

# GENDER DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE BEHAVIORS AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

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## **Abstract**

The present study investigated whether there are gender differences in how perceived use of relationship maintenance strategies by a partner is linked to subject's relationship satisfaction in a Lithuanian sample. The sample consisted of 472 participants in committed romantic relationship, including 389 women and 83 men with a mean age of 21.89 years. The sample included 232 participants in dating relationship, 216 cohabiting and 24 married. Mean relationship duration was 31.91 months. Stafford's (2011) Relationship Maintenance Behaviors Measure was used to assess relationship maintenance, while relationship satisfaction was measured by Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-32) of Funk and Rogge (2007). Results of the study indicated that women perceived their partners using more positivity, understanding, assurances, sharing tasks, and social network strategies than men did. While no statistically significant gender differences in relationship satisfaction were found, all relationship maintenance strategies were positively correlated with relationship satisfaction for both men and women. However, strategies contributing towards prediction of relationship satisfaction differed for men and women. For women, relationship satisfaction was best predicted by perceived assurances, followed by understanding, positivity, and self-disclosure, which collectively accounted for just under 40% of variance in relationship satisfaction. For men, only perceived partner's positivity was significant predictor of relationship satisfaction, but it alone accounted for 51.6 percent of variance in relationship satisfaction. Neither relationship status nor relationship duration were significant in predicting relationship satisfaction of either men or women.

**Keywords:** *relationship maintenance, relationship satisfaction, gender differences, Lithuania.*

## **Gender Differences In Relationship Maintenance Behaviors and Relationship Satisfaction**

It is well established that involvement in committed romantic relationship strongly contributes towards personal well-being. Long-term stability of such relationship significantly depends on relationship satisfaction experienced by partners (Ruffieux, Nussbeck, & Bodenmann, 2014). While recent research suggests that there are no gender differences in

levels of relationship satisfaction experienced by men and women (Jackson, Miller, Oka, & Henry, 2014), factors contributing towards their relationship satisfaction differ (De Andrade, Wachelke, & Howat-Rodrigues, 2015; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012).

Relationship maintenance behaviors involve actions people strategically take in order to keep their romantic relationships going (Canary & Yum, 2016). These behaviors are among those factors, which have been significantly and consistently linked to relationship satisfaction by previous research (Ballard-Reisch, Weigel, & Zaguidouline, 1999; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Stafford, 2011; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2008). Most research in this field was conducted using the initial model of Stafford and Canary (1991), which conceptualized 5 relationship maintenance strategies – positivity, openness, assurances, social network, and sharing tasks. According to Stafford and Canary (1991), *positivity* refers to pleasant, agreeable communication, *openness* means discussing ones feelings and plans with one's partner, *assurances* include those behaviors aimed at demonstrating continuing commitment, *social network* involves drawing on family and friends to maintain relationship stable, while *sharing tasks* refers to behaviors aimed at fair distribution of chores.

In meta-analysis of some 35 studies on correlates of relationship maintenance strategies, Ogolsky and Bowers (2012) found that while men and women did not differ in their perception of partner's use of openness, women perceived their partners as engaged in more positivity, assurances, social networks and sharing tasks. The authors also found that all 5 strategies were positively linked to relationship satisfaction for both men and women and effect sizes of those links were higher for women than for men, except for positivity-satisfaction association, which was higher for men.

The meta-analysis conducted by Ogolsky and Bowers (2012) did not attempt to answer the question which relationship strategies make bigger relative contributions to relationship satisfaction of men and women. Cumulative evidence from earlier studies seem to indicate that perceived use of positivity and assurances by partners is important in predicting relationship satisfaction of both men and women, while predictive utility of openness seems to be the lowest (Ballard-Reisch et al., 1999; Dainton, 2000; Dainton, Stafford, & Canary, 1994; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2001; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2008).

In 2011 Laura Stafford published a new instrument for measurement of relationship maintenance behaviors, with a view of addressing some psychometric issues of the older 5-factor version (Stafford, 2011). The new instrument measured 7 relationship measurement behaviors. In the new instrument behaviors of positivity, assurances, social network, and sharing tasks were retained from the older version. Openness was split into self-disclosure and relationship talk. Also, a new behavior – understanding (i.e. being non-judgemental and forgiving to one's partner) – was added. Stafford (2011) found the new measure to be psychometrically superior to the 5-factor version. While this instrument has been used in a number of studies (e.g. LaBelle & Myers, 2016; Kennedy-Lightsey, 2018; Stafford, 2016), none of the studies using this instrument have addressed the questions whether there are any gender differences in how perceived partner's enactment of the 7 relationship maintenance strategies are linked to relationship satisfaction.

