aggression tolerable or acceptable

when they observe increased amounts of violence in others' relationships (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Similarly, if individuals observe others using violence as a means to cope with problems, the observer will learn that it is an effective way to problem solve, opposed to using discussions or other forms of problem solving (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997).

Many factors are believed to contribute to observational learning, including that of violent behavior. Encoding specificity, in which the context that something is learned then becomes associated with the learned information, can become a trigger for the learned information or behavior (Tulving, & Thompson, 1973). Therefore, if an individual observes someone behaving violently due to a particular situation, the individual may resort to violence if ever placed in that situation.

In a study by Kwong, 1,249 adults completed assessments regarding whether or not they observed or were involved in family violence in their family of origin (Kwong, 1997). The researcher questioned participants regarding whether they had observed father-to-mother or mother-to-father violence, or had been a victim of father-to-participant or mother-to-participant violence. They were then asked if they had ever perpetrated or been victim of relationship violence. Twenty-three percent of participants reported having observed father-to-mother violence. Of these participants, 36.3% admitted that they had been the perpetrator in relationship violence, and 41.8% had been the victim of relationship violence. Of the total participant pool, 13.9% observed mother-to-father violence, and of these participants, 36.3% committed relationship violence, and 48.5% experienced violence in their relationship. Of the 28.5% of individuals who reported experiencing father-to-participant violence, 36.7% committed violent acts against a partner, and 45.2% were the victim of relationship violence. Over 24% of

participants reported experiencing mother-to-participant violence. Of those participants, 39.4% committed violent acts against partners, and 48.4% were the recipient of relationship violence. Of the 50.4% of participants who reported never having experienced or observed any violence among their family of origin, 18.7% were the perpetrators of violent acts against a partner, and 22.5% were victims of relationship violence. Being that percentages of those perpetrating or being victim of relationship violence were higher among those experiencing any of the forms of family violence compared to those not experiencing family violence, Kwong was able to conclude that exposure to family violence increases the likelihood of relationship violence (Kwong, 1997). Being that the percentages of those committing violence against romantic partners was higher among those experiencing any of the types of family violence compared to not experiencing family violence, it can be concluded that exposure to violence increases the use of violence as a means of problem solving. The higher percentages of individuals who were victims of relationship violence after experiencing family violence supports the social learning model. It also validates the theory that exposure to violence within the family teaches individuals that violence is acceptable, thereby causing a higher percentage of victims of violent relationship from families where violence was present, compared to families where violence was not present (Kwong, 1997).

The proposed study will use video footage and Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (1976) to evaluate the effects of observation on adult humans' romantic relationship satisfaction. In this study, we hypothesize that the group observing a negative relationship will report a higher level of satisfaction in regards to their own romantic relationship, and the individuals that will observe a positive relationship will report a

lower level of satisfaction regarding their romantic relationship. We also hypothesize that women's scores will differ more across the three groups. We believe that this will be a result of women being socialized to expect and desire the perfect relationship, as demonstrated in fairytales and the media. I also believe that women will sympathize with the woman in the negative relationship. In addition, we believe that participants over age 33 will have the smallest difference in relationship satisfaction across the three groups due to their attitudes being less easily changed compared to younger individuals. We also believe that those from more traditional cultures, such as Asian-Americans, will report higher levels of relationship satisfaction across all three groups. We hope that this study will advance previous research by studying the effects of observational learning on relationship satisfaction amongst adult humans, whereas most of the current literature evaluates observational learning in children and the effects of parents and violence on relationships.

METHOD

Participants

Forty-two participants volunteered from the psychology subject pool at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana. The sample consisted of 21 men and 21 women of various ethnicities. In order to select an equal number of men and women for analysis, a third party randomly selected Dyadic Adjustment Scales completed by participants. All participants were 18 years of age or older and currently involved in a romantic relationship.

Design

This study utilized a between-groups, mixed experimental design. The independent variable was the type of relationship observed, and had three levels: control, positive, and negative. The dependent variable was relationship satisfaction as measured by Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (1976).

