

How Do Relationship Maintenance Behaviors Affect Individual Well-Being? A Contextual Perspective

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Abstract

How do relationship maintenance behaviors affect individual well-being? Given that people who invest time and effort toward achieving important goals see their outcomes as more reflective of their skills and abilities than do people who invest less time and effort, engaging in relationship maintenance behaviors may lead people to experience increased individual well-being when those behaviors appear to be successful but decreased well-being when they appear to be unsuccessful. A diary study of romantic relationships, a diary study of friendships, and a longitudinal study of newlyweds provided support for this prediction. In all three studies, relationship maintenance behaviors were negatively associated with depressive mood when followed by relatively high relationship quality, but positively associated with depressive mood when followed by relatively low relationship quality. Accordingly, relationship maintenance processes are not inherently beneficial or harmful; their intrapersonal implications depend on the context in which they occur.

Keywords

relationship maintenance, interdependence, depression, marriage, conflict

Remaining satisfied with a close relationship requires engaging in a variety of relationship maintenance behaviors. Partners in close relationships will inevitably disagree with one another and need to compromise, hurt one another and need to forgive, experience distress and need to support one another, and be angry at one another and need to accommodate. Indeed, a robust body of research indicates that behaviors such as forgiving (see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006), accommodating (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), providing support (e.g., Pasch & Bradbury, 1998), self-disclosing (Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, & Meeus, 2004), and expressing gratitude (Lambert, Fincham, & Graham, 2011) tend to be associated with higher levels of relationship quality.

A large body of theoretical and empirical work has established a number of individual-level predictors of relationship maintenance behaviors. According to Karney and Bradbury's (1995) vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of marriage, partners' behavioral exchanges are jointly determined by each individual's enduring characteristics, life circumstances, and relationship satisfaction. Regarding individuals' enduring characteristics, for example, insecurely attached individuals tend to be more likely than securely attached individuals to engage in important relationship maintenance behaviors, such as accommodation (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995). Regarding individuals' life circumstances, people who face relatively low levels of

stress at work tend to be less argumentative with their partners at home (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). Regarding individuals' relationship satisfaction, people who are more satisfied with their relationship report performing relationship maintenance behaviors more frequently than do intimates who are less satisfied (e.g., Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Nevertheless, research has not yet established the individual-level *consequences* of relationship maintenance behaviors. The fact that relationship maintenance behaviors tend to benefit relational well-being suggests that they should benefit individual well-being. After all, a robust body of research indicates that having a satisfying intimate relationship is strongly positively associated with individual well-being (Davila, Karney, Hall, & Bradbury, 2003; Whisman & Bruce,

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1999). Accordingly, the tendency to engage in relationship maintenance behaviors should lead to increased individual well-being through increased relationship satisfaction, whereas the tendency to avoid such behaviors should lead to decreased individual well-being through decreased relationship satisfaction. In other words, subsequent relationship satisfaction should *mediate* the effects of relationship maintenance behaviors on individual well-being.

Recent research challenges this idea, however. Specifically, whereas much of the research demonstrating a positive association between relationship maintenance behaviors and relationship satisfaction is cross-sectional, a growing body of longitudinal research suggests that certain maintenance behaviors not only sometimes fail to maintain or increase relationship satisfaction over time, they sometimes decrease relationship satisfaction over time (McNulty, 2008; McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008; McNulty & Russell, 2010; for review, see McNulty, 2010). For example, McNulty (2008) demonstrated that although the tendency to be more forgiving of a partner's transgressions was associated with relatively higher levels of subsequent satisfaction among people with partners who rarely engaged in transgressions, the same tendency was associated with relatively *lower* subsequent relationship satisfaction among people with partners who more frequently engaged in transgressions. Likewise, McNulty and Russell (2010) demonstrated that although the tendency to behave in an accommodative manner while discussing relationship problems was associated with relatively higher subsequent satisfaction among people who faced mostly minor problems, that same tendency was associated with relatively *lower* subsequent satisfaction among people who faced more severe problems. In other words, sometimes attempts to benefit the relationship work, sometimes they fail, and sometimes they do more harm than good.

