

Abstract

Topic: Individual and Relational Factors Related to Relationship Quality in Heterosexual Couples

Introduction

Intimate relationship quality is associated with the characteristics of individual partners as well as with processes taking place between them. Because a couple consists of two interdependent individuals, its determinants should be studied from the perspective of both partners. The role of sensory processing sensitivity in romantic relationships, however, remains poorly understood. The theoretical assumption of the study is that relationship quality is associated with individual and relational factors, and that these associations may operate through other variables or be modified by them. The findings have applied value and provide a theoretical and empirical basis useful for designing supportive and therapeutic interventions for couples.

Aim

The main aim of the study is an empirical analysis of the individual and relational determinants of intimate relationship quality in heterosexual couples from a dyadic perspective. The specific aims include analysing the associations of personality traits, attachment style, sensory processing sensitivity, partner personality similarity, and love components (intimacy, passion, commitment) with relationship quality, as well as their predictive value. They also include testing the role of intimacy as a mediator between attachment style and relationship quality, and the roles of sensory processing sensitivity and relationship phase as moderators of the analysed associations, with sex treated as a distinguishing variable within dyads.

Method

The study had a cross-sectional design and was conducted online via the Polish nationwide research panel Ariadna in January and August 2023. It included 163 heterosexual couples ($N = 326$) who had been in a relationship for at least six months. Women were aged 18 to 74 years ($M = 41.42$; $SD = 12.50$) and men 21 to 79 years ($M = 44.11$; $SD = 12.35$). Relationship duration ranged from 0.67 to 56 years ($M = 16.43$; $SD = 12.82$). Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The following tools were used: the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) in the Polish adaptation by Sorokowska et al. (2014), the Attachment Styles Questionnaire (KSP; Plopa, 2008), the Highly Sensitive Person Scale (HSPS; Aron & Aron, 1997) in the Polish adaptation by Bobrowska and Liberska (2023), and the Intimacy–Passion–Commitment Questionnaire (INZ; Wojciszke, 1995, 2005). Relationship quality, understood as the level of dyadic adjustment, was measured with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) in the Polish adaptation by Cieślak (1989). Partner personality similarity was calculated as the absolute difference between partners' TIPI scores. The measurement tools used showed satisfactory reliability. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Psychology, Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz (No. 4/16.11.2021).

Hypotheses were tested in two stages: correlational analyses, followed by structural equation modelling using the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), which allows actor and partner effects to be estimated simultaneously. An attempt to identify relationship phases was made using Two-Step Cluster Analysis based on the intensity of the love components.

Results

Correlational analyses showed that relationship quality was significantly associated with both individual and relational factors. Among personality traits, the strongest associations were found for agreeableness and conscientiousness. Secure attachment was positively associated with relationship quality, whereas avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment were negatively associated with it. Intimacy, passion, and commitment were all positively associated with relationship quality. Overall sensory processing sensitivity was not significantly associated with relationship quality, but its components differed in direction: depth of processing was associated with it positively, and ease of excitation negatively. Partner personality similarity was significantly associated with relationship quality only for conscientiousness (in women and men) and emotional stability (in men). The more similar partners were in conscientiousness, the higher the relationship quality. For emotional stability, the association had the opposite direction: higher relationship quality co-occurred with a greater difference between partners.

Structural equation modelling (APIM) indicated the predictive value of agreeableness (actor effect in women), conscientiousness (actor effect in men), and secure and avoidant attachment, with actor effects stronger than partner effects. Depth of processing and ease of excitation predicted relationship quality only in women (actor effects). Among the love components, only intimacy was a significant predictor. It also functioned as a mediator between attachment style and relationship quality: fully for women's secure attachment and partially in the remaining analysed paths. For women's avoidant attachment, the mediator was their partners' intimacy. Men's sensory processing sensitivity moderated the associations between attachment style and relationship quality: higher sensitivity weakened the strength of these associations for secure attachment (partner effect) and anxious-ambivalent attachment (actor effect), contrary to the assumptions of differential susceptibility theory. Cluster

analysis yielded a two-cluster solution that differentiated participants mainly by the overall intensity of the love components and did not allow qualitatively distinct relationship phases to be identified. Consequently, the hypotheses on the moderating role of relationship phase could not be tested.

Conclusions

The results indicate a multifactorial and dyadic character of the determinants of intimate relationship quality. Secure attachment and intimacy were of particular importance, and intimacy mediated the association between attachment style and relationship quality. Partner personality similarity had limited importance, which was specific to the trait. Sensory processing sensitivity was relevant mainly at the level of its components and as a moderator in men, with the direction of moderation opposite to that predicted. Owing to the cross-sectional design, the results do not support causal inference, and some effects were obtained in models with unsatisfactory or borderline fit, which calls for replication.

Keywords: relationship quality, attachment style, personality traits, sensory processing sensitivity, intimacy, APIM