Materials

Stimuli. The stimuli that the researchers provided to participants involved one of three videos. The video for the control group was unrelated to human romantic relationships, and is entitled "Why I Hate School but Love Education: Spoken Word" (Ngongo, n.d.). The positive group watched a video filmed by the lead researcher. The video was approximately 10 minutes long, and showed a couple sharing a meal, enjoying each other's company, doing typical house chores, and being affectionate. The negative group watched a video, approximately 10 minutes in length. The researcher recorded the video, which displayed a couple engaging in verbal altercations, insulting one another, displaying distrust and jealousy, and being mildly aggressive. The researchers used a Sony Cybershot camera to record the videos. The researchers showed the videos to participants by downloading the videos onto a MacBook Pro laptop, using a USB cord. The researchers utilized a USB storage device to store the videos, and connected the USB device to a computer that was connected to a projector in a classroom to show the videos to participants.

Materials to measure responses. The researchers measured the relationship satisfaction of the couples using Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (1976) (Appendix A). The researchers provided a demographics form for participant to complete, containing nominal and interval measurement scales to identify the sex, age, and ethnicity

of participants (Appendix C). The participants provided a writing utensil to record their responses. The researchers used a MacBook Pro and HP Deskject 3050 printer to print copies of the demographics form. The researcher made copies of the demographic form using a Xerox copier. In order to score the questionnaires, the researchers utilized the version with the numerical values for each response (Appendix B).

Procedure

The researchers randomly assigned participants to one of the three groups. We did this by placing participants in a group based on the order they entered the room. For example, we placed the first man and the first woman in one group, the second man and woman in the second group, the third man and woman in the last group, and so on. This ensured that there were an even number of men and women in each of the three groups (7 men and 7 women in each). The researchers read and explained the consent form to the participants, after which, the participants signed and returned the forms to the researchers. After the researchers collected the consent forms, the researchers brought each of the three groups to separate classrooms.

The researchers connected the USB storage device to the computer connected to the projector in a McNeese State University classroom. The control group completed the demographics form (Appendix C). We then played the control video, “Why I Hate School but Love Education: Spoken Word” (Ngongo). After the participants viewed the video, they completed the questionnaire. In a separate room, the positive group completed the demographics form and watched the video that was recorded by the researcher. After the video, they too completed the questionnaire administered by the

researcher. In a third room, the researchers administered the demographics form, played the negative video for the third group, and administered the questionnaire.

The researchers collected the completed questionnaires after each condition was completed. We kept the three sets separate and labeled, “control”, “positive”, and “negative”. After collecting the questionnaires, we handed out debriefing forms to the participants. We read the form to them and explained how they could receive help if any aspect of the study caused discomfort. The researchers then dismissed the participants.

After dismissing the participants, the researchers scored each questionnaire. To score the questionnaire, we used the numeric version in Appendix B to assign values to participants’ responses. We then added the numeric values for each participant’s responses. After assigning scores for each participant, we determined the mean score for each of the three groups and compare group scores.

Ethics and Debriefing

To ensure the ethicality of the research, we debriefed the participants as soon as they finished the study, but before they left the facility. In the debriefing, we explained the goal of the study, where they could receive counseling if any aspect of the study made them uncomfortable, and how to contact us if they wished to obtain more information pertaining to the study or the results of the study.

Prior to the start of the study, the lead researcher presented the proposed study to the Institutional Review Board. The researchers also explained at the beginning of the study that participants were welcome to skip any questions on the questionnaire that caused discomfort. We also informed participants that they could withdraw from the study at anytime if they felt uncomfortable.

The researchers maintained the anonymity of participants to ensure their privacy. To do this, participants were instructed not to record their names on the questionnaire. Instead, the participants wrote an identification number on their questionnaire. The researchers instructed them to write their chosen identification numbers down in a safe and private place. In the case that participants wished to know their score on the questionnaire, they could present the researchers with their identification number, and the researchers would find the completed questionnaire with the specified identification number.

