



Multiple facets of women's relational orientation and their role in the relationship formation process [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Over three decades of theory and research has sought to highlight the notion of relational orientation as central to women's well-being. While researchers have extensively examined the negative outcomes of women's relational orientation, relations with positive outcomes has gone little explored and largely assumed as present. The purpose of the current study is to examine social competence and satisfaction associated with women's relational orientation. Previously unacquainted female participants ($N = 160$) completed measures of relational orientation, a dyadic interaction task, and were then asked to evaluate the quality of the interaction. Results supported a mitigation (versus trade-off) model in which facets of women's relational orientation are differentially related to relationship competence and satisfaction. Structural equation modelling was used to examine overall fit along with specific actor and partner effects. Specific results are interpreted within the mitigation model of relational orientation, contributing to our understanding of women's well-being.

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1. Introduction

Crossing multiple theoretical perspectives, biological (e.g., Taylor et al., 2000) and social (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997), there has been a shared interest in the notion that women's greater orientation to close relationships compared to men is central to understanding women's well-being. Historically, women's relational orientation has been viewed as a liability contributing to lower self-esteem, greater empathetic distress, and depression (Smith & Rose, 2011). Later investigators developed a number of gender-linked measures to better understand these liabilities, while at the same time highlighting the positive outcomes associated with social competencies and satisfying close relationships. Investigators have attempted to reconcile this apparent paradox by proposing a trade-off model, wherein women's relational orientation is viewed simultaneously as a benefit and a liability (Rudolph & Conley, 2005). Research results have been mixed. More recently, Hennig and Walker (2008) found evidence to support a multifaceted conceptualization of relational orientation (the

mitigation model), which better explained previous inconsistencies in the literature.

There is now a clear set of findings in which certain facets of relational orientation arise as predictors of negative outcomes especially for women; however studies examining relations with interpersonal capacities and positive outcomes are sparse. The current study seeks to fill this gap using an experimental and interpersonal analytic design (Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model; Ledermann & Macho, 2009) examining relational orientation within a model of relationship formation. Results will further our understanding of women's relational orientation and well-being.

1.1. Women's relational orientation: trade-off and mitigation models

As mentioned, historically women's greater relational orientation was viewed as inherently pathological (see Caplan, 1984 for a review) and as a vulnerability for greater emotional distress and depression (McBride, Bacchiochi, & Bagby, 2005). Indeed, it is difficult to find a better predictor for some forms of psychopathology than gender (Holden, 2005). Investigators have sought to better understand the link between gender and negative outcomes by proposing a variety of gender-linked constructs, such as: self-sacrificial care, self-silencing (Jack & Dill, 1992), and social evaluative concerns (Rudolph & Conley, 2005).

Compared to earlier historical accounts, however, these newer models resituated women's "dependency" within a rapidly

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expanding literature highlighting women's interpersonal competence and relational connectedness (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Proposed paradoxically, possession of a relational orientation left one both at risk for increased negative outcomes, but also in possession of capacities fostering close relationships, typically thought of as buffering negative outcomes. Rudolph and Conley (2005) were among the first to empirically examine the cost-benefit trade-off model. Gender predicted relational orientation which was simultaneously predictive of costs (depressive symptoms) and benefits (social competence).

Elsewhere in the literature, however, results were less clear. Cross, Bacon, and Morris (2000) developed a relational orientation measure that was associated with positive but not negative outcomes. Further, one of the earliest relational measures, silencing the self and its associated silencing-the-self theory that proposed a model of depression among women (Jack & Dill, 1992), repeatedly failed to find evidence of sex-differences (e.g., Whiffen, Foot, & Thompson, 2007).

More recently, Hennig and Walker (2008) undertook a structural analysis of existing measures, finding a great deal of between-measure item overlap and within-measure heterogeneity. Results indicated three distinct facets (or clusters of items), reconstituted as separate subscales here termed: interdependent self, sacrificial self, and silencing self. The three facets were found to have differential relationships with positive and negative outcomes.

The most adaptive (interdependent self) was strongly associated with social benefits, but not with costs (confirming Cross et al., 2000). The most maladaptive (silencing self) was strongly associated with costs, but not with benefits. The third (sacrificial self) represents a middle-point, reflective of the trade-off model in predicting both social benefits and emotional costs (Hennig & Walker, 2008). Gender differences were only found in interdependent and sacrificial self and not silencing self. The authors proposed a mitigation model in which the trade-off model could be encompassed. Importantly, the three facets are not to be understood as strictly categorical, but rather as meaningful markers along a benefit-cost continuum (for a fuller description see Hennig & Walker, 2008). The current study seeks to examine the three relational orientation facets within an established model of relationship formation.

