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Self-Determination in Marriage: Actor and Partner Effects of Spousal Autonomy on Relationship Maintenance Behaviors

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Guided by self-determination theory, this study examined the dyadic effects of marital autonomy on relationship maintenance behaviors. Heterosexual married couples (N = 324 dyads) completed questionnaires assessing their need fulfillment of autonomy in marriage along with their enactment of relationship maintenance behaviors. Using multilevel modeling, actor-partner interdependence models were estimated to determine dyadic effects for husbands' and wives' autonomy on their own and their partners' use of positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and shared tasks. Parameter estimates revealed that husbands' and wives' autonomy produced equivalent positive actor and partner effects for the positivity, assurances, social networks, and shared tasks maintenance behaviors, and a positive actor effect for the openness maintenance behavior. These dyadic findings support the idea of mutuality of autonomy support in marriage.

Keywords: actor-partner interdependence model; marriage; relationship maintenance behaviors; self-determination theory; spousal autonomy

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For marriages to be successful, husbands and wives must place considerable efforts into maintaining their relationship by enacting specific behaviors designed to keep their marriage in a desired state (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Indeed, for over 30 years, the programmatic study of relationship maintenance has uncovered a plethora of behaviors that marital partners use to maintain a desired relational state (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Stafford, 2010; Stafford et al., 2000). This collective body of research has found that when spouses use the positivity (remaining positive and cheerful), openness (having open discussions about the relationship), assurances (demonstrating commitment about the relationship), shared tasks (completing household tasks), and social networks (spending time with family members and mutual friends) relationship maintenance behaviors, they report being relationally and communicatively satisfied with each other, they are committed to their marriages, and they like their spouses (see Dainton & Myers, 2020 for a review).

Although the relationship maintenance literature demonstrates that husbands and wives use maintenance behaviors differentially (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012; Ramirez, 2008; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999b), and that the enactment of these behaviors is linked directly with spouses' perceptions of their partners' use of these behaviors (Dainton, 2000; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2001, 2008), marital partners' attitudes and feelings toward either their spouses or their marriages should affect their use of relationship maintenance behaviors as well (Dainton & Myers, 2020). One useful frame for exploring the influence of these attitudes and feelings among marital partners is self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985), which is a meta-theoretical perspective that recognizes psychological, developmental, and contextual influences on human motivation and behavior. SDT contends that humans are "active, growth-oriented organisms that innately seek and engage challenges in their environments ... [in order to] actualize their potentialities, capacities, and sensibilities" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 8). From this perspective, self-determined behaviors refer to those actions that are relatively autonomous and internally endorsed by the individual, rather than pressured or coerced by external forces or expectations (Deci & Ryan, 2008). While SDT argues that all individuals desire self-determination, it occurs only when individuals interact with others in an environment that allows them to freely behave in a way that reflects their own intrinsic desires and satisfies their related psychological needs (Knee et al., 2013).

Central to SDT (and its accompanying mini-theory, relationships motivation theory [RMT]; Deci & Ryan, 2014) is the need fulfillment of *autonomy*, which refers to perceived volition, self-initiation, and authentic endorsement of one's own actions (Deci, 1975). SDT views autonomy (both generally and within relationships) as an extension of agency, or the ability to reasonably regulate one's own choices and behavior. Thus, when individuals are committed to autonomously motivated romantic relationships, they are more inclined to see their partner as a genuine extension of their "integrated self" or part of their internalized identity (Knee et al., 2013) because they are able to act in the relationship in ways that are self-endorsed instead of feeling pressured or obliged to by external forces (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In marriages, self-determined partners fully endorse their volitional participation in the relationship instead of feeling guilty or compelled to be in the relationship (Knee et al., 2013); as such, they freely choose to become and stay involved with their spouses because of fulfillment associated with the relationship itself as opposed to extrinsically regulated motives. In other words, self-determined romantic relationships are primarily defined by their relational autonomy.

