RESEARCH PAPER

Factors Associated with Relationship Satisfaction: Importance of Communication Skills

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Abstract The present study aimed to investigate the association between communication skills and relationship satisfaction, after having controlled for some other important associates of relationship satisfaction, such as attachment styles and various problem-solving skills including sense of control, confidence, and attitudes of approach-avoidance. One-hundred-forty-two university students who were either currently involved in a romantic relationship, or who had a romantic relationship in the past participated in this study. As a result of hierarchical regression analysis consistent with the expectations, having secure attachment style and high self-confidence on possessed problem-solving abilities were found to be associated with the relationship satisfaction. Moreover, after controlling for the variance accounted for by these variables communication skills were still found to be associated with the relationship satisfaction. Findings were discussed in the light of the relevant literature.

Keywords Attachment styles · Problem-solving abilities · Communication skills · Relationship satisfaction

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of romantic relationships and in interpersonal relationships it refers to disagreements, incompatibilities, and differences in viewpoints. As conflict increases, it turns out to be something more than a disagreement and tends to become a negative and destructive part of intimate relationships (Cahn, 1992). Since intimacy is viewed as an important source of emotional, psychological, and physical well-being (Burman & Margolin, 1992), conflict appears to be a factor that intervenes with individuals', particularly late adolescents' well-being. It is well known that a major source of seeking help among university students is due to the problems they experience in their romantic relationships (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). The negative feelings experienced in conflict situations lead to stress

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responses, self-esteem problems, academic difficulties, and violence in adolescents (Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999). Additionally, it has been shown that in the long run, unresolved conflicts are associated with the instability of the relationship (Berndt & Keefe, 1992). Thus, experiencing conflicts and inability to resolve it is a critical issue influencing the quality of romantic partners' relationship.

Despite the negative effects of conflict, it has been also argued that it may be a positive and growth-enhancing experience (Schaeffer & Rollins, 2001). That is, couples may think that they can accomplish mutual understanding as a result of conflict resolution, and this may help partners feel closer to each other (Rands, Levinger, & Mellinger, 1981). According to Shantz and Hartup (1992), relationship functioning is closely related to how conflict is handled. Similarly, Thomas (1976) stated that conflict could be either constructive or destructive depending on the behaviors engaged in to resolve the conflict. However, when differences in choosing either constructive or destructive management behaviors are taken into account, it appears that there are some other important factors contributing to the decision process. Heppner and Lee (2002) emphasized the importance of individuals' appraisals about their problem-solving skills and resources. Though some individuals believe that they are capable of solving problems, some others may believe that they have some deficits on their problem-solving abilities. In this sense, the strategy that an individual chooses for solving conflicts is influenced by their attributions (Cahn, 1992), and one aspect of this attribution would be related to efficacy expectations. That is, individuals with high self-confidence in their problem-solving abilities would engage in the conflict situations calmly and would not be disrupted by difficulties, whereas those having low self-confidence in their problem-solving abilities would approach to the conflict with anxiety, and would increase the probability of disruption by the difficulties (Maddux, 2002).

Another important aspect that may contribute to efficacy beliefs is individuals' sense of control. Thompson (2002) states that having a sense of control over the problematic situation activates problem-solving skills. Thus, individuals with a strong sense of control tend to determine the cause of the problem and take a direct action to solve it, whereas individuals with weak sense of control will not focus on the problem, and tend to use ineffective and indirect problem-solving strategies (Ross & Mirowsky, 1989). Therefore, overall it appears that appraisals and beliefs about one's own skills play an important role on how he or she responds to conflicts, and consequently these responses determine the efficiency of attempts for conflict resolution which is associated with individuals' relationship satisfaction.

Attachment style is also considered as an important factor in relationship satisfaction and conflict handling attitudes (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Marchand, 2004; Shi, 2003). According to the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1977), individuals develop internal working models of self and attachment figures through infancy and childhood, these models are shaped on the basis of cognitive representations of early experiences with caregivers. These experiences shape individuals' expectations about the availability and responsiveness of attachment figures (Feeney, 1999). Every individual carries forward their internal working models into their adolescent and adult relationships (Marchand, 2004), and these models mostly apply to romantic relationships (Weiss, 1982, 1986, 1991). In other words, individuals seek comfort and security from their partners, and need them when they are confronted with stressful life events (Feeney, 1999). When individuals' security of relationship is

threatened by stressful events, their attachment system gets activated, and proto-typical behaviors and emotional features of different attachment styles evolve during these distressing situations (Kobak & Duemler, 1994). In other words, when romantic partners experience conflicts, partners tend to carry over their early childhood and current relationship models to the current situation and engage in certain behavioral patterns representing their attachment styles (Shi, 2003).

