Predicting Married Couples’ Daily Relationship Satisfaction from Difficulties with Emotion Regulation and Daily Negative Relationship Behaviours

by
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Ethics Statement

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Abstract

Negative relationship behaviours (e.g., irritating or neglectful behaviours or negative communication) can erode or enhance relationship satisfaction, which suggests that moderators might be operating. I examined how spouses' difficulties with emotion regulation moderated associations between daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction over 21 days in 125 mixed-sex married couples. Spouses' daily negative behaviours negatively predicted their own and partner's daily relationship satisfaction. Spouses' difficulties with emotion regulation negatively predicted their daily relationship satisfaction, and husbands' difficulties with emotion regulation negatively predicted partners' daily relationship satisfaction. Associations between difficulties with emotion regulation and both spouses' daily relationship satisfaction was stronger for husbands than for wives. Emotion regulation difficulties did not interact with daily negative behaviours to predict daily relationship satisfaction. Results suggest that managing negative behaviours and difficult emotions may enhance relationship satisfaction from day to day.

Keywords:  couples; relationship satisfaction; emotion regulation; negative behaviours
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Introduction

Romantic relationships can be important sources of support (e.g., Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010), happiness (e.g., Demir, 2010), and personal wellbeing (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2010). Nevertheless, individuals sometimes behave negatively in their romantic relationships (e.g., engaging in irritating or neglectful behaviours or communicating in a negative or invalidating manner) and romantic relationships can be sources of conflict (e.g., Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). The association between negative relationship behaviours and relationship satisfaction is mixed; negative relationship behaviours predict declines in relationship satisfaction (e.g., Fincham, 2003) but also predict increases in relationship satisfaction over time (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997). These conflicting findings suggest that moderating factors might be operating. Specifically, the emotional circumstances in which negative behaviours occur may moderate the association between negative behaviours and relationship satisfaction. Indeed, partners’ expression of greater positive affect reduces the detrimental effects of negative communication behaviours such as disengagement, criticism, and demandingness on relationship satisfaction over time (Johnson et al., 2005; Smith, Vivian, & O’Leary, 1990). Thus, how individuals manage emotions when they or their partner engage in negative behaviours may have important implications for relationship satisfaction. Reflecting the importance of emotion regulation, which mostly occurs in a social context (Gross, Richards, & John, 2006), there has been a recent call for research to examine how emotion regulation influences processes and outcomes in romantic relationships (see Levenson, Haase, Bloch, Holley, & Seider, 2014). In response to this need, I examined whether difficulties with emotion regulation moderated the association between daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction in married couples.

Negative Behaviours in Romantic Relationships

According to interdependence theory, partners’ satisfaction is derived, although not necessarily consciously, by the ratio of rewards and costs associated with the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Costly negative behaviours can range from less severe forms such as irritating or annoying behaviours (e.g., being late, leaving dishes in the sink, or not doing the laundry), neglect (e.g., being inattentive towards a partner), or negative communication (e.g., criticism, hostility, or contempt) to more severe negative
behaviours such as psychological or physical aggression. The focus in this study is on less severe forms of negative behaviour such as irritating, neglectful behaviour, or negative communication that may play a role in the daily lives of most couples. Consistent with interdependence theory, couples who exhibit disagreement, hostility, blame, and criticism during conflict are unhappy in their relationships and these negative behaviours are associated with declines in relationship satisfaction over time (see Caughlin & Vengelisti, 2006; Fincham, 2003; Gottman, 1998; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Most research supports the idea that negative behaviours predict relationship dissatisfaction and the erosion of relationship satisfaction over time, but there are a few contrary findings that disagreement, criticism, and anger during couple conflict discussions also predict improvements in relationship satisfaction over time (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). This suggests that the relationship effects of negative behaviours may depend on other relationship or personal factors (see McNulty, 2016; Overall & McNulty, 2017). Negative behaviours may not be inherently negative for relationships and several studies indicate that effects depend on the circumstances in which negative behaviours arise. For example, negative behaviours (e.g., demandingness, criticism) can be adaptive when directed at a partner unmotivated to make personal changes (Meltzer, McNulty, & Karney, 2012) and directly challenging partners about problems perceived to be under their control can increase motivation to change (Baker & McNulty, 2015). In another study, individuals’ direct strategies (e.g., criticism, coercion, etc.) to change partner behaviours, although initially perceived as unsuccessful by partners, predicted positive changes in partner behaviour over time (Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009). When couples are addressing serious issues, negative behaviours (e.g., blame, demandingness) may increase relationship satisfaction (McNulty & Russell, 2010). Thus, objectively negative behaviour may at times be damaging to relationships, but it can also promote positive adjustment, perhaps because partners’ negative reactions alert the couple to the severity of problems or to the need for change. It may also be that the affective context in which these behaviours occur changes the role of negative behaviour.

Affective expression can sometimes be considered part of the emotion regulation process (Gross & Barrett, 2011) and it is an important moderator of the effect of negative
behaviours on relationship outcomes (e.g., Johnson et al., 2005). Thus, how individuals manage emotions when they or their partner engage in negative behaviours may have important effects on their own and their partner's relationship satisfaction. For example, expressing positive affect during couple discussions buffers the negative effects of disengagement (Smith et al., 1990), criticism, and demandingness (Johnson et al., 2005) on marital satisfaction over time. Furthermore, how quickly wives' signs of negative emotions decline after negative emotional events during couple conflict discussions predicts increases in marital satisfaction over time (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014). Given that emotion regulation influences the duration and extent to which emotions are expressed (Gross, 2014), it may moderate the effects of negative behaviours on relationship satisfaction because it allows partners to communicate in ways that are consistent with their overall relationship goals by reducing negative emotions or conveying warmth even in emotionally tense situations.

