

Preliminary Findings Supporting a New Model of How Couples Maintain Excitement in Romantic Relationships

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In Study 1, 103 adults involved in an exciting romantic relationship described how they keep their relationship exciting. The responses provided the foundation for a new model of how couples keep their relationship exciting. The model includes exciting activities that are passionate, adventurous, playful, sexual, spontaneous, and romantic, along with three relationship-maintaining activities: communicating effectively, joint activities, and autonomy. In Study 2, 104 adults rated their relationship on the three relationship-maintenance variables, on exciting activities, on excitement, and on relationship satisfaction. The relationship-maintenance and exciting activities showed significant associations with both excitement and satisfaction, providing preliminary support for the model.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Good romantic relationships can improve all aspects of life, strengthening health, mind, and connections with others (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Conversely, when a relationship is not good, the resulting effects can be harmful, including feelings of disconnection and depression (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012). As social animals, humans are oriented toward developing strong and healthy relationships. Evidence from an evolutionary-economics perspective, among others, indicates that the more individuals put into or invest in their relationships, the more rewarding the relationship (Ackerman, Griskevicius,

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& Li, 2011; O'Leary et al., 2011). Therefore, good relationships can be considered a personal investment in a psychologically and physically healthy life.

The self-expansion model developed by Aron and Aron (1996) posits that the initial stages of a romantic relationship are associated with high levels of satisfaction as the partners engage in novel and arousing activities together which they consider exciting. When couples stop engaging in self-expansion activities, boredom can arise and result in less self-expansion and more relationship dissatisfaction.

The broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) posits that positive affect continues to grow long after the self-expansion activity has ended, resulting in relationship flourishing. Equally important, because the effects are ongoing and build upon each other, the positive affect and relationship enhancement gained may offer resilience, countering any negative events that occur and challenge the relationship in the future (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

Studies have found that various couple behaviors relating to excitement level are associated with positive relationships. For instance, Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, and Heyman (2000) found that engaging in novel and arousing activities was associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction. O'Leary, Acevedo, Aron, Huddy, and Mashek (2014) found that time spent in joint activities, engaging in novel and challenging activities, and engaging in sexual intercourse were all associated with higher levels of relationship quality. Graham (2008) found that momentary ratings of levels of activation (feeling alert, involved, active, and excited) were associated with relationship quality. A study of commonly perceived characteristics of romantic relationship found that one characteristic involved how exciting the relationship is (Malouff et al., 2012). The researchers used factor analysis to develop a scale of descriptive items to measure relationship excitement. The nine items included the terms *exciting*, *interesting*, and *boring* (reverse scored), as well as six items that could help explain how couples keep their relationship exciting: *adventurous*, *passionate*, *playful*, *romantic*, *sexual*, and *spontaneous*. A subsequent study found that providing couples with ideas about how to increase these same six types of activities led to significantly higher relationship satisfaction and positive affect than in a waiting list control group (Coulter & Malouff, 2013).

Boredom can have negative consequences for romantic relationships (Aron et al., 2000). Studies have found that boredom predicts relationship dissatisfaction and break-down (Aron & Aron, 1996; Harasymchuk & Fehr, 2013; Tsapelas, Aron & Orbuch, 2009). In prototype analysis of relational boredom, Harasymchuk and Fehr (2013) found that a main feature of boredom in a romantic relationship was loss of positive qualities once experienced in the relationship (e.g., lack of excitement, passion, fun, and surprises).

The main aim of the present study was to identify how individuals keep their romantic relationship exciting over a period of years. With that information, combined with the results of prior studies, we hoped to develop a model of factors that help keep romantic relationships exciting.

STUDY 1

Method

PARTICIPANTS

We recruited adults who had been in their current romantic relationship for at least 3 years and still found the relationship exciting. The participants were 103 adults (18 men and 85 females) ranging in age from 21 to 73 years ($M = 37.7$; $SD = 11.5$), recruited in Australia. The average age of male respondents was 40.8 ($SD = 14$) and for females it was 37.1 ($SD = 11$). Sixty-eight (66%) indicated they were married, 26 (25%) were unmarried but living together and 9 (8.7%) were unmarried and living apart. Ninety-eight (95.1%) indicated they were heterosexual, 3 (2.9%) identified their relationship as gay/lesbian, and 2 (1.9%) classified their relationship as “other”. The average length of relationships was 12.3 years and ranged from 3 to 44 years. Sixty-seven participants (65%) indicated they had achieved higher education degrees at bachelor or postgraduate level. Recruitment methods included notifying personal contacts about the study, posting study announcements on Facebook.com, and listing the study as a research-participation option for students in an introductory psychology course at a university.