### **The Present Study**

While there is a wealth of information collected using the older 5-factor model, empirical evidence on the links between the seven relationship maintenance behaviors described by

Stafford (2011) and relationship satisfaction is still accumulating slowly. Furthermore, there have been no studies conducted to examine possible gender differences in relative contributions of partners' relationship maintenance behaviors to relationship satisfaction of men and women. Finally, absolute majority of studies of relationship maintenance behaviors have been conducted in English-speaking countries and currently there is little research evidence from other linguistic and cultural environments. Thus, **the aim of the present study** is to answer two questions:

- 1) Do women and men differ in their perceptions of relationship maintenance behaviors used by their partners?
- 2) Are there any gender differences in links between relationship satisfaction and perceived partners' relationship maintenance behaviors?

**The research object** is gender differences in the role relationship maintenance behavior plays in relationship satisfaction.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

The data were collected using a Lithuanian online survey platform (apklausa.lt). The survey language was Lithuanian. Subjects were assured of their anonymity. A total of 472 participants, who were currently in a committed romantic relationship participated in this survey, including 389 women and 83 men. Age of the participants ranged from 18 to 30 years old, with the mean age of 21.89 years. The sample included 232 participants, who were dating, while 216 were cohabiting and 24 were married. Relationship duration in months indicated by participants ranged from 1 to 153 months, with a mean of 31.91 months.

### Measures

In the description of the survey we asked only those in committed relationship to participate in our study. Participants were asked to indicate their gender, age in years, their relationship status (dating, cohabiting or married), and relationship duration in months.

Partners' use of relationship maintenance behaviors as perceived by participants of the present study was measured using the Relational Maintenance Behaviours Measure (RMBM) developed by Stafford (2011). The 28-item instrument was aimed at assessing use of 7 relationship maintenance behaviors, including positivity, understanding, self-disclosure, relationship talk, assurances, sharing tasks and use of social networks. Cronbach alpha of the total RMBM was 0.94, with alphas of individual subscales ranging from 0.81 to 0.88.

Relationship satisfaction was assessed by Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-32) of Funk and Rogge (2007). The 32-item instrument yields a single satisfaction score. Reliability (Cronbach  $\alpha$ ) of this index in the present study was 0.98.

### Results

None of the variables were normally distributed, thus non-parametric tests are used in statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics of the study variables is presented in the Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the study variables

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach $\alpha$
Age	18	30	21.90	2.083	n/a
Relationship duration (in months)	1	153	31.91	23.665	n/a
Relationship satisfaction	19	161	129.70	27.852	0.97
Positivity	4	28	24.33	4.028	0.88
Understanding	4	28	23.33	4.764	0.84
Self-disclosure	5	21	23.36	4.630	0.81
Relationship talk	3	28	17.02	4.044	0.88
Assurances	4	28	23.46	5.200	0.87
Sharing tasks	4	28	23.29	4.641	0.84
Social networks	5	35	24.98	6.763	0.81

While comparisons of mean ranks using the Man-Whitney U criterion indicated that there were no statistically significant gender differences in relationship satisfaction, as well as use of self-disclosure and relationship talk, yet women reported significantly more use of positivity, understanding, assurances, sharing tasks, and social network behaviors by their partners than men did (see Table 2). Thus, Spearman correlations between relationship satisfaction and use of the 7 relationship maintenance behaviors were calculated for men and women separately. Absolute majority of correlations were significant and moderately positive, except for men's use of social networks as reported by women, which was also significant, but weak (see Table 3).

**Table 2.** Gender differences in perceived partner's use of relationship maintenance behaviors and relationship satisfaction

Behavior	Gender	Mean rank	p
Positivity	Men	192.92	<b>0.001*</b>
	Women	<b>245.80</b>	
Understanding	Men	183.98	<b>0.000*</b>
	Women	<b>247.71</b>	
Self-disclosure	Men	224.51	0.374
	Women	239.06	
Relationship talk	Men	229.21	0.588
	Women	238.06	
Assurances	Men	204.81	<b>0.018*</b>
	Women	<b>243.26</b>	
Sharing tasks	Men	201.16	<b>0.009*</b>
	Women	<b>244.04</b>	
Social networks	Men	194.80	<b>0.002*</b>
	Women	<b>245.40</b>	
Relationship satisfaction	Men	211.29	0.064
	Women	241.88	

\* differences are significant at  $p < 0.01$

**Table 3.** Spearman correlations between relationship maintenance strategies and relationship satisfaction by gender and nature of relationship\*