**Emotion Regulation in Romantic Relationships**

Most researchers conceptualize emotion regulation as the goal-directed processes by which individuals modulate how and when they experience and express emotions (Gross, 2014). Emotion regulation can involve implicit (i.e., automatic) or explicit (i.e., effortful) processes to modulate the expression, intensity, or duration of emotions (Sheppes, Suri, & Gross, 2015). The extended process model of emotion regulation proposed by Sheppes, Suri, and Gross (2015) suggests that regulatory processes occur over three stages: (a) identification (i.e., deciding whether to regulate or not), (b) selection (i.e., deciding which regulatory strategy to use), and (c) implementation (i.e., implementing a regulatory strategy). Individuals may use multiple different strategies to achieve regulatory goals, including dysfunctional strategies (Gross, 2014). For example, individuals who are angry at their romantic partner may regulate negative emotions by taking deep breaths and counting to ten before responding, or they might drink alcohol to numb their emotions.

Emotion regulation research with couples has focused almost exclusively on contrasting expressive suppression with cognitive reappraisal strategies to regulate negative emotions. Expressive suppression is generally related to negative outcomes while cognitive reappraisal is generally related to positive outcomes. For example, in studies on memory for conversation utterances (Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2003),

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cardiovascular arousal (Ben-Naim, Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Mikulincer, 2013), negative affect (Ben-Naim et al., 2013), perceptions of hostile criticism (Klein, Renshaw, & Curby, 2016), and relationship satisfaction (Vater & Schroder-Abe, 2015), the suppression of negative emotions during couple conflict discussions predicted negative outcomes and cognitive reappraisal predicted positive outcomes. These strategies are clearly relevant for couples’ and individuals’ functioning but other potential regulatory goals such as the acceptance of emotional responses or emotion regulation processes such as modifying the intensity or duration of emotions have been neglected in the couples emotion regulation research.

Given that emotion regulation consists of more than just expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal, I conceptualized emotion regulation using the multidimensional model proposed by Gratz and Roemer (2004). In the multidimensional model, emotion regulation includes the following dimensions: (a) strategies to regulate emotions (i.e., the ability to flexibly use strategies to modulate emotions in situationally appropriate ways), (b) acceptance of emotions (i.e., the ability to refrain from negatively judging one’s emotions or attempting to control them), (c) impulse control (i.e., the ability to resist acting inappropriately in response to emotions), (d) goal directed behaviours (i.e., the ability to act in accordance with one’s goals when experiencing emotions), (e) awareness of emotions (i.e., attentiveness to one’s own emotional state), and (f) clarity regarding emotions (i.e., the ability to identify and understand emotions). Deficits in any of these dimensions reflects difficulties with emotion regulation.

To my knowledge, only three studies have applied the multidimensional framework of emotion regulation in research to predict relationship outcomes (Holley, Hasee, Chui, & Bloch, 2018; Tani, Pascuzzi, & Raffagnino, 2015), although only one included an examination of the associations between the separate dimensions and outcomes (Rick, Falconier, & Wittenborn, 2017). First, among individuals in relationships, global difficulties with emotion regulation were negatively associated with perceived partner disclosure and positively associated with fear of emotional involvement and fear of dependency and control, suggesting poorer relationship quality (Tani et al., 2015). Second, among an undergraduate sample of couples, global difficulties with emotion regulation accounted for the tendency for depressed individuals to withdraw when their partner demanded (Holley et al., 2018), a communication pattern
that is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (e.g., Schrodt, Witt, & Shimkowsk, 2014).

In the third study, the six dimensions of difficulties with emotion regulation were examined separately in distressed couples presenting for couple therapy and some unexpected findings emerged (Rick et al., 2017). Consistent with results using the global score and as expected, men’s and women’s lack of strategies were negatively associated with their own relationship satisfaction and women’s impulse control difficulties were negatively associated with their partner’s relationship satisfaction. Contrary to expectations, men’s lack of emotional awareness was positively associated with their relationship satisfaction, and women’s non-acceptance of emotional responses was positively associated with their own and partner’s relationship satisfaction. Rick and colleagues suggested that the unexpected positive associations between the awareness and non-acceptance dimensions of emotion regulation difficulties and relationship satisfaction may be related to the distressed nature of the couples who in the study. If relationally distressed men were experiencing strong negative emotions, lacking awareness of these emotions may have protected their relationship satisfaction. Additionally, women’s non-acceptance of negative emotions may have promoted efforts to decrease or eliminate negative emotions by working to change factors that produced negative emotions, thus improving their own and their partner’s relationship satisfaction.

**Current Study and Hypotheses**

Individuals’ ability to regulate their emotions may be an important moderator of the associations between negative behaviours and relationship satisfaction. Interactions between affective expressions and communication have been examined in the laboratory (e.g., Bloch et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2005; Smith et al., 1990), but no research has focused on the interaction between global difficulties with emotion regulation and daily negative behaviours. I expanded the ecological validity of extant research by examining negative behaviours and relationship satisfaction in the day-to-day lives of community couples with daily diaries, which require less retrospection than typical self-report questionnaires and reduce memory biases.

I examined how spouses’ baseline emotion regulation difficulties interacted with daily negative behaviours to predict daily relationship satisfaction in a 21-day daily diary
of mixed-sex married community couples. Hypothesis 1 was that spouses’ daily negative behaviours would negatively predict their own and partner’s daily relationship satisfaction. Hypothesis 2 was that spouses’ difficulties with emotion regulation would negatively predict their own and partner’s daily relationship satisfaction. Hypothesis 3 was that difficulties with emotion regulation would interact with daily negative behaviours as follows: (a) spouses’ difficulties with emotion regulation would moderate the association between their daily negative behaviours and their own and partner’s daily relationship satisfaction such that as spouses’ difficulties regulating their emotions increased, the detrimental consequences of their negative behaviours on their own and partner’s daily relationship satisfaction would become stronger; (b) spouses’ difficulties with emotion regulation would moderate the association between their partner’s daily negative behaviours and spouses’ daily relationship satisfaction such that as spouses’ difficulties regulating their emotions increased, the detrimental consequences of their partner’s negative behaviours on spouses’ daily relationship satisfaction would become stronger. When spouses or their partners engage in negative behaviours spouses may feel negatively (e.g., guilty that they behaved negatively towards their partner or hurt that their partner was negative towards them) and an inability to regulate those negative emotions may lead to personal distress or escalate emotionally tense situations and in turn, reduce spouses and partner’s relationship satisfaction from day to day.

