Applying the ideal standards model to unmet expectations and satisfaction in friendship

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ABSTRACT

The present study applies the ideal standards model (ISM) to explore the role of ideal friendship standards on friendship satisfaction in a specific same-sex friendship and responses to unmet expectations in friendships in general. Participants ($N = 284$) completed an online survey wherein they reported their expectations on six dimensions of friendship, their friendship satisfaction for a close same-sex friendship, and their response to unmet standards in friendship. The influence of participants' self-evaluations and ideal standards on friendship satisfaction was mediated by the discrepancy between participants' close friend and participants' ideal standards. The flexibility of standards failed to explain variance in satisfaction and higher ideal standards were negatively associated with satisfaction. However, the flexibility of standards was negatively associated with direct communication, avoidance, and revenge in response to unmet expectations in friendships, and positively related to loyalty and acceptance. The present investigation clarifies how friendship ideals influence the evaluation of friendship and responses to unmet expectations.

Introduction

Friends are important sources of support, company, trust, and fun (Fehr, 1996). Individuals' expectations about how friends ought to behave and ought to be influence every stage of relationship development from initiation to dissolution (Clark & Ayers, 1993; La Gaipa, 1987; Wiseman, 1986). Children who meet the friendship expectations of their peers are more often selected as friends by other children (Bigelow & La Gaipa, 1980), and young adults who meet or exceed friendship maintenance expectations have more satisfying relationships (Hall, Larson, & Watts, 2011). The ideal standards of friendship represent the mutual dependence and reciprocity inherent to the very nature of friendship (Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Wright, 2006). These standards define what individuals desire, value, and seek in friendships (Hall, 2011).

The ideal standards model (ISM) was developed to explain the influence of ideal standards in romantic relationships (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). Individuals have a cognitive conception of what an ideal partner and ideal relationships ought to be like (Fletcher et al., 1999), and use that ideal standard to evaluate what they themselves bring to the relationship (i.e., self-evaluation)

and the degree to which a partner meets those standards (Fletcher & Simpson, 2001). Noting that the content dimensions of the ideal standards of friendship had not yet been established, Hall et al. (2011) applied the ISM to same-sex friendships using standards of friendship relationship maintenance. Although they found support for ISM-derived hypotheses, Hall et al. (2011) noted that this was an imperfect application of the ISM. Hall (2012) later conducted a comprehensive factor analysis, which recommended a six factor structure of friendship standards. To integrate past research on the ISM and same-sex friendship expectations, the present investigation will test the ISM using this six factor model.

In addition, this project will extend the application of the ISM by exploring how individuals respond to and communicate with friends who fail to live up to their standards. Drawing from past work on responses to unmet standards in romantic relationships (Baucom et al., 1996; Rusbult, Morrow, & Johnson, 1987) and friendships (Felmlee, 1999; Johnson, 2005) the present manuscript will explore the role of ideal friendship standards on four responses to unmet expectations: voice/direct, loyalty/acceptance, neglect/avoid, and revenge. In doing so, this project directly applies the ISM to same-sex friendship using empirically derived dimensions of expectations, and extends past work on friendship maintenance and dissolution by identifying how individuals respond to unmet expectations in their same-sex friendships. To begin, the four primary components of the ISM will be discussed

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and the dimensions of friendship expectations introduced. Then, how friends respond to unmet standards will be introduced in relation to the ISM and the exit–voice–loyalty–neglect model (Rusbult et al., 1987).

The ideal standards model

There are four important characteristics of the ISM: ideal standards, self-evaluation, flexibility of standards, and partner discrepancy (Fletcher & Simpson, 2001). Ideal standards are cognitive representations of the ideal relationship and ideal relationship partner (Fletcher et al., 1999). Individuals may never have an ideal friend or romantic partner, but individuals' standards nonetheless influence evaluations of relationships (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Hall et al., 2011). There are three ideal standards for romantic relationships: warmth-trustworthiness, status-resources, and vitality-attractiveness (Fletcher et al., 1999). Noting the poor fit of these dimensions to friendship, Hall (2012) analyzed the factor structure of ideal standards of same-sex friendship, drawing from known inventories (e.g., La Gaipa, 1987) and single-item measures (Argyle & Henderson, 1984). Six content dimensions representing the ideal same-sex friend were identified: symmetrical reciprocity, communion, enjoyment, instrumental aid, similarity, and agency. Each represents desired attributes of the ideal friend and valued aspects of an ideal friendship. Symmetrical reciprocity included expectations of commitment, trust, loyalty, and genuineness in friendship. Communion expectations focused on self-disclosure given and received, and expectations of intimacy in friendship. Enjoyment measured the having fun, a sense of humor, and the pleasure of friendship. Instrumental aid were expectations of help, assistance, and support for tasks and duties from friends. Expectations of similarity measured sharing similar attitudes, behaviors, and hobbies with friends. Finally, agency expectations included wanting a friend that is wealthy, attractive, athletic, and well connected.

