

Attributions of partner's negative behavior and intimate relationship quality

/ Atribucija partnerovog ponašanja u intimnoj vezi i kvaliteta veze

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Causal attributions are crucial in adapting to an ever-changing environment. When the outcome is favorable, attributions help us understand what led to such an outcome so we can repeat those behaviors in the future. Attributions also enable the recognition and avoidance of factors that led to a negative outcome. Partners who are unhappy in a relationship attribute the cause of negative events to the partner, considering the cause to be stable and global. Persons who are satisfied in their relationship judge the cause to be outside of the partner, unstable and specific. Fincham and Bradbury's Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM) measures attributions in romantic relationships. The participant estimates internality, stability and globality of the causes of 4 described hypothetical negative partner's behaviors. The aim of this research was to determine the relationship between the tendency to engage in positive or negative partner's behavior attributions, the perception of partner's expression of affectionate and antagonistic behaviors and the perception of relationship quality. The sample consisted of 155 students who are currently in a romantic relationship. The results represent the first evaluation of construct validity of the Croatian version of the Relationship attribution measure and indicate its possible applications, as well as providing an empirical verification of the Social Learning Theory in intimate relationships.

/ Stvaranje kauzalnih atribucija je presudno za mogućnost prilagodbe promjenjivoj okolini i prevladavanje svakodnevnih teškoća. Kada je ishod povoljan, atribucije nam pomažu da shvatimo što je dovelo do takvog ishoda kako bismo takva ponašanja mogli ponoviti. Kada iskusimo negativan ishod, atribucije nam omogućuju prepoznavanje i izbjegavanje faktora koji su do takvog ishoda doveli. Istraživanja intimnih odnosa pokazuju da su partneri nezadovoljni vezom skloni atribuiranju uzroka negativnih događaja tako da uzrok pripisuju partneru, smatraju ga stabilnim i nepromjenjivim te globalnim. Osobe koje su zadovoljne vezom sklone su atribucijama koje umanjuju značenje negativnih događaja pripisujući ih uzrocima izvan partnera te smatrajući ih nestabilnim i specifičnim. Finchamova i Bradburyjeva mjera atribucije u romantičnim vezama (*Relationship attribution measure*, RAM) sastoji se od 4 opisa hipotetskih negativnih partnerovih ponašanja, a sudionik na ljestvici sa 6 uporišnih točaka procjenjuje internalnost, stabilnost i globalnost uzroka tih ponašanja. Glavni cilj istraživanja bio je utvrditi odnos između sklonosti povoljnom ili nepovoljnom atribuiranju partnerovog ponašanja, percepcije socio-emocionalne klime u vezi i procjene kvalitete intimne veze. Ispitivanje je provedeno na uzorku od 155 studenata i studentica koji su trenutno u romantičnoj vezi. Osim što pružaju empirijsku provjeru postavki teorije socijalnog učenja u intimnim odnosima, rezultati su prva provjera konstruktne valjanosti ljestvice atribucije u intimnim vezama na hrvatskom jeziku i ukazuju na njenu moguću primjenu.

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INTRODUCTION

Intimate relationship distress has been identified as the primary reason for seeking psychological help by a number of studies (1). Kelley *et al.* (2) recognized that behavior is the only way partners can influence one another and a partner's behavior can be punishing or rewarding for the other partner. Partners gather information from each interaction and learn about their relationship. Thus, social learning theory's central idea is that rewarding and positive behaviors increase the quality of a relationship and punishing behaviors decrease relationship quality (3). When a couple experiences a rewarding interaction, partners learn they can trust each other, that their communication is effective and that their partner loves and respects them. This enhances the partners' relationship satisfaction, making future similar interactions more likely. On the other hand, accumulating negative interactions causes the partners to doubt their relationship and their ability to communicate effectively, increasing the likelihood of negative interactions in the future. Therefore, social learning theory describes a cyclical relationship between behavior and relationship satisfaction (3).

However, it soon became obvious that studying only explicit behavior is not enough. Thus, researchers expanded their focus, realizing that the interpretation of partner's behavior shapes the cognitive and emotional reactions to the

behavior. Later versions of social learning theory take into account that even good relationships can encounter problems when partners start to interpret each other's behavior in a negative way. Research has shown that dissatisfied couples, in comparison to satisfied couples, engage in negative behavior and negative behavior reciprocity more often (4). They also tend to make attributions that emphasize the negative events in the relationship and diminish the impact of positive events. Fincham & Bradbury (5) confirmed that attributions may initiate and maintain relationship distress.

The application of attributions in intimate relationships is the result of two different research directions. First, Kelley (6) noticed that partners very often mention partner's stable, general properties when explaining the causes of relationship problems. It was discovered that actors were more likely to attribute their own negative behavior to causes that reflect their positive attitudes towards the partner, whereas their partners were more inclined to make attributions that emphasize the actor's negative traits. It seemed that relationship satisfaction experienced by the partners covaried with attributions (7).