In secondary analyses, I examined how each of the six dimensions of emotion regulation independently moderated associations between daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction. Based on the findings from Rick and colleagues’ (2017) study, it is possible that being less aware of and accepting of negative emotions (i.e., having greater difficulties with these dimensions of emotion regulation) may be positively related to relationship satisfaction. A lack of awareness of emotions or a lack of acceptance of emotions when the relationship is characterized by a high frequency and intensity of negative emotions compared to when it is not may be protective. For example, being less aware of negative emotions may reduce distress that would otherwise arise if a spouse was more sensitive to negative emotions, and this may buffer the detrimental effects of negative behaviours on relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, being less accepting of negative emotions may motivate spouses to address the cause of negative emotions and this may weaken the damaging effects of negative behaviours on relationship satisfaction. Thus, it is possible that spouses reporting greater difficulties
with the awareness and non-acceptance dimensions of emotion regulation may experience fewer detrimental consequences of negative behaviours on their own and their partner’s relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, this study focuses on community couples who are presumably much less distressed than the couples presenting for therapy in the Rick and colleagues (2017) study, and thus the six dimensions of difficulties with emotion regulation may consistently negatively predict relationship satisfaction and consistently potentiate the negative effects of daily negative behaviour on daily relationship satisfaction. Therefore, given the scant research, I did not make strong predictions about how each of the six dimensions would be related to daily relationship satisfaction or how they would moderate the associations between daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction.
Methods

Participants

Participants were 125 mixed-sex married couples who were recruited for a three-week daily diary study on couple communication. The majority of couples (68%) were recruited through postings on online forums and websites (e.g., Reddit, Craigslist, Kijiji, Facebook) across Canada and the United States, 20.8% were recruited through print advertisements and posters on bulletin boards on the Simon Fraser University (SFU) campus and throughout the Greater Vancouver community, and 10.4% were recruited through word of mouth. One couple did not report recruitment source. Eligible couples were mixed-sex partners in their first marriage, between the ages of 19 and 45, not pregnant, and childless. In addition to reducing demographic heterogeneity (see Rogge et al., 2006), the inclusion criteria were intended to recruit a sample of couples who were engaging in regular sexual activity because sexuality was an important aspect of the larger project; older couples, those with children, or those who are pregnant tend to engage in less frequent sexual activity than younger, childless, non-pregnant couples (e.g., Apt & Hurlbert, 1992; Karraker, DeLamater, & Schwartz, 2011, Rados, Vranes, & Sunjic, 2015). Couples were also required to be fluent in English, to have access to a personal computing device and Internet, and to have a schedule that permitted them to complete daily questionnaires each evening for 21 consecutive days (as per couple report in initial screen).

Demographic characteristics of husbands and wives including racial identity, sexual orientation, education level, and employment status are presented in Table 1. At baseline (Time 0), relationships averaged 7.32 years ($SD = 4.12$) and marriages averaged 3.28 years ($SD = 3.41$). Most couples reported that they were monogamous (89%), but nine couples agreed that they had in the past or were currently consensually non-monogamous (e.g., swinging, polyamorous relationships) and five couples disagreed about whether they were consensually non-monogamous. Wives averaged 30.16 ($SD = 4.97$) years of age and husbands averaged 30.99 ($SD = 4.97$) years of age. Wives averaged 17.41 ($SD = 3.24$) years of education and their average annual income was CAD $33,188.18 ($SD = 27,045.91$). Husbands averaged 16.94 ($SD = 3.22$) years of education and their average annual income was CAD $47,203.82 ($SD = 35,065.38$).
Procedures

The SFU Research Ethics Board approved all study procedures. Potential participants who contacted the SFU Couples Lab were sent an email detailing the purpose of the study and requirements of participation. Lab staff then screened one member of the couple in a 15-minute phone or Skype interview to determine eligibility and to collect demographic information for both partners (i.e., age, ethnicity, living situation, employment status, parental status, relationship status, marriage length) and their relationship satisfaction on the 4-item Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-4; Funk & Rogge, 2007). See Figure 1 for a flowchart of couples screened and included or excluded.

Of the 420 couples who contacted the lab, 219 were not screened either because they were identified as ineligible based on initial contact (e.g., stated they were not married in their initial email to the lab), did not respond to our attempts to contact them, were no longer interested in participating once we reached them, or contacted us after recruitment was complete. Three screened individuals were subsequently excluded from any analyses or group comparisons because we discovered, through information they provided, that they were misrepresenting themselves as being members of a couple when they were not. Of the 198 legitimate couples who were screened, 157 were eligible. Eligible couples were younger ($M_{\text{Husbands}} = 31.50, SD = 4.96; M_{\text{Wives}} = 30.61, SD = 4.69$) than ineligible couples ($M_{\text{Husbands}} = 36.07, SD = 9.13, t(187) = 4.13, p < .001, d = 0.62; M_{\text{Wives}} = 34.15, SD = 8.17, t(187) = 3.47, p < .01, d = 0.53$) and more relationally satisfied ($M_{\text{CSI-4}} = 17.25, SD = 2.50$) than ineligible couples ($M_{\text{CSI-4}} = 16.13, SD = 3.12, t(165) = -2.15, p < .05, d = 0.40$). There were no significant differences in relationship length or marriage length between eligible and ineligible couples.