From an SDT/RMT perspective, the purpose of this study was to examine how spousal autonomy associates with the extent to which husbands and wives use relationship behaviors to maintain their marriages. Because SDT/RMT recognizes relational autonomy as a personal and genuine endorsement that individuals feel when their relationship is authentic and volitional (Deci & Ryan, 2008), it is likely that husbands' and wives' use of maintenance behaviors is linked to their intrinsic motivation for maintaining their marital relationship. As Blais et al. (1990) discovered, individuals who have self-determined reasons for being with their romantic partner are more likely to use adaptive behaviors to maintain their relationship, which in turn helps to foster greater happiness and satisfaction. Similarly, Knee et al. (2002) found that relational partners who operate with a high degree of self-determination are more likely to use active and prosocial strategies to constructively address conflict to increase their relational functioning.

Ryan and Deci (2017) discussed the importance of facilitating interdependence in close relationships and theorized that a true sense of mutuality builds from a shared sense of autonomy from both spouses in the marriage. That is, proposition V of RMT (within SDT) predicts that “autonomy-supportive partners in close relationships tend to experience a sense of mutuality—that is, when one partner experiences autonomy or autonomy support, the other is more likely to experience it as well—and the greater degree of mutuality in autonomy or autonomy support within a relationship, the greater is the relationship satisfaction, attachment security, and well-being of both partners” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 310). This theoretical and dyadic proposition speaks to the possibility of actor and partner effects of spousal autonomy on the maintenance of the marriage. Given these collective findings, when it comes to maintaining a marital relationship, we proposed the following dyadic hypothesis (see Figure 1) using the actor-partner interdependence model (Kenny et al., 2006):

H: Spousal autonomy will positively predict spouses' own (actor effect), and their partners' (partner effect), use of relationship maintenance behaviors.

Method

Participants

Participants were 648 individuals who comprised 324 heterosexual married couples (324 husbands, 324 wives). Most participants were in their first marriage (85%,

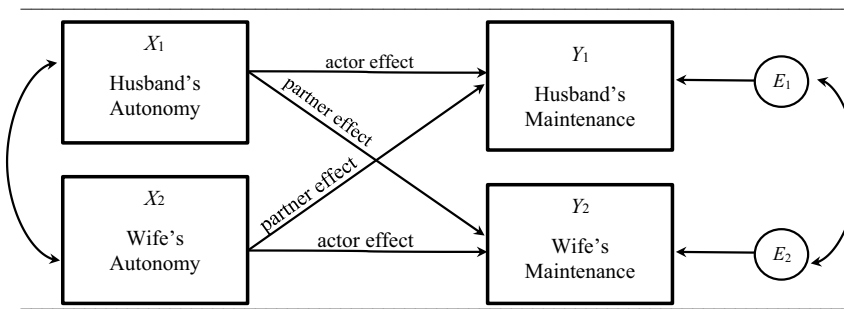


Figure 1 Actor-partner interdependence models.

$n = 556$; 15%, $n = 92$ were divorced and remarried) and reported being married to their partner, on average, for 13.50 years ($SD = 11.03$; range = less than 1 year–55 years) at the time of survey completion. Their ages ranged from 18 to 77 years ($M = 40.25$, $SD = 12.74$) and their ethnicity was largely White ($n = 538$), followed by Black/African-American ($n = 38$), Middle Eastern ($n = 29$), Hispanic ($n = 18$), Asian/Asian-American ($n = 13$), Native American ($n = 6$), and other ethnicities ($n = 6$). No other demographic data were obtained.

Procedures and Instrumentation

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, network sampling was used for recruiting the participants in this study. Undergraduate students enrolled in several introductory communication courses at a large Mid-Atlantic University were asked to recruit one heterosexual married couple who would be willing to complete a questionnaire about their marital relationship. Once students recruited the couple, they were provided with a study packet that contained a cover letter, a questionnaire, and an envelope for each spouse. The cover letter instructed each spouse to complete the survey privately, place the completed questionnaire in the provided envelope, seal the envelope, and return the envelope to the student, who then placed it in the study packet. Once students returned the packet—which was labeled with a unique code for dyadic data pairing—to a member of the research team, they received a minimal amount of extra credit in their respective communication course.