Strategies	Gender	
	Women	Men
Positivity	0.448	0.629
Understanding	0.510	0.534
Self-disclosure	0.473	0.395
Relationship talk	0.422	0.590
Assurances	0.532	0.418
Sharing tasks	0.450	0.616
Social networks	0.280	0.439

\*All correlations significant at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

In order to establish relative contribution of various relationship maintenance behaviors to relationship satisfaction, separate linear regression analyses were conducted for men and women. Relationship duration and relationship status (dating, cohabiting, or married) were also entered into the equations as predictor variables. Results of the analyses (see Table 4) indicated, that the latter were not significant for relationship satisfaction of either women or men. Such relationship maintenance behaviors as relationship talk, sharing tasks and social networks also failed to make any statistically significant contributions towards relationship satisfaction for any of the genders. For women relationship maintenance behaviors used by their partners accounted for almost 40% of variance in relationship satisfaction. The most important behavior for women was assurances followed by understanding, positivity, and self-disclosure. For men the only relationship maintenance behavior significantly predicting relationship satisfaction was positivity and it alone accounted for as much as 51.6% of variance in relationship satisfaction.

**Table 4.** Regression analyses of contribution of relationship maintenance behaviors to relationship satisfaction among men and women

Independent Variables	Relationship Satisfaction					
	Women			Men		
	Beta	VIF	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	Beta	VIF	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>
Positivity	<b>0.175*</b>	1.606	0.398	<b>0.473*</b>	1.898	0.516
Understanding	<b>0.195*</b>	1.952		0.068	2.318	
Self-disclosure	<b>0.149*</b>	2.417		-0.235	2.668	
Relationship talk	-0.038	2.529		0.300	3.206	
Assurances	<b>0.284*</b>	1.883		0.152	2.069	
Sharing tasks	0.061	1.728		0.058	2.851	
Social networks	0.022	1.229		0.205	1.381	
Relationship duration	-0.025	1.302		0.067	1.308	
Relationship status	0.047	1.372		-0.024	1.403	

\*Significant at  $\alpha<0,05$

### Discussion

Results of the present study indicate that genders do differ in perception of partner's maintenance behaviors. Women perceived their partners as using more positivity, assurances, sharing tasks and social network behaviors to maintain relationships than men did, but did not

differ from men on perception of how their partners use relationship talk and self-disclosure. These findings corroborate findings from a number of previous studies, which were conducted using the older, five factor RMSM measure (Ballard-Reisch et al., 1999; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012; Ragsdale, 1996; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford et al., 2000). However, the most significant gender difference was in use of understanding, a strategy which was not included in the original RMSM instrument and introduced only later, in the RMBM by Stafford (2011). This finding suggests that despite widespread popularity of the RMSM, the inclusion of understanding in the RMBM was a meaningful addition allowing for more detailed picture of relationship maintenance.

Similarly to results reported by other researchers (e.g. Dainton et al., 1994; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012; Stafford & Canary, 1991), all relationship maintenance behaviors were significantly correlated to relationship satisfaction for both women and men. Consistent with the results of a meta-analysis conducted by Ogolsky and Bowers (2012), we found that correlation between perceived partner's use of positivity and relationship satisfaction was higher for men than for women. However, in contrast to the aforementioned analysis, we did not find the pattern that correlations between relationship satisfaction and maintenance behaviors are stronger for women than for men. This was true only for self-disclosure and assurances, while in case of understanding, relationship talk, sharing tasks, and social networks correlations to relationship satisfaction were higher for men than for women.

There were no significant gender differences in relationship satisfaction. These results are similar to results of a meta-analysis of gender differences in relationship satisfaction conducted by Jackson et al. (2014). While neither relationship status (dating, cohabiting, married) nor relationship duration predicted relationship satisfaction of either men or women, results of the regression analysis indicated, that for women links between perceived relationship maintenance behaviors and relationship satisfaction is more complex than for men. Four of partner's relationship maintenance behaviors (positivity, understanding, self-disclosure, and assurances) made statistically significant contributions towards prediction of women's relationship satisfaction. This result is somewhat similar to findings by Stafford (2011), who also found that assurances, positivity, and understanding enacted by husbands were most predictive of wife's relationship satisfaction. However, taken together these four behaviors accounted for almost 40% of variance in women's relationship satisfaction, which was considerably less than 63% in Stafford's (2011) study. For men only positivity was found significantly predicting relationship satisfaction in a regression equation. However, this single behavior accounted for as much as 51.6% of men's relationship satisfaction. This result differs considerably from the one obtained by Stafford (2011), who found that men's relationship satisfaction was positively predicted by their wife's enactment of assurances, positivity, understanding, and use of social networks and negatively predicted by relationship talk.