Eligible couples ($n = 157$) were invited to participate in a phone or Skype information session together; however, 20 couples withdrew prior to the couple Skype information session (e.g., no longer interested, did not respond to our attempts to contact them etc.). During the Skype information session, a research assistant instructed the couples to complete their questionnaires separately and to report on their experiences since the last questionnaire they completed the evening before. If spouses missed completing a questionnaire the evening before, they were instructed to report on their experiences in the last 24 hours. Research assistants confirmed that the couple
would be seeing each other daily and that each spouse would be able to complete questionnaires in the evening for the next three weeks (e.g., would not be travelling, would not be inconvenient in some other way). Finally, the research assistant facilitated a troubleshooting discussion with the couple to improve compliance with the diary procedures by asking spouses to think about what might get in the way of completing their daily questionnaires each evening and to brainstorm potential solutions. The research assistant also made suggestions when appropriate (e.g., setting an alarm for the same time each day, pairing the daily diaries with bedtime habits, etc.).

Of the 137 couples who participated in the Skype information session, four couples subsequently withdrew (i.e., schedules no longer permitted participation or no longer interested) before completing Time 0 (T0) and the remaining 133 couples received separate emails with a link to the T0 baseline questionnaires, which took approximately an hour to complete. After receiving the questionnaires, two couples withdrew before completing any T0 questionnaires (one couple became pregnant and one couple determined that their schedules would no longer permit them to participate), and six couples did not complete T0 after multiple unsuccessful attempts to contact them. This resulted in a final sample of 125 couples. Included eligible couples \((n = 125)\) did not differ from eligible couples who withdrew or were excluded from the study \((n = 32)\) on age, relationship length, marriage length, or relationship satisfaction on the CSI-4 (Funk & Rogge, 2007) at screening.

Once both spouses had completed T0, they began receiving daily questionnaire links via email or text message at 7 p.m. their local time starting the evening after the second spouse completed T0 (or the following Monday evening if they completed T0 after Friday 5 p.m.) for 21 consecutive days (Times 1-21). Husbands received T1 an average of 2 days \((SD = 3.30)\) after completion of T0 and wives received T1 an average of 2.28 \((SD = 2.13)\) days after completion of T0. This study focuses on demographics, relationship length, and difficulties with emotion regulation assessed at T0, and negative behaviours and relationship satisfaction assessed daily over the three-week study period \((T1 - T21)\). All questionnaires were completed online using Remark WebSurvey hosted on a secure university server. Daily questionnaires took about 10 minutes to complete and spouses were asked to complete them each evening before going to bed; responses submitted up until 10 a.m. the next morning (participants’ local time) were considered on time and are included in the analyses. Out of the 5250 daily
questionnaires sent out, 5039 (95.98%) daily questionnaires were completed; of those, 164 (3.25%) were submitted late and were excluded from the analyses resulting in 4875 diaries for analyses. Spouses completed an average of 19.49 (SD = 3.19) daily diaries on time.

Couples received up to $135 for participation in all phases of the study as follows: $15 each for T0 (2 x $15 = $30) and $2.50 each per daily diary (2 x $2.50 x 21 days = $105). If individuals completed at least 15 of the daily diaries, they were also entered in a draw for one of five $100 prizes. All but five individuals (2%) completed at least 15 of the daily diaries and were entered in the draw.

Measures

Difficulties with Emotion Regulation. The Difficulties with Emotion Regulation Scale – Short Form (DERS-SF; Kaufman et al., 2016) is an 18-item self-report scale that assesses emotion regulation deficits across six subscales: strategies (e.g., “When I’m upset, I believe there is nothing I can do to make myself feel better”), non-acceptance (e.g., “When I’m upset, I become irritated at myself for feeling that way”), impulse (e.g., “When I’m upset, I lose control over my behavior”), goals (e.g., “When I’m upset, I have difficulty focusing on other things”), awareness (e.g., “I pay attention to how I feel”), and clarity (e.g., “I have difficulty making sense out of my feelings”). Participants rated how often each item applied to them on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always). Scores were averaged to yield a total score and subscale scores where higher values reflect greater difficulties regulating emotions. The total DERS-SF had excellent internal consistency for husbands ($\alpha = .90$) and good internal consistency for wives ($\alpha = .88$). For subscales, internal consistencies ranged from .79 to .93 for husbands and from .76 to .93 for wives.

Negative Behaviours. Two items were used to assess negative behaviours on each of the 21 days as follows: (a) “Did your partner do or say something that was negative or that hurt your feelings today?” and (b) “Did you do or say something that was negative or that hurt your partner’s feelings today?” Self and partner reports to these questions on each day were combined, such that if either spouse reported that the husband had done something negative, the husband received a 1 (Yes) and if neither reported that the husband had done something negative he received a 0 (No), and the
same coding was used if either spouse reported that the wife had done something negative.

**Relationship Satisfaction.** A single item from the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007) was used to assess spouses’ perceived satisfaction with their marriage on each of the 21 days (i.e., “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship today”). Participants reported their answer on a 7-point scale from 0 (*Extremely unhappy*) to 6 (*Perfect*).