The second research direction was the attempt to differentiate between satisfied and distressed couples. This line of research confirmed Heider's hypothesis (8) that the liking of a person is correlated to attributions made for the person's behavior. A causal relationship

between attributions and relationship satisfaction has also been established in longitudinal studies (e.g. 9), confirming the hypothesis that causal attributions predict future relationship satisfaction, but also showing that relationship satisfaction may change subsequent causal attributions, suggesting a bidirectional causal relation. These findings are in line with the cyclical explanation proposed by the social learning theory.

Attributions in relationships have three dimensions: locus, stability and globality. Locus indicates in which extent the cause rests in the partner, stability provides an estimate whether the cause is likely to change, and globality indicates whether other areas of the relationship are affected by the cause (10). Research has shown that partners who assess their relationship as being satisfactory assess positive events as having causes that emerge from their partner, and are stable and global. They attribute negative events to external, unstable and specific causes. The pattern in distressed couples is opposite. They tend to perceive the causes of positive events as external, unstable and specific, while they perceive the causes of negative events to be internal, stable and global (7).

The main aim of this research was to determine the relationship between the tendency to engage in positive or negative partner's behavior attributions, the perception of partner's expression of affectionate and antagonistic behaviors and the perception of relationship quality. Our second aim was to validate the Croatian version of the Relationship attribution measure (5).

METHOD

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 155 university students (22.6 % male and 77.4 % female) between the ages of 18 and 26, with the average age of

21. All the participants were currently in a relationship. The length of the relationship varied between 1 and 111 months, with the average duration of 26.11 months. Recruited via the Faculty's web site and in class, the participants filled out the questionnaires in a group setting which guaranteed anonymity.

Measures

The *Relationship attribution measure* (11) consists of 4 hypothetical negative partner behaviors (e.g. „your partner criticizes something you say“). The RAM focuses on negative events because attributions for negative events are more strongly and consistently related to relationship satisfaction than attributions for positive events (10). The chosen stimuli are common enough to allow all the participants to imagine them occurring in their relationship. Each of the 4 hypothetical negative behaviors is accompanied with 7 statements regarding the event. The participants rated the agreement with the statements on a 6-point scale (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). Using the statements, two different types of attributions were assessed: causal attributions and responsibility attributions. Following Fincham and Bradbury's (12) scoring instructions, we summed responses to corresponding statements across the four hypothetical situations and computed coefficient alpha for each of the attribution dimensions (partner locus = .628, self locus = .633, stability = .728, globality = .530, intent = .628, motivation = .679, blame = .696). To obtain a single locus score we subtracted self ratings from partner ratings. Higher score indicated that the partner is more likely than the self to be viewed as locus of the cause. Because Cronbach's alpha coefficients for some scales were below the criterion of .70, composite attribution indices were formed (10). A composite attribution index was computed summing the locus, stability and globality score (alpha = .743). This index is often re-

ferred to as the index of relationship negative attributions (12) or the index of causality. Higher scores on this composite indicate that partners were more likely to locate the cause in the partner and to see it as stable and global. A composite responsibility index was also computed, summing the intention, motivation and blame score ($\alpha = .811$), with higher results indicating more intentional, selfishly motivated and blame-worthy attributions. Principal factor analysis showed a six-factor solution explaining 53.98 % of the total variance.

To assess the perceived relationship climate, an adapted version of the *Inventory of Affection and Antagonism in Marriage* (13) was used. It is a measure of perceived partner's behavior that consists of 20 statements, 10 statements for affection and 10 statements for antagonism. The participants rated the statements („Your partner did something nice for you that you didn't expect“ for affection; „Your partner seemed uninterested or bored while you were talking“ for antagonism) on a 5-point scale indicating the frequency in which such events occurred during the last month (from *not once* to *regularly*). A clear two-factor solution of the measure established by Huston, Kamenov and Huić (13) was confirmed, explaining 42.47 % of men's score variance, and 34.09 % of women's score variance. Affectionate behaviors explained 26 % (men) / 22 % (women) of variance, while antagonistic behaviors explained 17 % (men) / 12 % (women) of variance. Alpha coefficients of the subscales for both men and women were high, ranging from .72 to .83.

Relationship quality was assessed using an adapted version of Norton's (14) *Quality of Marriage Index*. It consists of 6 items. Respondents express their agreement with five items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) (e.g. „My relationship with my partner is very stable.“). The sixth item („Taking everything into account, how happy are you in your current relations-

hip?“) is answered on a 10 point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unhappy) to 10 (extremely happy). The measure proved to be highly reliable ($\alpha = .936$).