The fact that the implications of relationship maintenance behaviors for relationship satisfaction are inconsistent suggests an alternative role of subsequent relationship satisfaction in the association between relationship maintenance behaviors and individual well-being—subsequent relationship satisfaction may *moderate* the effects of relationship maintenance behaviors on individual well-being. Specifically, like people who invest time and effort into any goal, people who invest time and effort into maintaining a quality relationship should see their relationship outcomes as more reflective of their skills and abilities and thus be more strongly affected by those relationship outcomes than should people who invest less time and effort. Indeed, expending more effort pursuing important goals leads people to make more internal attributions for the outcomes of those pursuits (Covington & Omelich, 1979; McCrea & Hirt, 2001), and models of depression posit that such internal attributions lead people to experience more positive emotions when they succeed and more negative emotions when they fail (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989). Accordingly, the tendency to engage in relationship maintenance behaviors may lead people to experience increased individual well-being when those behaviors appear to be successful (i.e., are followed by relatively high relationship satisfaction), but decreased

well-being when they appear to be unsuccessful (i.e., are followed by relatively low relationship satisfaction).

We conducted three studies to test this prediction. Study 1 was a diary study of romantic relationships in which people reported on their relationship maintenance behaviors, relationship satisfaction, and sadness every day for 2 weeks. Study 2 was a diary study of friendships in which people reported on their relationship maintenance behaviors, relationship satisfaction, and depressive mood 11 times over the course of 3 weeks. Study 3 was a multiwave, 4-year longitudinal study of newlywed couples in which couples were observed engaging in a specific relationship maintenance behavior (i.e., compromising during a problem-solving discussion) and subsequently reported relationship satisfaction and depressive mood. In all three studies, we examined the evidence for two possibilities. In one analysis, we examined whether subsequent relationship satisfaction *mediated* the effects of relationship maintenance on individual well-being. In the second analysis, we examined whether subsequent relationship satisfaction *moderated* the effects of relationship maintenance on individual well-being. Given evidence that relationship maintenance behaviors do not consistently benefit relationship satisfaction, we predicted that subsequent satisfaction would moderate the implications of relationship maintenance behaviors for changes in individual well-being, such that relationship maintenance behaviors would be associated with less depressive mood when people subsequently viewed the relationship relatively positively but with greater depressive mood when people subsequently viewed the relationship relatively negatively.

Study 1

Study 1 used data from a diary study of romantic relationships. Every day for 2 weeks, participants reported the extent to which they had engaged in various relationship maintenance behaviors, their satisfaction with their relationship, and their levels of sadness. We predicted that engaging in more relationship maintenance behaviors would be associated with decreased sadness when participants subsequently reported being relatively satisfied with their relationship, but associated with increased sadness when participants subsequently reported being relatively dissatisfied with their relationship.

Method

Participants. The participants were 76 undergraduate students (69 women) from a large New Zealand university. All participants had been involved in a romantic relationship for at least 1 month ($M = 30.34$, $SD = 40.38$). Participants had a mean age of 22.43 ($SD = 5.11$). The majority (57%) identified as New Zealand European; others identified as Asian (19%), European (non-New Zealand; 14%), Indian (5%), and "other" (5%).

Procedure. Participants were offered partial course credit to complete a 14-day online diary. On average, participants completed 12.28 diary assessments. Each diary record asked participants to report on how they felt and behaved that day.

Measures

Relationship maintenance. Participants rated the degree to which they had engaged in four different relationship maintenance behaviors that day: “I was supportive to my partner,” “I tried to resolve any problems in our relationship,” “I was affectionate and loving toward my partner,” and “I tried to maintain or improve the quality of our relationship” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Scores could range from 4 to 28, with higher scores indicating greater frequency of maintenance behaviors (α ranged from .64 to .77 over the 14 assessments).