**Data Analytic Strategy**

Given the nested (i.e., repeated measures of relationship satisfaction nested within individuals) and interdependent (i.e., dyadic) structure of the data, I tested the moderation hypotheses with multilevel modelling (MLM) using the MIXED procedure in SPSS using the standard over-time Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Repeated measures (i.e., time, negative behaviours and relationship satisfaction) were modelled at Level 1 and difficulties with emotion regulation and relationship length assessed at T0 were modelled at Level 2. I included time as a Level 1 covariate to improve the reliability of estimates because daily variables are likely to fluctuate and may increase or decrease within persons. I included relationship length as a Level 2 covariate because it is negatively related to relationship satisfaction (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). In this model, actor effects measure the extent to which spouses’ characteristics on a day relate to their own outcomes for the day, and partner effects measure the extent to which spouses’ characteristics on a day relate to their partner’s outcomes for the day. Specifically, I regressed daily relationship satisfaction onto daily negative behaviours, difficulties with emotion regulation, and the interaction between daily negative behaviours and difficulties with emotion regulation as per the following equations:

**Level 1**

\[
Y_{jt} (\text{Daily Relationship Satisfaction}) = \beta_{0jt} (\text{Wife Intercept}) + \beta_{1jt} (\text{Husband Intercept}) + \beta_{2jt} (\text{Wife Time}) + \beta_{3jt} (\text{Husband Time}) + \beta_{4jt} (\text{Wife Daily Negative Behaviours}) + \beta_{5jt} (\text{Husband Daily Negative Behaviours}) + r_{jt}
\]

**Level 2**

\[
\beta_{0jt} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}(\text{Wife Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{20}(\text{Husband Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{30}(\text{Relationship Length}) + \mu_{0jt}
\]

\[
\beta_{1jt} = \gamma_{01} + \gamma_{11}(\text{Wife Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{21}(\text{Husband Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{31}(\text{Relationship Length}) + \mu_{1jt}
\]
\[ \beta_{2j} = \gamma_{02} + \gamma_{12}(\text{Wife Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{22}(\text{Husband Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{32}(\text{Relationship Length}) + \mu_{2j} \]

\[ \beta_{3j} = \gamma_{03} + \gamma_{13}(\text{Wife Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{23}(\text{Husband Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{33}(\text{Relationship Length}) + \mu_{3j} \]

\[ \beta_{4j} = \gamma_{04} + \gamma_{14}(\text{Wife Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{24}(\text{Husband Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{34}(\text{Relationship Length}) + \mu_{4j} \]

\[ \beta_{5j} = \gamma_{05} + \gamma_{15}(\text{Wife Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{25}(\text{Husband Difficulties with Emotion Regulation}) + \gamma_{35}(\text{Relationship Length}) + \mu_{5j} \]

where \( Y_{jt} \) is the outcome (i.e., relationship satisfaction) for each spouse \( j \) at \( t \) points in time, \( \beta_{0j} \) and \( \beta_{1j} \) represent the intercept (i.e., mean level of the outcome for spouse \( j \)), \( \beta_{2j} \) and \( \beta_{3j} \) are the effects of time for spouse \( j \), \( \beta_{4j} \) and \( \beta_{5j} \) are the effects of negative behaviours for spouse \( j \) on day \( t \), and \( r_{jt} \) is the residual variance in repeated measurements for spouse \( j \).

Difficulties with emotion regulation and relationship length were grand mean centered to allow for ease of interpretation of intercept values, but time and negative behaviours were not centered as these variables have a meaningful zero value. I first constrained direct effects to be equal between husbands and wives, then I included sex and its interaction with predictors in all models to assess whether associations differed depending on participant sex. Finally, to interpret any sex differences, I ran simultaneous models where husband and wife paths could covary. When no sex differences were present, pooled results with husband and wife paths constrained to be equal are presented. When sex differences were present, results with husband and wife paths unconstrained are presented.

**Missing Data**

Of the 4875 on time diaries, 3.2% of the data for study variables (i.e., difficulties with emotion regulation, daily negative behaviours, and daily relationship satisfaction) were missing, which is well below the 15-20% rate of missing data that is typical for psychology studies (Enders, 2003). On the DERS-SF, 17 participants were missing a single item (0.4%) and I used item mean substitution to replace missing items (if the entire scale was missing no missing items were replaced). As the MIXED procedure in SPSS uses a restricted maximum likelihood approach to handle missing data at Level 1, the same number of observations across participants is not required and thus no further
steps were taken to deal with missing relationship satisfaction items (0.4%) or missing negative behaviour ratings (i.e., spouses left the item about negative behaviours for themselves or their partner that day blank; 2.4%).
Results

Descriptive Analyses

Means and standard deviations for difficulties with emotion regulation global score and subscales, daily negative behaviours, and daily relationship satisfaction and differences between husbands and wives on these variables are in Table 2. Husbands reported greater daily relationship satisfaction and lack of emotional awareness compared to wives, and as per the husband and wife combined report, husbands had more days with negative behaviours over the diary period than wives. Negative behaviour by husbands was identified an average of 2.33 out of 21 days and negative behaviour by wives was identified an average of 2.01 out of 21 days. To examine whether the difference in husband and wife negative behaviour was due to the husband or the wife report in the combined score, I examined reports by each spouse. Husbands reported that they behaved negatively on 160 days and that their wives behaved negatively on 163 days. Wives reported that they behaved negatively on 158 days and that their husbands behaved negatively on 214 days. Spouses agreed that they or their partner engaged in negative behaviour on 150 days. Thus, the difference between husbands’ and wives’ negative behaviours may be partially explained by the wives’ tendency to identify husbands’ negative behaviour rather than the husbands’ tendency to identify their own negative behaviour; $t(2323) = -3.52, p < .001, d = -.07$). There were no other significant differences between husbands and wives on study variables.

Descriptive Predicting Daily Relationship Satisfaction from the Interaction of Difficulties with Emotion Regulation and Daily Negative Behaviours

I tested all three interaction hypotheses in a single model to control for the effects of within-person and cross-partner interactions on outcomes. There was a significant interaction of participant sex and actor and partner difficulties with emotion regulation. Thus, results with husband and wife paths unconstrained are presented in Table 3. In the table, within-person effects are labelled as actor effects and cross-partner effects are labelled as partner effects, for example, husbands’ effects on wives’ outcomes are in the
wife panel on the left and labelled partner effects. Associations that differ between husbands and wives are noted in the text.