1.2. A model of relational orientation and relationship formation

Enduring relationships emerge from a series of relationally satisfying interactions (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Relational satisfaction is an outcome of an interpersonal process involving various social competence skills, including self-disclosure and sensitive/responsive reactions (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Self-disclosure consists of sharing information about oneself with a partner. Sensitive and responsive reactions involve being able to detect a partner's need and responding in a caring, understanding, and supportive manner. Perception of the partner's responsiveness is the most important element in an interaction (Reis & Shaver, 1988), with a responsive reaction leading to an increase in positive affect for the discloser and the promotion of further self-disclosure (Anderson, Carson, Darchuk, & Keefe, 2004; Laurenceau et al., 1998). Both self-disclosure and responsiveness is associated with feelings of closeness, liking, and relationship satisfaction (Collins & Miller, 1994).

Cross et al. (2000) expanded on this model of relationship formation by examining the role of women's relational orientation. Results revealed that women's relational orientation affected levels of relationship satisfaction indirectly through social competence skills (self-disclosure and responsiveness; see Fig. 1). The model proposes that a woman's relational orientation will affect her own self-disclosure (path a) and her perception of her partner's

responsiveness (path b), which in turn will affect her satisfaction with the interaction (path c and d, respectively). Women's relational orientation is also proposed to affect her partner's overall satisfaction through both direct (path f) and indirect pathways. The indirect pathways exist through the actor's self-disclosure to her partner's perception of her responsiveness (path e). The model also proposes an interrelationship among perceiving one's partner as being responsive and self-disclosing (path g).

Due to the interpersonal nature of relationships, women's relational orientation influences relationship satisfaction both at the individual and dyadic levels. At an individual level, relational orientation can be expected to drive perceptions of the interaction in a biased fashion, partially independent of the partner's actual behaviours in the interaction. Research has shown interdependent self is associated with positive evaluations of relationships (Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002), which is consistent with the finding that interdependent self is positively related to self-disclosure and perceiving one's partner as responsive, partially independent of the partner's behavior (Cross et al., 2000). Alternatively, it can be expected that a more negative bias may result in perceiving others as critical. As a result, they would disclose less about themselves and experience less satisfaction from the exchange, partially independent of the partner's actual behaviours.

At the dyadic (partner) level, a person's relational orientation can be expected to drive their own level of self-disclosure which in turn is perceived as responsive/nonresponsive and affects the level of relationship satisfaction experienced by their partner. Interdependent self has been shown to lead to more self-disclosure which is in turn perceived as responsive by the partner and leads them to feel satisfied (Cross et al., 2000).

The model suggests that women's relational orientation indirectly influences the quality of interpersonal relationships (Cross et al., 2000). Research on this model to date, however has been limited to one facet of relational orientation, interdependent self. In an attempt to further validate the mitigation model and understand the role of women's relational orientation within relationships, it is important to understand how the multiple facets of relational orientation lead to positive outcomes such as social competence skills and relationship satisfaction.

1.3. The current study

As previously noted, research examining the three facets of relational orientation is limited particularly in relation to predicting social benefits. The current study examined the role of the various facets of relational orientation on the relationship formation process. Due to many potential confounds in naturally developing relationships, such as similarity biases (Verbrugge, 1977), the current study examined the relationship formation process within a controlled experimental setting. Previously unacquainted partners engaged in an interaction task known to generate feelings of closeness (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Valone, & Bator, 1997). The task provided opportunities for both self-disclosure and responsiveness leading to relationship satisfaction allowing for the modeling of important relational processes and minimization of confounds.

Interpersonal self, silencing self, and sacrificial self were examined in Cross et al.'s (2000) model of relational orientation and relationship formation. According to the mitigation model, it was expected that these facets will lead to different relationship outcomes. Specifically, it was hypothesized that (H1) interdependent self will be predictive of relationship satisfaction through its positive association with social competence skills (replicated from Cross et al., 2000), (H2) silencing self will not be predictive of relationship satisfaction, nor associated with social competence skills, and (H3) sacrificial self will be predictive of relationship satisfaction through its positive association with social competence skills.

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