Relationship satisfaction. Participants reported the extent to which they were “satisfied” with their relationship, where 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*.

Sadness. Participants reported the extent to which they “felt sad,” where 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*.

Results

We conducted two sets of analyses. First, we tested whether participants’ satisfaction with their relationship the day after engaging in relationship maintenance behaviors mediated the effects of those behaviors on sadness the day after those behaviors by following the procedures described by MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, and Lockwood (2007) to establish the two criteria necessary to establish mediation: (a) that relationship maintenance behaviors predicted subsequent satisfaction and (b) that subsequent satisfaction predicted subsequent well-being, controlling for relationship maintenance behaviors. To examine evidence for the first criterion, we regressed subsequent satisfaction onto the prior day’s relationship maintenance behaviors, controlling for time, in the first level of a two-level model, where random effects, confirmed as necessary on all Level 2 parameters using deviance tests (see West, Welch, & Galecki, 2007), control for the nonindependence of repeated assessments. Consistent with the idea that relationship maintenance behaviors are not always effective at increasing satisfaction, engaging in more relationship maintenance was not significantly related to subsequent relationship satisfaction, $B = .01$, $t(74) = .53$, $p = .60$. The failure to find evidence for this first criterion indicates that subsequent satisfaction did not mediate the effects of relationship maintenance behaviors on subsequent sadness.

To examine whether participants’ satisfaction with their relationship the day after engaging in relationship maintenance behaviors moderated the association between those behaviors and changes in sadness between that day and the previous day, we estimated the following first level of a another two-level model:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y_{it}(\text{Next Day's Sadness}) = & \pi_0 + \pi_1(\text{Time}) + \pi_2(\text{Prior Day's Sadness}) \\
 & + \pi_3(\text{Prior Day's Relationship Maintenance}) \\
 & + \pi_4(\text{Next Day's Satisfaction}) \\
 & + \pi_5(\text{Prior Day's Relationship Maintenance} \\
 & \times \text{Next Day's Satisfaction}) + e_{it},
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{1}$$

where random effects were only confirmed as necessary on the Level 2 intercept and time parameters.

Results are presented in the left two columns of Table 1. Subsequent satisfaction was negatively associated with sadness. Controlling for this association, the Satisfaction \times Relationship Maintenance interaction was significant. A plot depicting that interactive effect for people 1 *SD* above and below the mean on each variable involved in the interaction appears in Panel A of Figure 1. Consistent with predictions, simple slopes analyses revealed that engaging in more relationship maintenance was negatively associated with sadness when people were subsequently 1 *SD* more satisfied with their relationship than the mean, $B = -.05$, $t(787) = -2.98$, $p < .01$, but positively associated with sadness when they were subsequently 1 *SD* less satisfied with their relationship than the mean, $B = .04$, $t(787) = 1.96$, $p = .05$. Also, subsequent satisfaction was associated with less sadness among those who engaged in 1 *SD* more maintenance, $B = .45$, $t(74) = 10.32$, $p < .01$, but unassociated with sadness among those who engaged in 1 *SD* less maintenance, $B = .00$, $t(74) = .29$, $p = .77$. The interaction remained significant after controlling for prior day’s satisfaction, $B = -.03$, $t(785) = -3.48$, $p < .01$.¹

Discussion

Study 1 provided preliminary evidence that the implications of relationship maintenance behaviors for individual well-being depend on subsequent relationship satisfaction. Specifically, relationship maintenance behaviors were negatively associated with sadness when intimates subsequently reported relatively high relationship satisfaction, but positively associated with sadness when intimates subsequently reported relatively low relationship satisfaction.