As shown in Table 3 and consistent with Hypothesis 1, husbands’ and wives’ daily negative behaviours were negatively associated with their own and partner’s daily relationship satisfaction, suggesting that spouses who behaved negatively on a given day reported lower relationship satisfaction and had partners who reported lower relationship satisfaction that day compared to spouses who did not behave negatively. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, husbands’ and wives’ difficulties with emotion regulation were negatively associated with daily relationship satisfaction such that spouses who reported greater difficulties regulating their emotions at baseline were less satisfied with their relationships each day compared to spouses who reported fewer difficulties regulating their emotions. This association was stronger for husbands. Husbands’ (but not wives’) difficulties with emotion regulation were negatively associated with their partner’s daily relationship satisfaction and this was a significant difference between husbands and wives. Thus, wives were less satisfied with their relationships each day when their husbands reported greater difficulties regulating their emotions at baseline compared to when their husbands reported fewer difficulties regulating their emotions. As shown at the bottom of Table 3 and contrary to Hypothesis 3, none of the three predicted interactions were significant; difficulties with emotion regulation did not moderate the associations between daily negative behaviour and relationship satisfaction.

Secondary Analyses with the Six Dimensions of Difficulties with Emotion Regulation

In secondary analyses, I examined whether difficulties with each of the six dimensions of emotion regulation separately predicted daily relationship satisfaction and moderated associations between daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction. There were no significant sex differences in the model with non-acceptance, but there were significant interactions between participant sex and the strategies, impulse, goals, awareness, and clarity dimensions of emotion regulation difficulties and there was a significant three-way interaction between participant sex, partner daily negative behaviours, and actor difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviour. Results with husband and wife paths constrained for the non-acceptance model are in Table 4,
and results of the other five dimensions with husband and wife paths unconstrained are in Table 5. The results of the full model including Level 1 and Level 2 predictors is shown for the analyses of non-acceptance in Table 4; however, only the results of the Level 2 predictors are shown for the other five dimensions in Table 5. The pattern of results for main effects of the covariates and daily negative behaviours were consistent across each of the five dimensional models and were the same as the pooled model in Table 4 (with the exception that wives’ relationship length did not significantly negatively predict their own daily relationship satisfaction in the models with strategies or clarity). Thus, only Level 2 results excluding relationship length are presented in Table 5 for simplicity. Associations that differ between husbands and wives are noted.

I will describe all the main effects in Table 4 and 5 first, and then I will describe the interactions. As shown in Table 4 and consistent with the previous analyses, spouses’ daily negative behaviours were negatively associated with their own and partner’s daily relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 1), and for the most part difficulties with emotion regulation on the six subscales were negatively related to daily relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 2). Specifically, spouses’ non-acceptance of emotional responses (see Table 4) and spouses’ lack of strategies, lack of emotional awareness, and lack of emotional clarity (see Table 5) were all negatively associated with their own daily relationship satisfaction. All these associations were stronger for husbands, except for non-acceptance of emotion responses where no gender differences were present. As shown in Table 5, husbands’ impulse control difficulties and difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviours were negatively associated with their own daily relationship satisfaction; the same associations were not significant for wives and were significantly different from the associations for husbands. Regarding partner effects, spouses’ non-acceptance of emotional responses (see Table 4) and lack of emotional clarity (see Table 5) were negatively associated with their partner’s daily relationship satisfaction. As shown in Table 5, husbands’ (but not wives’) lack of strategies, impulse control difficulties, difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviour, and lack of emotional awareness were negatively associated with their partners’ daily relationship satisfaction and these results were significantly different between husbands and wives.

Next, I examined the interactions between negative behaviours and each dimension of difficulty with emotion regulation (Hypothesis 3). To interpret the significant interaction effects, I plotted simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below
the mean for the moderator as per Aiken and West (1991). Of the interactions tested, only four were significant and one supported my hypotheses and three did not. First, wives’ lack of strategies interacted with their own daily negative behaviours to predict their own daily relationship satisfaction; this was not significantly different from the corresponding interaction for the husbands. As shown in Figure 2 and consistent with my expectations, simple slopes analyses indicated that the negative association between wives’ daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction was stronger when wives reported greater lack of strategies. Second, wives’ lack of emotional clarity and husbands’ lack of emotional awareness interacted with their own daily negative behaviours to predict their partner’s daily relationship satisfaction; these were not significantly different from the corresponding interactions for the partner.

As shown in Figure 3 and contrary to my expectations, simple slopes analyses indicated that the negative association between wives’ daily negative behaviours and husbands’ daily relationship satisfaction was weaker when wives reported greater lack of emotional clarity. Similarly, as shown in Figure 4, simple slopes analyses indicated that the negative association between husbands’ daily negative behaviours and wives’ daily relationship satisfaction was weaker when husbands reported greater lack of emotional awareness. Finally, husbands’ difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviour interacted with wives’ daily negative behaviours predicting husbands’ daily relationship satisfaction; this was a significant difference between husbands and wives. As shown in Figure 5 and contrary to my expectations, simple slopes analyses indicated that the negative association between wives’ daily negative behaviours and husbands’ daily relationship satisfaction was weaker when husbands reported greater difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviours.

To summarize the interactions, wives’ lack of strategies strengthened the association between their daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction, but wives’ lack of emotional clarity and husbands’ lack of emotional awareness weakened the associations between their daily negative behaviours and their partners’ daily relationship satisfaction. Additionally, husbands’ difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviours weakened the association between wives’ daily negative behaviours and husbands’ daily relationship satisfaction.