Accordingly, secure adults are comfortable with closeness and intimacy, willing to rely on others when needed and are self-confident of being loved (Collins, 1996). When these individuals are faced with a conflictual situation they tend to express their negative and positive emotions more openly (Feeney, 1995), whereas anxious/ambivalent individuals are willing to have close relationships, but, however are hesitant to depend on others, since they are suspicious about others' attitudes of accepting or rejecting them (Collins, 1996). When their security is threatened they tend to blame their partners, use more physical and verbal aggression, and exhibit ambivalent patterns such as becoming demanding and withdrawn. Avoidant indi-viduals, on the other hand, feel uncomfortable about getting close to and trusting others (Collins, 1996), usually seek less support under stress (Collins & Feeney, 2000), and tend to avoid conflict-evoking situations (Creasey et al., 1999). So in general, secure individuals are expected to have more optimistic expectations, a strong sense of control, self-efficacy, and self-confidence in seeking help from others (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Read, 1990; Shaver & Hazan, 1993). On the other hand, since insecure individuals' (i.e., preoccupied, fearful, and dismissed) early representations are characterized by unstable and inadequate reg-ulation of distress, and by a sense of personal inefficacy in relieving discomfort (Bowlby, 1973; Shaver & Hazan, 1993), they tend to lack positive appraisal and successful coping skills when faced with stressful life events (Mikuliner & Florian, 1998).

Apart from all these factors, communication skills also deserve a particular attention in relation to relationship satisfaction, and development and maintenance of conflicts (Noller & Feeney, 1998). Ineffective communication skills tend to intensify the conflict situation (Mayer, 2000). According to Burgess and Huston (1979), in order to handle conflicts effectively, partners should be able to talk about what caused the conflict and should be able to express their point of views. However, people usually do not rely on accurate and compatible perceptions, but carry their communication conclusions from earlier experiences into the current situation (Mayer, 2000). According to Harary and Batell (1981), during the communication process, even the content of the communication itself has the potential to activate new conflicts.

Based on this notion Harary and Batell (1981) suggested that conflicting com-munication is a situation in which mutual communication cannot be thoroughly achieved, since the message undergoes some alterations during the process of transfer from one individual to the other. In such communications misunderstand-ings, getting angry with the other person without listening to him or her, and insisting on one's own point of views are the basic characteristics (Dökmen, 1994). As these communication problems increase, the couples' ability to solve problems decreases, which also decreases the relationship satisfaction (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998; Gottman, 1994; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

Therefore, communication skills seem to be a crucial factor in association with relationship satisfaction. For marriage and couple therapists to construct better

guidelines for assessing and treating dissatisfied couples, identifying the factors associated with relationship dissatisfaction seems to be quite crucial. Moreover, studies focusing on the relationship between conflicts and relationship dissatisfaction, and skills required to resolve these conflicts are strongly needed. In the light of this perspective, the present study was aimed at addressing the association between communication skills and relationship satisfaction, even after controlling for some other important associates of relationship satisfaction such as attachment styles (i.e., secure or insecure) and various problem-solving skills including sense of control, confidence, and attitudes of approach–avoidance.

Method

Participants

The participants in the present study were 142 undergraduate and graduate students from different departments of Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. The ages of the participants varied from 18 to 43, with a mean of 21.8 (SD = 3.45). Seventy-one of the participants (50%) were females and 71 of them (50%) were males; 119 (84%) were undergraduates and 23 (16%) were graduate students. The students who reported that they had never been in a romantic relationship were excluded from the sample. Among 142 participants, 83 (58.5%) reported that they were in an ongoing relationship, the duration of which ranged from 1 to 360 months ($M = 30$, $SD = 48$), and 59 (41.5%) indicated that though they were not currently in a romantic relationship, they had been in a romantic relationship which lasted for 1 to 80 months ($M = 18$, $SD = 22$).

Measures

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) was developed in order to assess the perceived quality of relationship and relationship satisfaction of married or cohabiting couples. It consists of 32 items. Higher scores reflect perception of better quality of relationship. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Fışıloğlu and Demir (2000) with sufficient psychometric properties. The DAS was found to be correlated with the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (Fışıloğlu & Demir, 2000).