Study 2

In Study 2, we wanted to examine whether the effects demonstrated in Study 1 extend to another type of close relationship—friendships. We also wanted to test potential gender effects, which could not be examined in Study 1 due to the low number of male participants. Approximately once every other day for 3 weeks, participants reported the extent to which they had engaged in various maintenance behaviors in a close friendship, their satisfaction with that friendship, and their levels of depressive mood since the last log. We again tested whether subsequent satisfaction with the friendship mediated and/or moderated the implications of relationship maintenance behaviors for subsequent depressive mood. We again predicted that engaging in more relationship maintenance behaviors would be associated with decreases in depressive mood when participants were subsequently relatively satisfied with their friendship, but associated with increases in depressive mood when participants were subsequently relatively dissatisfied with their friendship.

Table 1. Effects of Relationship Maintenance, Subsequent satisfaction, and Their Interaction on Changes in Sadness and Depressive Mood.

	Study 1: Next-Day Sadness		Study 2: Next-Day Depressive Mood		Study 3: Trajectory of Depressive Mood	
	π	r	π	r	π	r
Initial well-being	.10**	.13	.20**	.44	—	—
Time	-.00	.02	.00	.02	.40**	.32
Relationship maintenance (M)	-.00	.01	.00	.00	-.05	.04
Satisfaction (S)	-.55**	.75	-.03**	.20	-.00	.00
M \times S	-.03**	.13	-.02**	.27	-.28*	.17

Note. In Study 1, $df = 787$ for M, M \times S, and initial depressive mood predicting depressive mood and 74 for all other analyses; In Study 2, $df = 197$; In Study 3, $df = 102$ for time and 202 for all other analyses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Method

Participants. The participants were 204 undergraduate students (148 women, 43 men, 13 did not report sex) at a large university in the southeastern United States who had a mean age of 19.31 years ($SD = 1.32$). All participants reported on a close friendship that had existed for at least 3 months ($M = 15.11$ months). The majority (66%) identified as White; others identified as Black or African American (17%), another ethnicity or as two or more ethnicities (11%), or did not report ethnicity (7%).

Procedure. Participants were recruited through a large undergraduate class and were offered extra credit for participating. Beginning at the start of the week following a laboratory session unrelated to the current analyses, participants completed up to 11 online diary assessments, approximately every other day, over the course of 3 weeks. On average, participants completed 9.46 diary assessments.

Measures

Relationship maintenance. At each assessment, participants reported the extent to which they had engaged in six behaviors “since the last log:” “I have attempted to make my interactions with my friend very enjoyable,” “I have tried to build up my friend’s self-esteem, including giving compliments, etc.,” “I have asked how my friend’s day has gone,” “I have tried to be fun and interesting with my friend,” “I have encouraged my friend to disclose his/her thoughts and feelings to me,” and “I have worked hard on my relationship with my friend” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 8 = *strongly agree*). Scores could range from 6 to 48, with higher scores indicating greater frequency of maintenance behaviors. This measure demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha \geq .90$ over the 11 assessments).

Relationship satisfaction. Participants’ friendship satisfaction was assessed at each assessment with 1 item—“I have been happy with my relationship with my friend since the last log,” where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 8 = *strongly agree*.

Depressive mood. Participants’ depressive mood was assessed at each assessment with 1 item—“How much did you feel depressed since the last log?,” where 1 = *not at all* and 5 = *extremely depressed*.

Results

Once again, we examined evidence for the first criterion necessary to establish mediation by regressing subsequent satisfaction onto the prior day’s relationship maintenance behaviors, controlling for time, in the first level of a two-level model. As was found in Study 1, engaging in more relationship maintenance behaviors was not significantly associated with subsequent relationship satisfaction, $B = .02$, $t(197) = 1.21$, $p = .23$, indicating that subsequent satisfaction did not mediate the effects of relationship maintenance behaviors on subsequent depressive mood.