RESULTS

The average score for relationship quality ($M = 39.46$, $SD = 6.16$) is above the midpoint of the scale (theoretical range 6 to 45), indicating that the participants in our study are, on average, happy in their relationships. This is not surprising, because couples who decide to participate in studies on relationship quality usually are the ones who think they are in a good relationship. Also, our sample consisted of students and it is known that students and younger adults tend to be happier in relationships than older adults. These findings are supported by the level of perceived affection measured by the *Inventory of Affection and Antagonism in Marriage*. The scores are again high ($M = 33.11$, $SD = 5.32$, theoretical range 0 to 40), indicating we did indeed have a sample of individuals in high quality relationships. In accordance with this, the expression of antagonism was fairly low ($M = 8.08$, $SD = 5.62$, theoretical range 0 to 40). It suggests our participants perceive their partner's as expressing affection often and expressing antagonistic behavior rarely.

The composite index of causal attributions of the RAM was $M = 30.37$, $SD = 6.92$ (theoretical range 8-68). The average index of responsibility was a bit higher, $M = 32.86$, $SD = 9.18$ (theoretical range 12 to 72). Compared to the results obtained by Fincham, Bradbury, Arias, Byrne and Karney (15) on a sample of American married couples and a sample of American newlyweds, our participants, on average, scored lower on the causal attributions index. This indicates that our participants tend to be less inclined to locate the cause of negative behaviors in the partner, and perceive the

cause to be less stable and global. On the responsibility index, our participants scored higher than American newlyweds but still lower than the sample of American married couples (see Fig. 1). They are more inclined to think the cause to be intentional, selfishly motivated and blameworthy than do the American newlyweds.

Our main goal was to determine the relationship between the tendency to engage in positive or negative partner's behavior attributions, the perception of partner's affectionate and antagonistic behaviors towards the partner and the perception of relationship quality. Since theory predicts a cyclical relationship between the perceived partner's behavior, relationship quality and attributions, two separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted.

Correlations between variables are shown in Table 1. In line with expectations, correlations are low to moderate, which confirms the empirical distinction between the variables. Perceiving the causes of negative events to come from the partner, to be stable and global, as well as perceiving the partner to be responsible for the negative event is positively correlated with the perception of the partner's behavior as showing antagonism and with lower relationship quality. Perceiving the partner's behavior as an expression of affection is, as expected, positively correlated with higher relationship quality and perceiving the partner as someone not responsible for negative events. It is also correlated with more positive partner's behavior attribution, namely the perception of the cause of the negative events as unstable and specific as well as not originating within the partner.

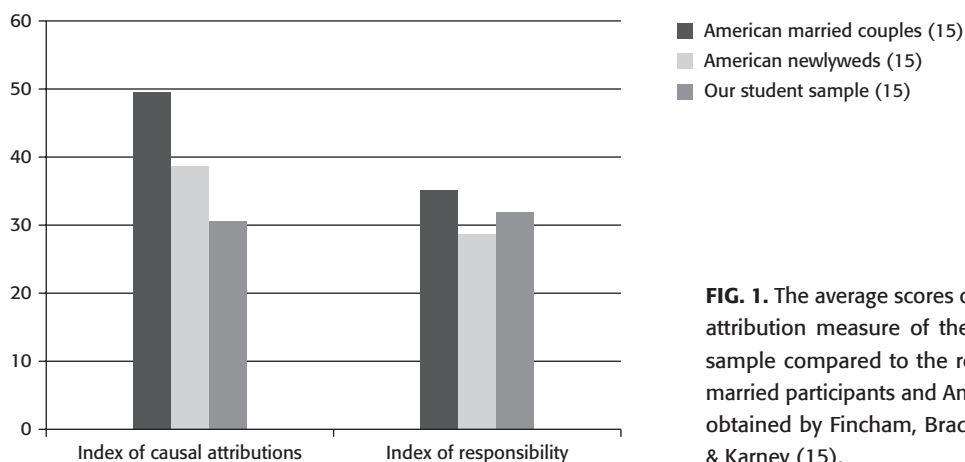


FIG. 1. The average scores on the Relationship attribution measure of the Croatian student sample compared to the results of American married participants and American newlyweds obtained by Fincham, Bradbury, Arias, Byrne, & Karney (15).

TABLE 1. Correlation coefficients of the predictors and the criterion

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Affection				
2. Negativity	-.234**			
3. RAM index of causal attributions	-.238**	.269**		
4. RAM index of responsibility	-.232**	.257**	.371**	
5. Relationship Quality	.544**	-.320**	-.257**	-.330**

**p<0.01

First, we wanted to see the predictive power of relationship emotional climate and quality for explaining the participants' attributions for negative events. Therefore, the perceptions of partner's affection and antagonism expression were entered in the first step of a hierarchical regression analysis and relationship quality in the next step. The partner's behavior attribution indices were the criteria. The results are shown in Table 2.