MEASURES

The Exciting Scale of the Four-Factor Romantic Relationships Scales (FFRR; Malouff et al., 2012) contains nine adjectives that could describe a relationship, including three that measure level of excitement, and six that measure activities that contribute to excitement, such as being spontaneous. The nine items constituted a single factor in prior studies (Malouff et al., 2012). Respondents used a 7-point Likert scale with the response options: 1 = disagree strongly, 2 = moderately disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = moderately agree, 7 = agree strongly. Cronbach's alpha in prior studies ranged from .91 to .96; validity findings include significant associations with relationship satisfaction and significant increases as a result of an intervention aimed at increasing excitement (Coulter & Malouff, 2013; Malouff et al., 2012). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .84.

PROCEDURE

Respondents anonymously completed an online questionnaire that said it was intended for individuals in a “romantic relationship (married or not)” that had lasted “for at least three years” and whose relationship “remains exciting to you.” They answered the following questions: How many years ago did your current romantic relationship start?” “What do you and your partner do that keeps the relationship exciting for you?” The respondents also completed a demographics section that asked for their age, gender, highest level of education achieved, marital status and relationship type. Finally, the participants completed the Exciting Scale.

Results

We coded responses into categories. As it turned out, six of the original Exciting Scale categories of activities constituted logical categories of joint exciting activities mentioned by the participants: being adventurous, playful, passionate, romantic, sexual, and spontaneous. We added three more categories for comments that suggested different categories: communicating effectively with each other, activities together, and autonomous functioning. Some items could be coded in more than one category, but one of us placed them in the category they fit best. Then another one of us checked the coding decisions. We settled all differences by agreement. All categories had at least seven responses that we classified as relevant to the category. See below typical responses in two groupings: (1) exciting activities and (2) relationship-maintenance activities.

The exciting activities included being:

- **Adventurous:** “We’re adventurous, so we go rock climbing, bush walking, fishing.” “We always try to go new places and do new activities together.” “Encourage each other to do things outside our comfort zone.”
- **Passionate:** “We are still spontaneously passionate and romantic with each other.” “Love each other very deeply.” “I take the time to observe my partner from a distance, especially when at a social function – that can turn me on!”
- **Playful:** “We joke with each other, not afraid to have fun and act silly.” “My partner makes me laugh with silly dances etc.” “We still act silly with each other, e.g. tickle each other, surprise each other and do stupid things to make each other laugh.”
- **Romantic:** “We have specific and romantic date nights.” “Make the home a place where romance can be wonderful, e.g., fireplace, spa, etc.” “Give each other cards/gifts/flowers at appropriate times (thoughtful ones).”

- **Sexual:** “Sexually, our relationship is exciting and frequent, researching and trying new things, e.g. toys, positions etc.” “Different types of sex and explore sex together especially fantasies and taboos.” “We have regular sex, send naughty sms and mms.”
- **Spontaneous:** “We do things on the spur of the moment.” “Surprise each other with gifts, getaways, cooked meals etc.” “Random acts of kindness.”

The relationship-maintenance activities included:

- **Good Communicating:** “We can and do talk about anything and everything.” “Very honest, open and forward with information.” “Complement [compliment] each other regularly.”
- **Shared Activities:** “We spend time together doing things we both enjoy.” “Holiday together, have hobbies together.” “Make time for each other.”
- **Autonomous Functioning:** “We also have separate interests and activities that we do without each other so we have things to talk about.” “Respect each other’s space when necessary.” “We allow each other to do activity [activities] and have our own friends.”

To evaluate how exciting the relationships were for participants, we calculated the mean sample score on the Exciting Scale, after recoding responses to the boring item. The mean total excitement scale item score for the sample was 5.94 ($SD = 0.96$), near the maximum possible score of 6.