Next, we tested whether subsequent satisfaction moderated the effects of relationship maintenance behaviors on subsequent depressive mood using Equation 1, where this time deviance tests indicated random effects were necessary on all parameters at Level 2. Results are presented in the middle two columns of Table 1. As in Study 1, subsequent satisfaction was negatively associated with depressive mood. Controlling for this association, the Satisfaction \times Relationship Maintenance interaction was significant. A direct test of the Participant Sex \times Satisfaction \times Relationship Maintenance interaction indicated that this effect did not vary across men and women, $B = .00$, $t(196) = .36$, *ns*. A plot depicting that interactive effect for people 1 *SD* above and below the mean on each variable involved in the interaction appears in Panel B of Figure 1. Consistent with predictions, simple slopes analyses revealed that relationship maintenance was negatively associated with depressive mood when people were subsequently 1 *SD* more satisfied with their friendship, $B = -.04$, $t(197) = -2.27$, $p = .02$, but positively associated with depressive mood when they were subsequently 1 *SD* less satisfied with their friendship, $B = .04$, $t(197) = 2.57$, $p = .01$. Also, subsequent satisfaction was associated with less depressive mood among those who engaged in 1 *SD* more maintenance, $B = -.07$, $t(197) = -4.02$, $p < .01$, but unassociated with depressive mood among those who engaged in 1 *SD* less maintenance, $B = .01$, $t(197) = .72$, $p = .47$. The interaction remained significant after controlling for satisfaction at the prior log, $B = -.01$, $t(197) = -3.80$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

Study 2 provided further evidence that the implications of relationship maintenance behaviors for individual well-being

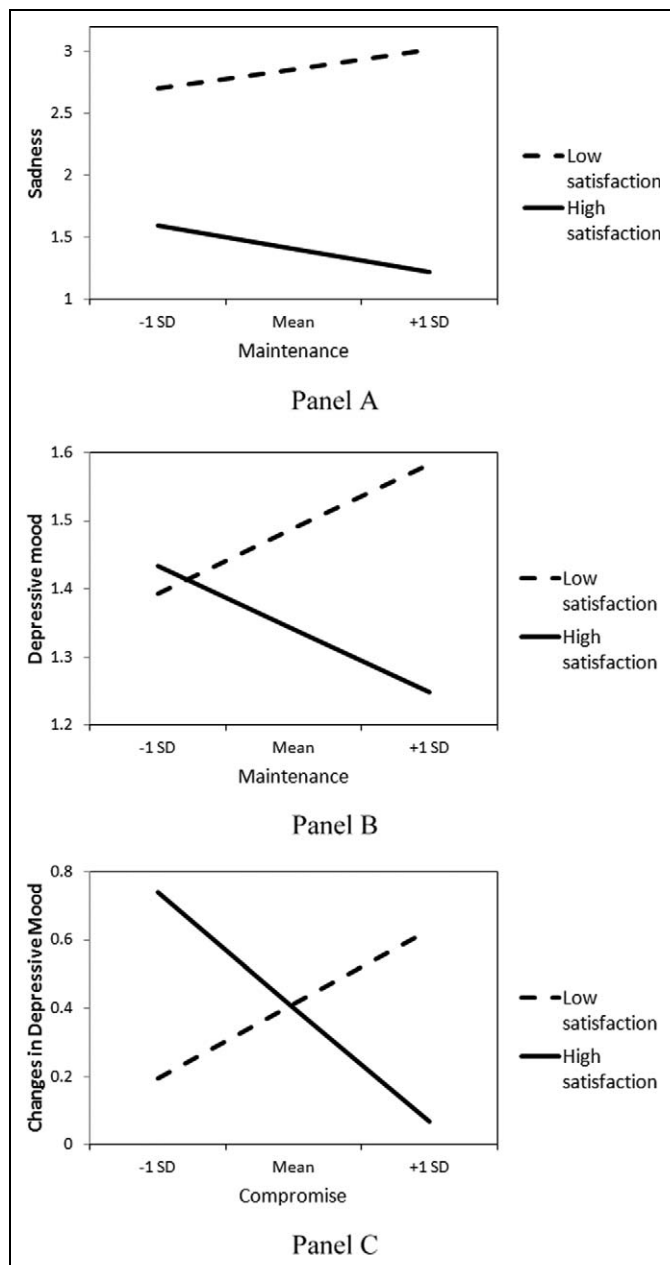


Figure 1. Interactive effects of relationship maintenance and subsequent satisfaction on individual well-being.