   Problem Solving Inventory (PSI; Heppner & Peterson, 1982) is designed to assess people's perception of their problem-solving abilities. The inventory consists of 35 items rated on a 6-point scale, in which higher scores indicate ineffective problem-solving abilities. The PSI has three subscales, namely problem-solving confidence, approach–avoidance style, and personal control. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Şahin, Şahin, and Heppner (1993). In the current study, the instruction was modified so that the participants were asked to respond to the items of the inventory based on the conflictual situations they faced with their romantic partners.

   Conflict Tendency Scale (CTS, Dökmen, unpublished) is based on Harary and Batell's (1981) "Communication Conflict Theoretical Model." CTS assesses individuals' communication abilities and problems they faced during communication. The scale consists of 53 items and responses to the items are given on a 5-point Likert type format, where higher scores indicate communication problems. The scale was found to be internally consistent with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .89 in a

sample of university students. (For the details of the psychometric properties of the scale see Dökmen, unpublished.)

The revised version of Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECRI-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) was developed in order to assess adult attachment styles in close relationships. ECRI-R is a 36-item 7-point Likert type inventory. It has two subscales, namely, avoidance and anxiety subscales. Based on these two subscales the four attachment styles are grouped (i.e., low scores on both subscales indicate secure attachment, high scores from both subscales indicate fearful attachment, low scores from avoidance subscale and high from anxiety indicate preoccupied attachment, and low scores from anxiety and high from avoidance indicates avoidant attachment style). ECRI was adapted into Turkish by Selçuk, Günaydin, Sümer, and Uysal (2005).

Procedure

After they provided informed consent, participants were asked to fill in the questionnaires, which took approximately 20 min to complete.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and the ranges for the measures of the study are given in Table 1. Prior to the analysis four attachment styles were grouped under two categories as secure and insecure attachment styles. Individuals with a secure attachment style, were again categorized as those having secure attachment styles ($n = 67$, 47%), while individuals with fearful, preoccupied, and dismissed attachment styles were categorized as those having insecure attachment styles ($n = 75$, 53%).

Factors Associated with Relationship Satisfaction

In order to investigate the associates of relationship satisfaction a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was run. In this robust analysis, on the first step the variable created for attachment categories (coded as 1 = secure attachment, 2 = insecure attachment) was forced to enter. After controlling for the variance accounted for by this variable, three measures of problem-solving abilities (i.e., problem-solving confidence, personal control, and approach–avoidance) were entered into the equation on the second step. Finally, the measure of conflict tendency was entered into the equation on the third step. As can be seen from Table 2, attachment categories explained 11% of the total variance ($F\,[1, 140] = 17.52$, $P < .001$), and was significantly

Table 1 Means (M), standard deviations (SD) and ranges for the measure of the study

Measures	M	SD	Range
Problem-Solving Inventory			
Personal control	17.81	4.87	7–36
Avoid–approach	46.06	12.06	21–87
Self confidence	27.18	7.91	12–46
Conflict Tendency Scale	150.88	20.43	104–208
Dyadic Adjustment Scale	111.35	17.37	70–150

Table 2 Factors associated with the relationship satisfaction

Variables in set	Fchange	df	t	Beta	Partial correlation (pr)	Model R^2
1st Step	17.52**	1,140				.11
Attachment categories						
Secure vs. Insecure		140	− 4.19**	− .33	− .33	
2nd Step	2.78*	3,137				.16
Problem-solving skills						
Confidence		137	− 2.40*	− .24	− .20	
Avoidance–approach		137	0.14	.02	.01	
Personal control		137	− 0.12	− .01	− .01	
3rd Step	4.84*	1,136				.19
Communication problems						
Conflict tendency		136	− 2.20*	− .19	− .19	

Note. Beta and t values are for within set variables

*P < .05; **P < .001

associated with the relationship satisfaction (pr = − .33, t [140] = − 4.19, P < .001). This association indicated that as expected, participants having secure attachment styles reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction. On the second step, with the inclusion of the three measures of problem-solving abilities the explained variance increased to 16% (F change [3, 137] = 2.78, P < .05). Among the measures of problem-solving abilities, only Problem-Solving Confidence revealed significant association with the relationship satisfaction (pr = − .20, t [137] = − 2.40, P < .05), indicating that those who have confidence in their problem-solving abilities tended to be more satisfied with their relationships. Finally, even after controlling for all these variables that accounted for 16% of the variance, the inclusion of Conflict Tendency further increased the explained variance to 19% (Fchange [1, 136] = 4.84, P < .05), and this final variable revealed significant association with the dependent measure (pr = − .19, t [136] = − 2.20, P < .05). These results suggested that even after controlling for the variance accounted for by the attachment categories and problem-solving abilities, those with lower communication problems (i.e., conflict tendencies) were more likely to experience relationship satisfaction.