Following the procedures used in prior relationship maintenance studies, participants were asked to reference their marriage as they completed the Basic Need Satisfaction in Relationships Autonomy Subscale (La Guardia et al., 2000) and the Relational Maintenance Strategy Measure (Stafford & Canary, 1991) as well as several other measures not germane to this investigation. All responses were solicited using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Composite reliability for all measures was assessed using coefficient omega (ω) with maximum likelihood estimation (Goodboy & Martin, 2020).

The *Need Satisfaction in Relationships Autonomy Subscale* is a three-item measure that assesses participants' perceived autonomy in their marriage (i.e., "When I am with my spouse, I feel free to be who I am"; "When I am with my spouse, I have a say in what happens and I can voice my opinion"; "When I am with my spouse, I feel controlled and pressured to be certain ways" [reverse-coded]). Coefficient omega was .76 for the measure ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.16$).

The *Relational Maintenance Strategy Measure* is a 29-item measure that assesses participants' use of five relationship maintenance behaviors with their spouse: positivity (10 items), openness (6 items), assurances (4 items), social networks (4 items), and shared tasks (5 items). Composite reliability estimates for positive maintenance subscales were: positivity ($\omega = .88$; $M = 5.47$, $SD = .93$), openness ($\omega = .85$; $M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.24$), assurances ($\omega = .74$; $M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.04$), social networks ($\omega = .82$; $M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.16$), and shared tasks ($\omega = .89$; $M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.11$).

Data Analysis

To account for nonindependence in dyadic reports, multilevel modeling with correlated errors and restricted maximum likelihood estimation was used (Kenny, 2015) for five separate APIMs (Kashy & Donnellan, 2012), testing the degree to which husbands' and wives' autonomy predicted their own, as well as their spouses', use of relationship maintenance behaviors. Using the two-intercept model approach for distinguishable dyads (Kenny & Kashy, 2010), separate actor and partner effects were estimated for husbands and wives because the dyad members were distinguishable on the basis of sex. Prior to data analysis, actor and partner scores for autonomy were grand mean centered and participant sex was contrast coded as 1 = husbands and -1 = wives.

Results

A full reporting^{1,2} of actor and partner effects for husbands and wives is displayed in Table 1. We found positive actor effects for both husbands' (unstandardized coefficients ranging from .240 to .304) and wives' (unstandardized coefficients ranging from .269 to .376) autonomy on all five maintenance behaviors. When husbands and wives had more autonomy in their marriage, they made more efforts to maintain their marriage using the positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and shared tasks maintenance behaviors. The strength of actor effects between husbands and wives was equivalent in size for all five behaviors: positivity ($z = .126$, $p = .90$), openness ($z = -.308$, $p = .76$), assurances ($z = -.587$, $p = .56$), social networks ($z = -1.570$, $p = .12$), and shared tasks ($z = -.130$, $p = .90$). Because the actor effects did not differ between spouses, the actor effects can be pooled (Kenny, 2015) for overall spousal actor effects: positivity ($b = .300$ [95% CI: .245, .354]), openness ($b = .255$ [95% CI:

Table 1 Multilevel parameter estimates for actor and partner effects of spousal autonomy on positive relational maintenance behaviors