The second ISM construct is self-evaluation, which occurs when these content dimensions are applied to oneself (Campbell et al., 2001). Once in a relationship, a person who has more to offer tends to evaluate transgressions or failings of a romantic partner more harshly (Campbell et al., 2001). The third construct is the flexibility of standards. The flexibility of standards is the degree to which a relational partner can fall below one's ideal and still be acceptable (Campbell et al., 2001). Individuals with more flexible standards are more willing to maintain relationships with less-than-ideal partners. Finally, the discrepancy between one's ideal standards and a relationship partner's characteristics is negatively associated with satisfaction in romantic relationships (Campbell et al., 2001) and friendships (Hall et al., 2011). Simply put, individuals are more satisfied when a relationship partner approximates the ideal partner.

The ISM predicts that the level of ideal standards is positively related to satisfaction in existing relationships because individuals use standards to select romantic partners (Fletcher et al., 1999). Although it is consistent with the ISM to predict a negative indirect relationship between ideal standards and satisfaction through diminished flexibility, the direct relationship predicted by the ISM between the two concepts in romantic relationships might not apply to friendships. It is consistent with the ISM that high standards might indirectly decrease satisfaction through decreased flexibility because less flexibility should be associated with less satisfaction (Campbell et al., 2001). That is, individuals with relaxed standards are more satisfied, while inflexible individuals are less satisfied. However, in contrast with the ISM, research on friendship expectations in children (Clark & Ayers, 1993; Felmlee, 1999) and young adults (Felmlee, Sweet, & Sinclair, 2012) suggests that high standards negatively impact satisfaction, both directly and indirectly because those with exceedingly high standards may

experience more disappointment and dissatisfaction because few individuals can live up to those standards (Flannagan, Marsh, & Fuhrman, 2005). This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1a. Higher ideal standards will be negatively related to relationship satisfaction.

H1b. Higher ideal standards will be negatively related to flexibility of standards.

H2. Flexibility will be positively related to relationship satisfaction.

Friendship standards influence individuals' evaluations of friends. Higher ideal standards result in more stringent judgments of friends, or the perception of a greater discrepancy between one's friends and one's expectations. Higher friendship standards in adolescents can lead to unmet expectations when evaluating friends' behaviors (Clark & Ayers, 1993), and decreasing fulfillment of expectations in young adults (Hall et al., 2011). The ISM suggests failure to meet standards leads to disengagement and decreased satisfaction (Fletcher & Simpson, 2001). Alternatively, when friends exceed expectations, individuals are more satisfied (Hall et al., 2011). In contrast, when an individual is very flexible in their standards of friendship, they tolerate friends who do are discrepant from the ideal. Taken together, both a direct relationship and an indirect relationship between ideal standards and satisfaction through friend discrepancy are expected:

H3a. Higher ideal standards will be positively related to friendship discrepancy.

H3b. Flexibility will be negatively related to friendship discrepancy.

H3c. Greater friendship discrepancies will be negatively related to satisfaction.

Individuals who rate their own characteristics more positively have less flexibility in their standards (Campbell et al., 2001). For example, highly attractive individuals are less flexible about the attractiveness of their romantic partners. Similarly, individuals who actively maintain friendships expect that good friends should reciprocate (Oswald, Clark, & Kelly, 2004). As a consequence, self-rated characteristics decrease the flexibility of standards and increase the perceived discrepancy between actual friends and the ideal friend. In the case of warmth-trustworthiness, self-evaluated characteristics also directly impact romantic relationship quality (Campbell et al., 2001). That is, individuals who are more warm and trustworthy have higher quality romantic relationships. Additionally, Campbell et al. proposed and found support for a mediation model: the relationship between self-perception and relationship quality was mediated by partner discrepancy. Individuals who rated themselves highly were more likely to have partners matching their ideal. In turn, this affected relationship satisfaction, wherein partners who more closely approximated ideal standards were more satisfying. A hypothesized path model (Fig. 1) can be derived from these hypotheses:

H4a. Higher self-evaluations will be negatively related to flexibility.

H4b. Higher self-evaluations will be positively related to discrepancy.

H4c. Higher self-evaluations will be positively related to satisfaction.

Unmet standards

Individuals seek out and maintain relationships that consistently meet or exceed friendship expectations because those