Discussion

The present study was aimed at revealing the association of communication skills with relationship satisfaction through a robust statistical analysis. Results revealed that after partialling out the variance accounted for by some other important associates of relationship satisfaction, like attachment style and various problem-solving skills, communication skills were still statistically significantly associated with relationship satisfaction. The findings also confirmed the importance of one's confidence in his or her problem-solving abilities and having secure attachment style on relationship satisfaction.

Current theoretical perspectives suggest that adult attachment style is an important factor associated with relationship satisfaction because it shapes individuals' expectations about how to behave in romantic relationships (Marchand, 2004). That is, believing that one can trust and depend on another person guides his or her

selection of particular behaviors in security-threatening situations (Creasey et al., 1999), and these attitudes also affect relationship satisfaction (e.g., Feeney, 1999). Consistently, it was found that late adolescents with secure attachment styles felt closer to their partners (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and were more satisfied with their romantic relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990). Thus, this finding was consistent with the expectations.

Among problem-solving skills, only being self-confident about the possessed problem-solving skills was found to be significantly associated statistically with relationship satisfaction. Being confident in one's problem-solving abilities refers to the belief that one is capable of recognizing and understanding the actions which would lead to the desired outcome, and having the capacity to accomplish this outcome (Bandura, 1997). More specifically, a self-confident person would coordinate his or her abilities in challenging situations (Thompson, 2002). Thus among the problem-solving skills one's confidence in his abilities seems to be the most important feature in association with relationship satisfaction. It may be that, without such a confidence people hardly feel personal control over situations and usually tend to avoid active problem-solving strategies. However, these possible expectations need to be supported by future studies.

Thus, being securely attached and having positive appraisals about one's own problem-solving resources were found to be critical factors associated with relationship satisfaction. However, after controlling for these factors, communication skills appeared to be an important associate of the relationship satisfaction. Consistent with this finding, it is suggested that increased level of negative communication impairs couples' ability to handle conflicts, and in turn, affects relationship satisfaction (Bradbury et al., 1998; Gottman, 1994; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). According to Mayer (2000), false assumptions which people hold cause and intensify the conflicts. Behaviors based on these false assumptions may increase the likelihood of being insistent on these responses, and may prevent partners from making true interpretations and functional alterations. Thus, even though they believe in their abilities to communicate, not knowing how to reach the satisfactory outcomes prevents them from resolving the conflicts which decreases the overall relationship satisfaction.

Overall, this study reveals importance of the early attachment schemas which are developed based on experiences with important others. Since individuals' expectations from their partners are mainly shaped by these schemas, which are particularly activated in conflictual situations (Kobak & Duemler, 1994), when working with dissatisfied couples, these schemas deserve attention. Therefore, in marriage and couple therapies, identifying partners' attachment styles and the expectations each individual holds would be useful in clarifying the basis of the conflict behaviors which are related to dissatisfaction. Furthermore, improvement of self-confidence in problem-solving abilities might be another necessary step in order to help partners achieve a satisfactory relationship. As individuals believe in their own resources to handle conflictual situations, they would engage in these situations and coordinate their abilities to come to a satisfactory solution. However, beyond individuals' basic schemas about close relationships and their beliefs about problem-solving abilities, this study underlines the importance of communication skills in relationship satisfaction. Thus, young partners should acquire some constructive communication skills in order to achieve a satisfactory relationship. Therefore, when marriage and couple therapists work with dissatisfied partners, they should identify and explore the factors which might impair effective communication, such as being insistent on one's

own thoughts without even listening to the partner's views, coming to conclusions before trying to alter the misunderstandings and so forth. In addition, though it was beyond the scope of the current study, working with both partners might help to understand the interactional pattern of conflicts. Furthermore, similar studies with non-student adult participants are strongly encouraged.

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