	Estimate	95% CI [LL, UL]	β	t ($df = 321$)
Autonomy → Positivity				
Intercepts				
Husbands	5.457			
Wives	5.496			
Husbands' Positivity ($R^2 = .238$)				
Actor Effect	.304	[.218, .390]	.378	7.304*
Partner Effect	.143	[.056, .229]	.177	3.445*
Wives' Positivity ($R^2 = .248$)				
Actor Effect	.296	[.210, .382]	.367	6.756*
Partner Effect	.197	[.111, .284]	.245	4.484*
Autonomy → Openness				
Intercepts				
Husbands	4.783			
Wives	5.158			
Husbands' Openness ($R^2 = .040$)				
Actor Effect	.240	[.123, .357]	.228	3.689*
Partner Effect	-.019	[-.136, .098]	-.018	-.299
Wives' Openness ($R^2 = .082$)				
Actor Effect	.269	[.152, .386]	.255	4.519*
Partner Effect	.065	[-.052, .182]	.061	1.084
Autonomy → Assurances				
Intercepts				
Husbands	5.850			
Wives	5.920			
Husbands' Assurances ($R^2 = .163$)				
Actor Effect	.298	[.204, .392]	.333	6.085*
Partner Effect	.115	[.021, .209]	.128	2.354*
Wives' Assurances ($R^2 = .257$)				
Actor Effect	.341	[.247, .435]	.381	7.124*
Partner Effect	.207	[.113, .301]	.232	4.314*
Autonomy → Social Networks				
Intercepts				
Husbands	5.359			
Wives	5.563			
Husbands' Networks ($R^2 = .119$)				
Actor Effect	.244	[.136, .352]	.247	4.413*
Partner Effect	.159	[.051, .267]	.160	2.884*
Wives' Networks ($R^2 = .205$)				

(Continued)

Table1 (Continued)

	Estimate	95% CI [LL, UL]	β	t ($df = 321$)
Actor Effect	.376	[.268, .484]	.379	6.821*
Partner Effect	.161	[.053, .270]	.163	2.918*
Autonomy → Shared Tasks				
Intercepts				
Husbands	5.735			
Wives	6.005			
Husbands' Tasks ($R^2 = .117$)				
Actor Effect	.266	[.162, .370]	.280	4.905*
Partner Effect	.117	[.010, .223]	.123	2.158*
Wives' Tasks ($R^2 = .147$)				
Actor Effect	.276	[.172, .380]	.291	5.203*
Partner Effect	.159	[.053, .265]	.167	2.936*

Note. Actor and partner effects are in bold. The partial correlations for maintenance behaviors between spouses controlling for actor and partner variables are: positivity = .385, openness = .374, assurances = .344, social networks = .368, shared tasks = .121.* = significant t -value.

.175, .334]), assurances ($b = .320$ [95% CI: .257, .382]), social networks ($b = .310$ [95% CI: .239, .381]), and shared tasks ($b = .271$ [95% CI: .199, .344]).

We found positive partner effects for both husbands (unstandardized coefficients ranging from .115 to .159) and wives (unstandardized coefficients ranging from .159 to .207) for the positivity, assurances, social networks, and shared tasks maintenance behaviors, whereas there were no partner effects for husbands' or wives' openness (see Table 1). The strength of partner effects between husbands and wives was equivalent in size for all four behaviors: positivity ($z = -.843$, $p = .40$), assurances ($z = -1.264$, $p = .20$), social networks ($z = -.028$, $p = .98$), and shared tasks ($z = -.540$, $p = .59$). Because the partner effects did not differ between spouses, the partner effects can be pooled for overall spousal partner effects: positivity ($b = .170$ [95% CI: .116, .224]), assurances ($b = .161$ [95% CI: .099, .223]), social networks ($b = .160$ [95% CI: .090, .231]), and shared tasks ($b = .138$ [95% CI: .065, .211]).

Discussion

In this study, we discovered that spouses who are free to be themselves by acting and behaving in ways they prefer (as opposed to being controlled by their partner) not only maintain their marriages more in prosocial ways, but also have partners who use more prosocial maintenance behaviors. These dyadic findings align with SDT in that “in a high-quality close relationship one is able to be oneself—that is, to be the person one authentically wants to be” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 308). Indeed, autonomy-fulfilled husbands and wives remained optimistic about their marriage, had open discussions