depend on subsequent relationship satisfaction. Specifically, relationship maintenance behaviors were negatively associated with depressive mood when intimates subsequently reported relatively high friendship satisfaction, but positively associated with depressive mood when intimates subsequently reported relatively low friendship satisfaction.

Study 3

Study 3 expanded on Studies 1 and 2 in two important ways. First, whereas Studies 1 and 2 used self-reports of relationship maintenance, Study 3 used observations of married spouses'

tendencies to engage in a common relationship maintenance behavior—compromising during problem-solving discussions. Second, whereas Studies 1 and 2 assessed changes in depressive mood over short periods of time, Study 3 assessed depressive mood 8 times over 4 years. We tested whether subsequent satisfaction mediated and/or moderated the effects of compromise on changes in depressive mood and predicted that the tendency to compromise would be associated with less depressive mood when participants subsequently reported relatively greater marital satisfaction, but associated with more depressive mood when participants subsequently reported relatively lower marital satisfaction.

Method

Participants. The participants were couples involved in a broader longitudinal study of 135 newlyweds.² At baseline, husbands were on average 26.90 years old ($SD = 4.57$) and had received 16.85 years ($SD = 2.54$) of education. The majority (92%) were White. On average, wives were 25.21 years old ($SD = 3.59$) and had received 19.91 years ($SD = 2.30$) of education. The majority (94%) were White.

Procedure. Before a baseline laboratory session, participants were mailed measures of depressive mood, and marital satisfaction that they completed at home and brought to the session. At the session, spouses participated in two problem-solving discussions. Each spouse identified an important area of difficulty in the marriage and then the couple participated in two, 10-min videotaped discussions in which they were left alone to “work towards some resolution or agreement” for each area of difficulty. After completing their interactions, couples were paid \$80.

Seven times after the initial assessment, at approximately 6- to 8-month intervals, couples were mailed a packet of questionnaires that contained the same measures of depressive mood and marital satisfaction. Couples were paid \$50 each time they completed these measures.

Measures

Tendency to compromise. After watching the recordings, one of four coders rated the extent to which each spouse offered to “compromise to solve the problem” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely/a lot*). We collapsed across the two conversations to form an index of the average tendency for each spouse to compromise. The predicted effect did not differ across discussions of own and partner topics, $z = 1.31$, $p = .19$. To assess reliability, approximately 20% of the discussions were double-coded. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) indicated that the coding system was reliable (for husbands, $ICC = .77$; for wives, $ICC = .73$).

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed with a version of the Semantic Differential (SMD; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) that required spouses to evaluate their relationship according to 15 sets of opposing adjectives

(e.g., good–bad, pleasant–unpleasant) on a 7-point scale. Thus, scores on the SMD could range from 15 to 105, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction with the marriage. Given that *subsequent* marital satisfaction should mediate and/or moderate the effects of compromise, we examined whether spouses' marital satisfaction at the next assessment, 6 months later, mediated and/or moderated the implications of their tendency to compromise at baseline on changes in depressive mood over time. Two-hundred and six participants completed this measure at that phase of data collection and are thus included in the analysis ($\alpha = .95$ for husbands and $.96$ for wives).

Depressive mood. Depressive mood was measured at all eight assessments using the 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale (Radloff, 1977), which assess the extent to which individuals experienced depressive symptoms (e.g., "I felt depressed") over the past week ($0 = \text{none of the time}$, $3 = \text{all of the time}$). Scores could range from 0 to 60, with higher scores indicating greater depressive mood (across all phases, $\alpha \geq .82$ for husbands and $.84$ for wives.)

