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Demand-Withdraw, Couple Satisfaction And Relationship Duration

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Abstract

The demand-withdraw interaction pattern is a pattern of conflict in which one-spouse pressures or blames while the other avoids or withdraws. Research has consistently shown that demand-withdraw behaviours are associated with couple dissatisfaction. However, longitudinal associations between the two constructs are less robust. Moreover, existing research has been overwhelmingly conducted with relatively young couples, overlooking the differences that may exist between young and well-established marriages. The present study examined concurrent and longitudinal association between demand-withdraw pattern and couple dissatisfaction in a sample of 176 couples with a wide range of relationship duration (1 to 55 years). Couples provided data on two occasions (4-month interval). Cross-lagged panel models were used to examine: a) associations between couple dissatisfaction and demand-withdraw, specifically testing for the direction of effects b) whether these relations were moderated by relationship duration (four groups were formed based on relationship length: young; stable young; stable mature; old). Results demonstrated that: a) the demand-withdraw pattern and couple dissatisfaction were associated both concurrently and longitudinally and couple dissatisfaction was a predictor of the demand-withdraw pattern for all participants, with the only exception of the young women group; b) relationship duration moderated the association between demand-withdraw and dissatisfaction only for women. Findings suggest that demand-withdraw may have the role of “detector” of couple distress, especially in older couples. Moreover, the moderating role of relationship duration suggests that different couples may enact demand-withdraw in different ways.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Demand-withdraw interaction pattern and couple dissatisfaction: precursor or consequence?

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There is clear evidence that demand-withdraw interaction pattern, a pattern in which one partner seeks change and discussion of a problem, while the other avoids the conflict [1], is concurrently associated with couple dissatisfaction [e.g., 2; 3]. What is less clear is the longitudinal association between demand-withdraw and dissatisfaction, with studies documenting inconsistent results. Most studies, in fact, found that demand-withdraw predicts declines in couple satisfaction [e.g., 4], but other studies found the opposite pattern, with wives becoming more satisfied over time if they engage in a pattern in which they withdraw while their husbands demand [5; 6]. Moreover other studies did not find a connection between demand-withdraw and couple satisfaction over time [6; 7]. From a theoretical point of view, different associations can be hypothesized between the two constructs: According to the emergent distress model [8], demand-withdraw, as a negative form of conflict communication associated with several negative consequences [9], predicts declines in couple satisfaction over time, while another perspective, the accommodation model [10], asserts that when demand-withdraw is indicative of an accommodation process, which helps partners to successfully solve their problems, it can even predict increases in couple satisfaction over time. Another plausible alternative, however, views dissatisfaction not just as a consequence, but as a precursor of demand-withdraw [11], in which demanding and withdrawing behaviors could be coping-like strategies triggered by the distress caused by the problem eliciting the conflict and by the conflict situation itself. If distress can engender a demand-withdraw pattern in couples, then couple dissatisfaction itself can be a precursor of demand-withdraw over time. Research has shown, in fact, that dissatisfied couples present less adequate conflict styles than satisfied couples [12]. Given these contrasting view and findings, it is important to examine the longitudinal association between demand-withdraw and couple satisfaction and, specifically, to test the direction of effects.

1.2. Demand withdraw interaction pattern and relationship duration

The complex association between demand-withdraw and satisfaction, moreover, could be better understood within a contextual framework of analysis, which can take into account the fact that demand-withdraw patterns may hold different meanings, as well as be differently linked to couple dissatisfaction, in different types of couples. Specifically, the length of couples' relationship can be an important moderator of such an association, since young and mature couples have been found to differ in the association between couple processes and relationship wellbeing [e.g., 13]. Specifically, research has shown that relationship duration is related to both changes in satisfaction [e.g., 14] and in communication behaviors, such as negativity [8] and unresponsive listening [15]. It is plausible to speculate, then, that the impact of demand-withdraw may depend on how long couples have been together. Although some research has controlled for relationship duration when studying the impact of demand-withdraw on couple satisfaction [16], no research has compared couples of different relationship length.

To extend the knowledge on the role of demand- withdraw of couple satisfaction, the present study aimed at: a) analysing the link between demand-withdraw and couple dissatisfaction over time, specifically testing for the direction of effects; and b) analyzing whether and how relationship duration may moderate the association between demand-withdraw and couple dissatisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 176 community couples who were involved in a longitudinal study on the correlates of couple satisfaction. Couples completed a self-report questionnaire and were contacted for a second data collection 4 months later. Partners were between 17 and 85 years of age: Men were slightly older ($M = 45$, $SD = 15$) than women ($M = 42$, $SD = 14$). Couples had a wide range of relationship duration, from 1 to 55 years ($M = 19$, $SD = 13$) and 69% of them were married. They took part in the research voluntarily and gave informed consent. Anonymity and data confidentiality were guaranteed.

2.2. Measures

Demand-withdraw interaction pattern. The Communication Pattern Questionnaire [17] was used to measure the demand-withdraw pattern. The CPQ is a 35-item questionnaire assessing behavior during three stages of problem

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