STUDY 2

The Study 1 results pointed to three constructs not previously identified as contributing to how exciting romantic relationships are: good communication, joint activities (including non-exciting ones), and autonomy (the option of separate activities). The main aim of Study 2 was to examine whether these three factors are statistically associated with higher levels of romantic-relationship excitement and relationship satisfaction. A second aim was to determine whether a group of six types of exciting relationship behaviors would be associated with excitement level and level of relationship excitement, as found in prior studies. These six types of behaviors involve being adventurous, passionate, playful, romantic, sexual, and spontaneous.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

We recruited participants who had been in a romantic relationship for at least three years. We used Facebook contacts different from those used to recruit Study 1 participants. One hundred and four individuals entered the study, including 89 women and 15 men. Their mean age was 32.7, $SD = 9.4$. On average, their romantic relationship started 9.8 years ago ($SD = 7.2$). All but one person had a heterosexual relationship; 62 were married, 25 were living together unmarried, and 17 were living apart unmarried.

MEASURES

Excitement Experienced Scale. This scale was made up of three items on the Romantic Relationship Exciting Scale used in Study 1 (Malouff et al., 2012): *exciting*, *interesting*, and *boring* (reverse scored). The options range from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of excitement in the relationship.

Exciting Activities Scale. This scale included the remaining six items from the Four-Factor Romantic Relationship Exciting Scale. The scale asks about the extent to which a romantic relationship included activities that could help make the relationship exciting (being *adventurous*, *passionate*, *playful*, *romantic*, *sexual*, and *spontaneous*). The response options range from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree. Higher scores indicate more agreement that the activities occur in the relationship.

Relationship Assessment Scale. This scale (Hendrick, 1988) uses seven items to assess relationship satisfaction, e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" Response options vary from item to item, but each item has options numbered from 1 to 5. Higher total scores indicate more satisfaction. In a prior study by Vaughn & Matyastik Baier (1999), the scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .86. In the present study the scale had an alpha of .79. Evidence of validity from prior studies includes associations between scores on the scale and scores on other measures of relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998; Vaughn & Matyastik Baier, 1999).

Measures of Good Communication, Joint Activities, and Autonomy. Although there are existing measures of intra-couple communication, we wanted to create items to match as closely as possible the communication findings of Study 1. Also, we wanted to measure the joint activities, autonomy, and good communication with measures of similar length to make it easier to compare fairly the three underlying constructs. For each of these constructs we created a measure using three items that relate closely to statements made by participants in Study 1. The items for Good Communication were *My partner and I: (1) talk a great deal with each other, (2) discuss ev-*

TABLE 1 Means and Correlations of Study 2 Variables, With Cronbach's Alpha on Diagonal (N = 103)

Scale	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Good communication	18.4 (3.4)	.86					
2. Joint activities	13.2 (3.6)	.66	.82				
3. Autonomy allowed	18.0 (2.3)	.57	.52	.51			
4. Exciting activities	31.5 (7.1)	.53	.63	.47	.87		
5. Excitement experienced	16.9 (3.5)	.56	.63	.49	.85	.72	
6. Relationship satisfaction	32.1 (4.4)	.71	.63	.38	.67	.72	.85

Note. All correlations significant at $p < .001$ one tailed. Scores are the sum of all items, including any reverse-scored items.

everything, and (3) communicate honestly. For Joint Activities the items were *My partner and I: (1) spend a great deal of time doing things together, (2) engage in many activities together, and (3) make time for each other.* For Autonomy allowed the items were *My partner and I: (1) engage in many separate activities, (2) give each other space when necessary, and (3) pursue individual interests.* Response options range from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Higher total scores indicate more of the construct.

PROCEDURE

Participants anonymously completed all the study measures online and also provided demographic information. The research questionnaire indicated to participants that it was intended for individuals in a “romantic relationship (married or not)” that had lasted “for at least three years.”

Results

Table 1 shows the means for the study variables and their intercorrelations. Supporting the research hypotheses, scores on all model variables were significantly associated with scores on the measure of relationship excitement level and on the measure of relationship satisfaction level.

DISCUSSION

The Study 1 participants provided responses to a question about what they did to keep their romantic relationship exciting. We coded the responses into nine categories, which can be categorized as (1) good overall relationship-maintenance activities (good communicating shared activities, and autonomy) and (2) exciting activities (adventurous, passionate, playful, romantic, sexual, and spontaneous activities).