Results

To examine evidence for the first criterion necessary to establish mediation, we regressed subsequent satisfaction onto compromising in the first level of a two-level model, where all parameters at Level 2 were allowed to vary across individuals. Consistent with the findings of Studies 1 and 2, compromising was not associated with subsequent relationship satisfaction, $B = .03$, $t(202) = 1.03$, $p = .29$, indicating that subsequent satisfaction did not mediate the effects of compromise on subsequent depressive mood.

Next, we tested whether subsequent marital satisfaction moderated the association between compromising and changes in depressive mood by estimating the following first and second levels of a three-level growth curve model:

Level 1:

$$Y_{ijt}(\text{Depressive Mood}) = \pi_0 + \pi_1(\text{Time}) + e_{ijt}.$$

Level 2:

$$\pi_0 = b_{00} + b_{01}(\text{Compromising}) + b_{02}(\text{Subsequent Satisfaction}) + b_{03}(\text{Compromising} \times \text{Satisfaction}) + r_{0ij}.$$

$$\pi_1 = b_{10} + b_{11}(\text{Compromising}) + b_{12}(\text{Subsequent Satisfaction}) + b_{13}(\text{Compromising} \times \text{Satisfaction}) + r_{1ij}.$$

(2)

where t indexes time, i indexes individuals, j indexes couples, random effects at Level 2 were confirmed as necessary and control for the nonindependence of repeated assessments, and random effects on both Level 3 intercepts were also confirmed

as necessary and control for the nonindependence of husbands and wives' data.

Results are reported in the right two columns of Table 1. As predicted, and consistent with the findings of Studies 1 and 2, the Satisfaction \times Compromise interaction was significant. As in Study 2, this effect did not vary across men and women, $B = .36$, $t(198) = 1.80$, *ns*. A plot depicting the effect of the tendency to compromise on changes in depressive mood over time for people 1 *SD* above and below the mean on each variable involved in the interaction appears in Panel C of Figure 1. Consistent with predictions, and consistent with the pattern of results that emerged in Studies 1 and 2, simple slopes analyses indicated that the tendency to compromise during problem-solving discussions was associated with less depressive mood among people who subsequently were 1 *SD* more satisfied with their marriage, $B = -.28$, $t(202) = -2.10$, $p = .04$, but trended toward being associated with less in depressive mood among people who subsequently were 1 *SD* less satisfied with their marriage, $B = .18$, $t(202) = 1.45$, $p = .15$. Also, subsequent marital satisfaction was marginally associated with less depressive mood among those who engaged in 1 *SD* more compromise, $B = -.34$, $t(202) = -1.86$, $p = .06$, but, unexpectedly, marginally associated with steeper increases in depressive mood among those who engaged in 1 *SD* less compromise, $B = .33$, $t(202) = 1.68$, $p = .09$. The interaction remained significant after controlling for initial satisfaction, $B = -.28$, $t(200) = -2.34$, $p = .02$.

General Discussion

Although maintaining a close relationship requires engaging in maintenance behaviors, little is known about how such behaviors affect individual well-being. Existing theoretical perspectives suggest that the relationship satisfaction people experience after engaging in such behaviors may play a role in determining how such behaviors affect individual well-being, but they provide divergent predictions regarding what role it plays. Given that relationship maintenance behaviors can benefit relationship satisfaction, and given that relationship satisfaction tends to benefit individual well-being, one might expect relationship maintenance behaviors to benefit individual well-being through their benefits for subsequent relationship satisfaction. However, given that recent longitudinal research demonstrates that relationship maintenance behaviors do not always benefit and instead can harm relationships over time, the implications of relationship maintenance behaviors for individual well-being may depend on whether or not such behaviors are followed by relatively high relationship satisfaction.