Discussion

Managing emotions and negative behaviours are necessary in any intimate relationship and how effectively partners do so is related relationship satisfaction (see Caughlin & Vengelisti, 2006; Vater & Schroder-Abe, 2015). I examined how difficulties with emotion regulation and daily negative behaviours predicted daily relationship satisfaction in a 21-day daily diary study of mixed-sex married community couples. Given that negative behaviour in a relationship may be unescapable at times, I also examined whether partners’ ability to regulate emotions moderated the association between daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction. As predicted, when spouses behaved negatively, they and their partners were less satisfied with their relationships each day. To the degree that spouses reported difficulties with emotion regulation (assessed globally and on most dimensions), they were less satisfied with their relationships each day and these effects were stronger for husbands than for wives. Furthermore, only husbands who reported greater difficulties with emotion regulation (globally and on most dimensions) had partners who were less satisfied with their relationships each day. Contrary to predictions, global difficulties with emotion regulation did not interact with daily negative behaviours to predict daily relationship satisfaction within- or cross-partner, although there were several interactions between the individual dimensions of difficulties with emotion regulation and daily negative behaviour.

The pattern of results, whether with the global difficulties in emotion regulation measure or the dimensions, suggests that difficulties with emotion regulation and negative behaviours may operate independently rather than interactively to affect relationship satisfaction. Behaving negatively in the relationship from day to day predicted less happy marital relationships, which is similar to previous research suggesting that negative behaviours reduce relationship satisfaction over time (see Caughlin & Vengelisti, 2006; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and with interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). When spouses behave negatively, such as calling their partner stupid or ignoring their partner during dinner, their partner may feel their needs in the relationship are unmet or they may question their self-worth, which may lead to unhappiness.
With respect to difficulties regulating emotions, to the extent that spouses reported difficulties regulating their emotions globally and on the six dimensions, they were less satisfied with their relationships each day and this association was almost always stronger for husbands. Furthermore, to the extent that husbands, but not wives, reported difficulties regulating their emotions their partners were less satisfied with their relationships each day and this association was significantly different for wives, whose emotion regulation difficulties were mostly unrelated to their husbands’ marital satisfaction. Spouses who have difficulties managing emotions may be unable to cope with emotionally challenging events that arise in their relationship or they may express more frequent and intense negative emotions towards their partner, leading to relationship dissatisfaction for themselves and their partners. These results are consistent with research employing a multidimensional conceptualization of emotion regulation where global difficulties regulating emotions were associated with poor relationship outcomes (Tani et al., 2015; Holley et al., 2018). However, the relationship eroding effects of husbands’ lack of emotional awareness and wives’ non-acceptance of emotional responses were different from Rick and colleagues’ (2017) study where difficulties with these dimensions of emotion regulation had positive relationship effects. These differences might be explained by the differing distress levels of couples in the two studies; in Rick and colleagues’ study, couples were distressed and seeking therapy, and couples in this study were recruited from the community and only 6.7% were in the distressed range (i.e., scoring below 51.5) on the CSI-16 (Funk & Rogge, 2007) as measured at baseline.

Overall, husbands’ difficulties regulating their emotions globally and on the six dimensions were consistently negatively related to their own and their partners’ relationship satisfaction, and these associations were almost always stronger for husbands than wives. Thus, husbands’ difficulties regulating their emotions seem particularly important for their own and their partner’s relationship satisfaction. This might be because traditional gender norms dictate that women should be more emotionally expressive than men (see Brody, Hall, & Stokes, 2016) and although the effects are still negative, women’s difficulty regulating their emotions may be more acceptable and non-consequential to how their partner’s view the relationship. Conversely, traditional gender norms dictate that men should be stoic and unemotional (see Brody et al., 2016) and thus, to the degree that men have difficulties regulating their emotions they may violate
these expectations, strengthening the effects of emotion regulation difficulties on relationship satisfaction.

Global difficulties with emotion regulation did not moderate the association between daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction, which was unexpected. This could be because general trait-level difficulties regulating emotions are less relevant to daily relationship satisfaction compared to how spouses manage their emotions in the moment that negative behaviour occurs. Lending support to this notion, associations between state-level measures of difficulties with emotion regulation and relationship outcomes have emerged in laboratory interaction studies of couple conflict (e.g., Bloch et al., 2014; Vater & Schorder-Abe, 2015). Another possibility is that spouses in this study may have been considering their abilities to regulate emotions in all kinds of situations when they responded to questions about how they regulated their emotions, not just interpersonal situations and not just situations involving their partner. Thus, this measure of trait-level difficulties with emotion regulation may not have accurately represented how spouses manage emotions when interacting with their partner.