The findings about exciting activities are consistent with prior findings that (1) show an excitement factor in romantic relationships that includes activities that are adventurous, passionate, playful, romantic, sexual, and spontaneous activities (Malouff et al., 2012); (2) show that an intervention that suggested adventurous, passionate, playful, romantic, sexual, and spontaneous activities led to significant improvements in how exciting their relationships were (Coulter & Malouff, 2013); (3) show that couples that engage in novel and arousing activities view their relationship more positively (Aron & Aron, 1996).

The findings about communication, joint activities, and autonomy being associated with excitement were new with regard to maintaining excitement, although prior studies had found that good communication and joint activities were associated with relationship quality overall (Markman, 1981; Oladeji, 2013; O'Leary et al., 2014). To further assess the importance of these three variables, we completed Study 2, which used correlational analyses to find that all three variables were significantly associated with both excitement level and relationship satisfaction.

Study 2 also produced evidence, confirming findings of prior studies, that a group of relationship activities (being adventurous, passionate, playful, romantic, sexual, and spontaneous) was associated with excitement level and relationship satisfaction. This finding is consistent with elements of self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 2011) and the broaden-and-build theory (Frederickson, 2012) in that the exciting joint activities tend to expand and broaden a person.

The weakest correlate with excitement level and satisfaction was autonomy. It might be that this variable is important only for some couples or individuals. It could be that in most couples autonomy helps maintain a good general relationship and in some it is the result of a poor general relationship. The measure of the variable had low internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .51$), suggesting that the measure may have measured more than one concept. That could be another reason for the lower correlations involving the measure.

The significant association between exciting activities and excitement level was consistent with prior findings that those constructs are so closely connected that they form a single factor in a factor analysis and can be included in a single measure with high internal consistency (Coulter & Malouff, 2013; Malouff et al., 2012).

The mean Exciting Scale item score for participants in Study 1, where we sought couples in exciting relationships, was 5.94 ($SD = 0.96$). That is much higher than (a) the item mean of 2.95 ($SD = 0.73$) for a sample of 202 individuals who wanted to increase relationship excitement in an earlier study (Coulter & Malouff, 2013), (b) the item means of about 5.0 (SD s about 1.1) in three samples of a total of hundreds of ordinary individuals in a study of characteristics of romantic relationship (Malouff et al., 2012), and

(c) the item means in Study 2 (about 5, with *SD* about 2), for which we recruited couples who had been in a relationship for at least three years. These comparisons support the view that the individuals in Study 1 had high levels of excitement in their relationships. The comparisons also provide additional validity support for the Exciting Scale of the FFRR Scales.

Limitations

The study methods had several limitations. First, the studies included only one romantic partner, not couples. Future similar research may benefit from targeting couples in an exciting relationship. Second, the studies used self-report data, which can be influenced by response biases, including social desirability responding (McDonald, 2008). However, the need for anonymity and our desire to obtain a broad sample meant that a self-report questionnaire with anonymous responding was the best option. Third, the results were not based on experimental methods, so they cannot support causal conclusions. Fourth, some the Study 2 measures did not have prior evidence of validity. Fifth, the participants were mostly Australian women, usually responding about a relationship with a man. It is unclear whether the results generalize to men as respondents or to romantic relationships other than heterosexual. Also, it is unclear whether the results generalize to cultures that are much different from that of Australia.

Clinical Implications for Couples and Family Therapy

The current findings, although preliminary, might have potential for practical use, whenever maintaining or increasing relationship excitement is part of counseling or training couples. For instance, couples training could include assessment and promotion of relevant relationship-maintenance behaviors, as well as of excitement-focused behaviors. Couples counseling and marriage enrichment training already often include communication training (Epstein & Jackson, 1978; Markman et al., 2001), which is one of the relationship-maintenance variables we found related to excitement and relationship satisfaction.

Recommendations for Future Research on the Model

The new model, developed on the basis of current findings in conjunction with past findings, can help guide further research. Future research might test the model with samples that include a substantial number of men and with samples in countries other than Australia. Using couples for the research, as did Malouff et al. (2012) in one study relating to romantic excitement,

would provide opportunities to examine the model with observer ratings in addition to self-report, to examine the dyads as units, and to compare the results for men and women. Future studies could also examine the effects of counseling or training couples in the elements of the model.

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