RESULTS

To evaluate the results of the study, the researchers completed an ANOVA test using the SPSS statistical analysis software. We performed a univariate analysis of the data collected. We used a single factor ANOVA in order to examine the three levels of our independent variable. The three levels include the control, the positive relationship, and the negative relationship observed. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated a significant difference, $F(2, 39) = 3.530, p = 0.039$, among the groups; with the mean score for the control group ($M = 118.5, SD = 16.6$) not significantly different from either of the other two groups, but with the negative model group ($M = 127.5, SD = 9.4$) being significant higher than the positive model group ($M = 110.2, SD = 22.9$), $t(26df) = 2.61, p = .015$.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research confirm the original hypothesis, with statistical significance. The group that observed the negative relationship reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction. We believe that these individuals were more appreciative of

their own relationship, thereby causing them to report a higher level of satisfaction in regards to their own romantic relationship. Research by Mihalic and Elliott also shows that children and adolescents learn appropriate behaviors for intimate relationships by observing their parents as well as other couples (1997). Similarly, we believe that the adults in this study reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction because viewing the negative relationship caused them to be more accepting of their own possible relationship flaws.

The individuals that observed a positive relationship reported a lower level of relationship satisfaction on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale in comparison to those who observed a negative relationship. It may have been that they were jealous and therefore reported a lower level of satisfaction regarding their romantic relationship. These findings also support previous research that individuals feed off of others' emotions, causing feelings of jealousy (*The Psychology*, 1991, p.1).

The major limitation of this study is the inability to strongly generalize results because of the small pool that participants were chosen from. In order to better generalize these results to a broader range of adults, future studies should use a larger participant pool. For example, future studies should include randomly selected adults, not exclusively adults currently attending college. Future participants should also be from various regions, as culture often affects how one is raised, thereby affecting how they evaluate certain situations. The study can also be strengthened by using a within groups design, opposed to the between groups design used in this study. Another limitation of this study is transparency of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. In order to make the purpose

of the study less obvious to participants and more accurate, future research should include random questions unrelated to the dependent variable being measured.

To expand upon the study, the researchers could have the same group of participants complete a Dyadic Adjustment Scale without having observed another couple. After a week or two's time, the same participants could watch the video of the positive couple, then complete the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. A week or two following the second session, a third session could be held where the same participant complete the Dyadic Adjustment Scale after viewing the negative relationship. This would allow the researchers to compare the influence of observation on responses for each individual participant.

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	Every Day	Almost Every Day	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
23. Do you kiss your mate?	<input type="radio"/>				
	All of them	Most of them	Some of them	Very few of them	None of them
24. Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?	<input type="radio"/>				

How often would you say the following events occur between you and your mate?

	Never	Less than once a month	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a week	Once a day	More often
25. Have a stimulating exchange of ideas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
26. Laugh together	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
27. Calmly discuss something	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
28. Work together on a project	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

These are some things about which couples sometimes agree and sometime disagree. Indicate if either item below caused differences of opinions or were problems in your relationship during the past few weeks. (Check yes or no)

	Yes	No
29. <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> Being too tired for sex.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
30. <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> Not showing love.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

31. The circles on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy," represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please fill in the circle which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

<input type="radio"/>						
Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A Little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy	Perfect

32. Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the future of your relationship?
- I want desperately for my relationship to succeed, and *would go to almost any length* to see that it does.
 - I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and *will do all I can* to see that it does.
 - I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and *will do my fair share* to see that it does.
 - It would be nice if my relationship succeeded, but *I can't do much more than I am doing now* to help it succeed.
 - It would be nice if it succeeded, but *I refuse to do any more than I am doing now* to keep the relationship going.
 - My relationship can never succeed, and *there is no more that I can do* to keep the relationship going.