Consistent with this latter possibility, three studies provide consistent evidence that subsequent relationship satisfaction moderates the association between relationship maintenance behaviors and individual well-being. Relationship maintenance behaviors were negatively associated with sadness/depressive mood when intimates subsequently reported relatively high relationship satisfaction, but positively associated with sadness/depressive mood when intimates subsequently reported

relatively low relationship satisfaction. Importantly, these effects emerged controlling for the direct implications of subsequent relationship satisfaction for sadness/depressive mood. In other words, not only does having a satisfying relationship benefit individual well-being, so does working toward a relationship that ends up satisfying. Likewise, not only does having an unsatisfying relationship harm individual well-being, so does working toward a relationship that ends up unsatisfying.

These findings have important theoretical and practical implications. Regarding theory, they join a growing body of research (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2011; McNulty, 2008; McNulty et al., 2008; McNulty & Russell, 2010) demonstrating that the implications of various interpersonal processes for well-being depend on the context in which they occur—i.e., qualities of the relationship (e.g., problem severity), individual (e.g., satisfaction), partner (e.g., agreeableness), and/or external environment (e.g., stressful events). However, whereas most of that research demonstrates the interactive effects of such processes on interpersonal well-being, the current studies join only a few others (e.g., Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010) to demonstrate the contextual moderators of the implications for relationship processes on intrapersonal well-being. Thus, these findings highlight the need for theories of individual well-being to attend to the relational context (see McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Reis, 2008).

Regarding practice, these findings further highlight the need for practitioners to rely on evidence-based practices. Several critical papers reveal that many practitioners ignore treatment-outcome research and instead rely on their instincts and/or unsubstantiated treatments when recommending strategies to their clients (e.g., Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2009; Barlow, Levitt, & Bufka, 1999). It may seem that the only downside to relying on unsubstantiated treatments when treating distressed couples is that such couples may fail to improve their relationship. In reality, however, not only can these strategies sometimes harm distressed relationships (see McNulty, 2010), the current findings reveal that well-intentioned strategies that do not improve the relationship can lead to declines in individual well-being above and beyond those associated with the distressed relationship itself. To avoid such risks, research needs to continue to distinguish between effective and ineffective improvement strategies, and practitioners need to only recommend treatment strategies known to be effective in a given context.

Several strengths of the current research enhance our confidence in the results reported here. First, the overall interactive effect replicated across three independent samples with conceptually similar but empirically distinct predictor and outcome measures, reducing the likelihood that the results were unique to sample or operationalization of the independent or dependent variables. Second, Study 3 demonstrated the same effects as Studies 1 and 2 using observed, rather than self-reported, behaviors, reducing the likelihood that sentiment override (Weiss, 1980) can account for the results reported here. Third, the results replicated across individuals in varying types of relationships, helping to ensure that the results obtained were not unique to individuals in certain types of relationships.

Nevertheless, several factors limit the conclusions that can be drawn from these results until they can be replicated and extended. First, the couples examined were primarily White. Although we are aware of no reasons to expect that the way people's behaviors within their relationships affect their depressive mood should differ across different races and ethnicities, future research may benefit by examining these effects in other populations. Second, although the longitudinal nature of these studies lends confidence to the idea that the interactive effects of relationship maintenance behaviors and relationship quality caused changes in depressive symptoms, the results are nevertheless correlational and thus causal conclusions should still be drawn with caution.

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Notes

1. The Satisfaction \times Relationship Maintenance interaction also predicted changes in self-esteem in all three studies; In Study 1, $B = .02$, $t(74) = 2.08$, $p = .04$. In Study 2, $B = .01$, $t(197) = 2.00$, $p = .05$. In Study 3, $B = .30$, $t(201) = 3.56$, $p < .01$. The simple effects were less consistent across the studies, however; maintenance was only significantly associated with self-esteem in Study 3, in which both simple effects were significant.
2. For details on sampling procedures, see McNulty and Russell (2010).

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