We can see that the perception of partner's antagonistic behaviors and relationship quality, although correlated with the criterion, are irrelevant for the prediction of partner's negative behavior causal attributions. The perception of partner's antagonistic behaviors predicts causal attributions of the partner's behavior, explaining 10.8 % of total variance.

However, in the case of responsibility attributions, although the perception of partner's antagonistic behavior is still a significant predictor, relationship quality is also. It had significant incremental power when predicting responsibility attributions ($\Delta R^2 = 3.3\%$), even when the perception of expression of affection and antagonism is controlled for.

Secondly, we explored the predictive power of participants' attributions and the perception of emotional climate for explaining the relationship quality. Therefore, the index of causal attribution and the index of responsibility were entered in the first step. In the second step we entered the perception of the partner's expression of affectionate and antagonistic behavior. The criterion was relationship quality (see Table 3).

TABLE 2. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting partner's negative behavior causal and responsibility attributions.

	Index of causal attributions (RAM)		Index of responsibility attributions (RAM)	
	β when entered	β in last step	β when entered	β in last step
1. Affectionate behaviors	-.177*	n.s.	-.218*	n.s.
Antagonistic behaviors	.230**	.215*	.273**	.237**
	$R^2 = .104^{**}$; $\Delta R^2 = .104^{**}$		$R^2 = .156^{**}$; $\Delta R^2 = .156^{**}$	
2. Relationship quality		n.s.		-.226*
	$R^2 = .108^{**}$; $\Delta R^2 = n.s.$		$R^2 = .189^{**}$; $\Delta R^2 = .033^*$	

β – standardized Beta coefficients, R^2 – coefficient of determination, ΔR^2 – change in R^2 , * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

TABLE 3. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting relationship quality.

Relationship quality	β when entered	β in last step	R^2	ΔR^2
1. Index of causal attributions	n.s.	n.s.	.127**	.127**
Index of responsibility attributions	-.298**	-.178*		
2. Affectionate behaviors		.483**	.368**	.242**
Antagonistic behaviors		-.116**		

β – standardized Beta coefficients, R^2 – coefficient of determination, ΔR^2 – change in R^2 , * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Causal attributions did not predict relationship quality, but responsibility attributions did, explaining 12.7 % of the total variance. Affectionate and antagonistic behaviors explained additional 24.2 % of the variance. In total, the predictors accounted for 36.8 % of the variance of relationship quality. The single strongest predictor of relationship quality was the perception of partner's affectionate behaviors. The effects of perceived partner's affection and antagonism on relationship quality are in line with previous research (e.g. 16). The fact that this effect is present even after controlling for attributions of negative events, confirms previous findings.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to determine the relationship between the tendency to engage in positive or negative partner's behavior attributions, the perception of partner's expression of affectionate and antagonistic behaviors and the perception of relationship quality. The results confirm the principles postulated by the social learning theory. Those who perceive that their partners are expressing antagonistic behavior more often tend to find the cause of negative events in the partner, and to perceive the cause as more stable and global. Those who think their partners are expressing antagonistic behavior more often and those who perceive their relationship to be of lower quality are more inclined to think the cause of negative events was intentional, motivated by selfish reasons, and that their partner should be blamed for it. Our study confirms the importance of relationship climate and quality on partner's attribution.

The second hierarchical regression analysis showed that the perception of affectionate or positive behaviors during interactions between partners increases the quality of a relationship, and exchanging punishing or negative

(antagonistic) behaviors diminishes it. Those who believe the cause of negative events was intentional, motivated by selfish reasons, and that their partner should be blamed for it tend to see their relationship as being of lower quality. Although there is a popular notion that antagonism is the most significant predictor of relationship quality and satisfaction (16), the results show that perceived affectionate partner's behaviors have an equally strong impact on relationship quality. These findings support the hypothesis that quality relationships are not just the ones in which there is no antagonistic behavior, but those in which the expression of affectionate behavior exists.

In further research the stability of the findings should be tested, since our sample consisted of only 155 participants. Furthermore, the duration of participants' relationships varied between 1 and 111 months. It is possible that the assessments given by participants in short relationships are not quite comparable to the ones given by participants in longer relationships.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we wanted to confirm the cyclical relationship between the perception of partner's behavior, partner's behavior attributions and relationship quality. Our findings suggest the perception of partner's antagonistic behaviors predicts negative partner behavior attributions. Relationship quality is predicted by responsibility attributions and relationship climate. To better understand the cyclical relationship between the perception of partner's behavior, partner's behavior attributions and relationship quality, further research should be conducted with a sample of married couples and dysfunctional couples. Also, the dynamics of the change of attributional style in the course of the relationship should be examined further.

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