Although global difficulties with emotion regulation did not moderate the association between daily negative behaviours and daily relationship satisfaction, dimensional analyses revealed several significant interactions predicting actor and partner outcomes. I interpret these interactions with caution however, given that only four of 33 interactions with the dimensions of emotion regulation were significant. As expected, wives’ greater difficulties engaging in strategies to regulate negative emotions potentiated the detrimental effects of their daily negative behaviours on daily relationship satisfaction, but husbands’ lack of emotional awareness and wives’ lack of emotional clarity were protective for their partner’s daily relationship satisfaction when husbands and wives engaged in daily negative behaviours. Spouses who are less aware of and clear about their negative emotions may express less distress in relation to negative behaviours, thus weakening the effects of daily negative behaviours on their partner’s daily relationship satisfaction. There was also a significant cross-partner interaction such that husbands’ difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviours weakened the association between wives’ daily negative behaviours and husbands’ daily relationship satisfaction. Husbands who have difficulties getting work done or concentrating when
they experience negative emotions may engage in problem-solving around their partner’s negative behaviours, thus reducing the negative effects on satisfaction.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This study has several limitations. To begin, there are multiple concerns with measurement that may affect the validity of the conclusions that can be drawn from this study. First, all but one measure in this study were self-report and thus may be influenced by common method bias (i.e., the self-report nature of the questionnaires may account for shared error variance among the variables) and social desirability bias; for example, individuals may have under-reported difficulties with emotion regulation or negative relationship behaviours, while over-reporting relationship satisfaction to present themselves more favourably. Using a combination of different methods (e.g., self-report, observational) in future would be helpful to mitigate biases. Second, I measured daily relationship satisfaction using a single-item that may not fully capture the manifestation of satisfaction in relationships; however, daily relationship satisfaction was significantly positively correlated with total scores on the CSI-16 as measured at baseline (ranging from $r = .38$ to $r = .55$ for husbands and from $r = .30$ to $r = .58$ for wives over 21 days). Third, I used a broad question to assess occurrence of negative behaviours, and how reported behaviours differed in terms of type (e.g., negative communication, neglect, etc.), severity, or frequency is unknown. It is possible that the specific mention of “hurt feelings” in the question about negative behaviours may have influenced what participants reported. Nevertheless, the types of negative behaviors that participants in the study described ranged from minor mistakes (e.g., partner made the wrong takeout order) to overt criticism (e.g., “He said that I can be selfish and rude”), suggesting that the reported behaviours encompassed a broad range of negative behaviours and were not necessarily specific to hurt feelings. Given that the circumstances in which negative behaviours occur can affect their association with relationship outcomes, it will be important to clearly distinguish types of negative behaviours and assess the severity and frequency of specific negative behaviours in future. Fourth, the measure of emotion regulation abilities in this study, the DERS-SF, focuses primarily on difficulties regulating negative emotions and it is possible that difficulties regulating positive emotions may interact with negative behaviours and contribute to relationship outcomes. The desire to downregulate positive emotions may seem counterintuitive, but in romantic relationships
the failure to temper laughter in response to a partner’s failure or bad luck may have serious negative consequences (Levenson et al., 2014).

The next area of concern is the study design. I assessed how global difficulties with emotion regulation reported at baseline interacted with daily negative behaviours over three weeks; however, it is likely that many factors, including situational features or cognitive processes, influence emotion regulation within brief periods. For example, individuals may be able to maintain goal-directed behavior when experiencing negative affect but may have difficulties when experiencing extremely high levels of negative affect or negative affect about a specific relationship issue. Measuring emotion regulation as a trait does not take into account these individual or situational factors that might affect ability to regulation emotions. As such, it may be useful to conceptualize emotion regulation as a fluid construct that can vary from day-to-day and moment-to-moment and to use daily or momentary sampling techniques to measure state-level emotion regulation abilities in future (see Lavender, Tull, DiLillo, Messman-Moore, & Gratz, 2015).

Clinical Implications and Conclusions

Overall, the results of this study suggest that negative behaviours and difficulties with emotion regulation are potential targets for couple interventions to improve relationship satisfaction. Many evidence-based couple therapies already target negative behaviours by emphasizing behavioural change strategies (e.g., communication training, behavioural exchange). Changes in target behaviour have positive short-term effects on relationship satisfaction (Christensen et al., 2004), but changes are not long lasting (see Snyder & Halford, 2012). Spouses may not benefit from communication training or behavioural exchange in the long-term because they lack strategies to deal with strong negative emotions, which may in turn impair their ability to engage in constructive communication behaviours. Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), an individual therapy aimed at improving emotion regulation abilities, has already been modified for couples and does improve partners’ emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction (Kirby & Baucom, 2007). As negative behaviour in a relationship may be unavoidable at times, addressing individual deficits in emotion regulation may be a more viable target for interventions to improve relationship satisfaction than negative behaviours, and assisting
couples to develop adaptive strategies to deal with challenging emotions may help them to build more satisfying relationships.
## Tables and Figures

### Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

<table>
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<td>28</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13.6</td>
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*Note. One wife did not report racial identity, two wives did not report sexual orientation, two wives and one husband did not report level of education, and one wife did not report employment status.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wives</th>
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<td>2.18</td>
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<td>1.96</td>
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<td>.09</td>
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<td>2.18</td>
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<td>DERS-SF Awareness</td>
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<td>0.81</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>0.95</td>
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<td>Daily Relationship Satisfaction</td>
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<td>1.18</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.16</td>
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*Note. DERS-SF = Difficulties with Emotion Regulation Scale – Short Form.
Range of DERS-SF = 1-5; range of daily relationship satisfaction = 0-6.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Table 3. Predicting Daily Relationship Satisfaction from the Interaction of Difficulties with Emotion Regulation and Daily Negative Behaviours

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<td>-3.38**</td>
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Note. DERS-SF = Difficulties with Emotion Regulation Scale – Short Form; NB = Negative Behaviours.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Table 4. Predicting Daily Relationship Satisfaction from the Interaction of the Non-Acceptance of Emotional Responses and Daily Negative Behaviours

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Note. NB = Negative Behaviours.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Table 5. Predicting Actor Daily Relationship Satisfaction from the Interaction of Difficulties with Emotion Regulation Dimensions and Daily Negative Behaviours

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Note. NB = Negative Behaviours. Only Level 2 results excluding relationship length are depicted in the Table.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Figure 1. Flowchart of couples included in analyses.
Figure 2. Wives' lack of strategies moderates the association between wives’ daily negative behaviours and wives’ daily relationship satisfaction.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Figure 3. Wives’ lack of emotional clarity moderates the association between wives’ daily negative behaviours and husbands’ daily relationship satisfaction.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Husbands’ lack of emotional awareness moderates the association between husbands’ daily negative behaviours and wives’ daily relationship satisfaction.

\*p < .05, \**p < .01, \***p < .001
Figure 5. Husbands’ difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviour moderates the association between wives’ daily negative behaviours and husbands’ daily relationship satisfaction.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
References