Note: Blank Dyadic Adjustment Scale retrieved from <http://women4real.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Dyadic-Adjustment-Scale-DAS.pdf>.

Appendix B

Dyadic Adjustment Scale with Numerical Values

DYADIC ADJUSTMENT SCALE						
Most persons have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.						
	Always Agree	Almost Always Agree	Occasionally Disagree	Frequently Disagree	Almost Always Disagree	Always Disagree
1. Handling family finances	5	4	3	2	1	0
2. Matters of recreation	5	4	3	2	1	0
3. Religious matters	5	4	3	2	1	0
4. Demonstrations of affection	5	4	3	2	1	0
5. Friends	5	4	3	2	1	0
6. Sex relations	5	4	3	2	1	0
7. Conventionality (correct or proper behavior)	5	4	3	2	1	0
8. Philosophy of life	5	4	3	2	1	0
9. Ways of dealing with parents or in-laws	5	4	3	2	1	0
10. Aims, goals, and things believed important	5	4	3	2	1	0
11. Amount of time spent together	5	4	3	2	1	0
12. Making major decisions	5	4	3	2	1	0
13. Household tasks	5	4	3	2	1	0
14. Leisure time interests and activities	5	4	3	2	1	0
15. Career decisions	5	4	3	2	1	0
	All the time	Most of the time	More often than not	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
16. How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?	0	1	2	3	4	5
17. How often do you or your mate leave the house after a fight?	0	1	2	3	4	5
18. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?	5	4	3	2	1	0
19. Do you confide in your mate?	5	4	3	2	1	0
20. Do you ever regret that you married? (or lived together)	0	1	2	3	4	5
21. How often do you and your partner quarrel?	0	1	2	3	4	5
22. How often do you and your mate "get on each other's nerves?"	0	1	2	3	4	5

23. Do you kiss your mate?	Every Day 4	Almost Every Day 3	Occasionally 2	Rarely 1	Never 0		
	All of them	Most of them	Some of them	Very few of them	None of them		
24. Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?	4	3	2	1	0		
How often would you say the following events occur between you and your mate?							
	Never	Less than once a month	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a week	Once a day	More often	
25. Have a stimulating exchange of ideas	0	1	2	3	4	5	
26. Laugh together	0	1	2	3	4	5	
27. Calmly discuss something	0	1	2	3	4	5	
28. Work together on a project	0	1	2	3	4	5	
These are some things about which couples sometimes agree and sometime disagree. Indicate if either item below caused differences of opinions or were problems in your relationship during the past few weeks. (Check yes or no)							
	Yes	No					
29.	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	Being too tired for sex.				
30.	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	Not showing love.				
31. The dots on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy," represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please circle the dot which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.							
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

	Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A Little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy	Perfect
32. Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the future of your relationship?							
<u>5</u>	I want desperately for my relationship to succeed, and <i>would go to almost any length</i> to see that it does.						
<u>4</u>	I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and <i>will do all I can</i> to see that it does.						
<u>3</u>	I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and <i>will do my fair share</i> to see that it does.						
<u>2</u>	It would be nice if my relationship succeeded, but <i>I can't do much more than I am doing</i> now to help it succeed.						
<u>1</u>	It would be nice if it succeeded, but <i>I refuse to do any more than I am doing</i> now to keep the relationship going.						
<u>0</u>	My relationship can never succeed, and <i>there is no more that I can do</i> to keep the relationship going.						

Note: The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976)

Appendix C

Demographics Form

Participant I.D. number: _____

Demographics Form

Instructions: For each item, circle the ONE response that best describes you.

1. Age of participant:
 - a. 18 – 21 years old
 - b. 22 – 24 years old
 - c. 25 – 28 years old
 - d. 29 – 32 years old
 - e. 33 years of age or older
2. Ethnicity:
 - a. African American (not Hispanic)
 - b. Caucasian (not Hispanic)
 - c. Asian
 - d. Hispanic
 - e. Other
3. Sex:
 - a. Male
 - b. Female