These results seem to corroborate a popular wisdom that women in this Lithuanian sample expected more from the relationship than men did. Women in the present sample expected their partners to provide assurances of their relationship, be understanding, positive, and open. In terms of relationship maintenance behaviors, men in our sample seem to have required the single most important thing – positivity. Granted positivity on the part of their partners, at least moderate relationship satisfaction could be expected for men.

This interesting result is open to multiple interpretations. The most straightforward one is that men perceive their relationships in more simple terms than women do. On the other hand, as women bear more risk in a relationship due to pregnancy and childcare, they might

tend to feel less secure and more sensitive to a wider range of aspects in the relationship. The third interpretation might be that women may be more prone to social desirability in their answers, tending towards exaggeration of relationship maintenance behaviors of their partners. Testing of these competing and possibly complementing interpretations might be a fruitful avenue for future research.

### Conclusions

1. Women and men have differing perceptions of partner's relationship maintenance behaviors. Women perceived their partners as using more positivity, assurances, sharing tasks and social network behaviors to maintain relationships than men did.
2. All relationship maintenance behaviors – positivity, understanding, self-disclosure, relationship talk, assurances, sharing tasks, and social network – were significantly correlated to relationship satisfaction for both women and men.
3. No statistically significant gender differences in relationship satisfaction were found.
4. For women links between perceived relationship maintenance behaviors and relationship satisfaction is more complex than for men. Positivity, understanding, self-disclosure, and assurances made statistically significant contributions towards prediction of women's relationship satisfaction together accounting for almost 40% of variance in women's relationship satisfaction. For men only positivity was found significantly predicting relationship satisfaction accounting for 51.6% of men's relationship satisfaction.

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### *Summary*

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It is well established that involvement in committed romantic relationship strongly contributes towards personal well-being. Long-term stability of such relationship significantly depends on relationship satisfaction experienced by partners (Ruffieux, Nussbeck, & Bodenmann, 2014). While research suggests that there are no gender differences in levels of relationship satisfaction experienced by men and women (Jackson, Miller, Oka, & Henry, 2014), factors contributing towards their relationship satisfaction differ (De Andrade, Wachelke, & Howat-Rodrigues, 2015; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012).

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In 2011 Laura Stafford published a new instrument for measurement of relationship maintenance behaviors, with a view of addressing some psychometric issues of the older 5-factor version (Stafford, 2011). The new instrument measured 7 relationship measurement behaviors. While this instrument have been used in a number of studies (e.g. LaBelle & Myers, 2016; Kennedy-Lightsey, 2018; Stafford, 2016), none of the studies using this instrument have addressed the questions whether there are any gender differences in how perceived partner's enactment of the 7 relationship maintenance strategies are linked to relationship satisfaction.

While there is a wealth of information collected using the older 5-factor model, empirical evidence on the links between the seven relationship maintenance behaviors described by Stafford (2011) and relationship satisfaction is still accumulating slowly. Furthermore, there have been no studies conducted to examine possible gender differences in relative contributions of partners' relationship maintenance behaviors to relationship satisfaction of men and women. Finally, absolute majority of studies of relationship maintenance behaviors have been conducted in English-speaking countries and currently there is little research evidence from other linguistic and cultural environments. Thus, **the aim of the present study** is to answer two questions:

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- 2) Are there any gender differences in links between relationship satisfaction and perceived partners' relationship maintenance behaviors?

**The research object** is gender differences in the role relationship maintenance behavior plays in relationship satisfaction.

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All relationship maintenance behaviors were significantly correlated to relationship satisfaction for both women and men. There were no significant gender differences in relationship satisfaction. Neither relationship status (dating, cohabiting, married) nor relationship duration predicted relationship satisfaction of either men or women.

Women reported significantly more use of positivity, understanding, assurances, sharing tasks, and social network behaviors by their partners than men did. For women relationship maintenance behaviors used by their partners accounted for almost 40% of variance in relationship satisfaction. The most important behavior for women was assurances followed by understanding, positivity, and self-disclosure. For men the only relationship maintenance behavior significantly predicting relationship satisfaction was positivity and it alone accounted for as much as 51.6% of variance in relationship satisfaction.

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more risk in a relationship due to pregnancy and childcare, they might tend to feel less secure and more sensitive to a wider range of aspects in the relationship. The third interpretation might be that women may be more prone to social desirability in their answers, tending towards exaggeration of relationship maintenance behaviors of their partners. Testing of these competing and possibly complementing interpretations might be a fruitful avenue for future research.

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