about the relationship, reassured their partners that they were committed to the marriage, helped with household chores, and spent time with their mutual friends and relatives. These findings make sense because SDT demonstrates that autonomous partners tend to be intrinsically motivated to stay in their marriages (i.e., they value their relationship for its own sake rather than for external incentives or consequences). These intrinsically motivated spouses often report greater relational benefits including trust, commitment, and satisfaction because their self-determined relationships also are characterized as highly positive, honest, and open (Kluwer et al., 2020; Knee et al., 2002; Patrick et al., 2007), which, based on our findings, appears to associate with their use of positive relationship maintenance behaviors. Within SDT, RMT would suggest that the authenticity to be oneself will autonomously motivate spouses to willingly participate in the marriage as they maintain it wholly and freely (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In support for SDT/RMT, greater relative autonomy by both spouses in a marriage has been shown to activate autonomy-driven motivational processes (instead of controlling or amotivated processes) to maintain quality marriages where both spouses are happy (Blais et al., 1990). Thus, in line with SDT/RMT, the desire to maintain the relationship might associate with the motivation to do so in an autonomy-supportive marriage (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

Likewise, partners of autonomous spouses also used more relationship maintenance behaviors, except there was no partner effect for openness. Autonomy within one spouse may have no effect on their partner's openness to maintain the marriage because it simply may not play as essential of a role (as compared to the other four relationship maintenance behaviors) in the day-to-day functioning of the marriage when spouses feel free to be their authentic selves to begin with. This lack of a partner effect aligns with Dainton and Myers' (2020) conclusion, after having reviewed the relationship maintenance literature, that openness is the least influential maintenance behavior in affecting partners' relational outcomes including relational satisfaction, romantic love, and commitment. Consistent with the literature, openness appears to be less important to the autonomous state of the marriage.

These theoretical results offer several practical implications for marital couples, namely that spouses should encourage each other to behave authentically and to feel comfortable to be themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Doing so would benefit both spouses by having high autonomy present in the marriage, which is an application of RTM's Proposition V (mutuality of autonomy). These findings speak to the importance of mutuality of autonomy support in marriage (i.e., both partners share a sense of autonomy in the marriage together; Ryan & Deci, 2017) because without mutuality of autonomy support, one spouse (or both spouses) can become actively or passively controlling in the marriage and may "relate to their partners not for who they are but for what they possess or represent" (Deci & Ryan, 2014, p. 67). Without mutuality of autonomy support, controlling spouses may view their partner more as an object to hold power over (e.g., how finances are spent, how attractive the partner must look, what the partner is or is not allowed to say) rather than as a respected and cared for partner, which leads to autonomy thwarting instead of autonomy support. Moreover, we suspect that without autonomy support, the controlling spouse might elicit more

negative forms of maintenance (see Dainton & Gross, 2008) from the low autonomy (controlled) partner, resorting to maintenance behaviors such as allowing control (e.g., one partner makes all of the plans and decisions for the couple) or avoidance (e.g., not being able to communicate about certain topics in the marriage).

To gain a more comprehensive picture of how self-determination impacts how marital partners maintain their relationship, future research should take one of three directions to improve upon the limitations of our study. First, researchers should consider the longitudinal role that spousal autonomy—in addition to competence and relatedness—plays in husbands' and wives' efforts to maintain their relationships over time. Although relational need fulfillment increases relational stability (Machia & Ogolsky, 2021), as Canary et al. (2002) noted, "being in a stable marriage does not mean that change ceases" (p. 395). Second, it might be helpful to explore whether the relationship between spousal autonomy and maintenance behavior use is differentiated by marital couple type (i.e., whether couples classify themselves as traditional, independent, or separate; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999a) or the expectations that marital partners bring to the relationship about how their spouses should engage in relationship maintenance (Dainton, 2000). Examining types of marital couples could provide greater insight into how they maintain their relationships. Third, consistent with SDT/RMT, it would be interesting to determine if spouses are motivated to maintain their marriages for extrinsic (e.g., investments) versus intrinsic (e.g., love) reasons. SDT would predict that need fulfillment would intrinsically motivate spouses to maintain their marriage because they find it exceptionally rewarding to do so, not because they feel obligated to.

In conclusion, our findings offer evidence that both husbands and wives (equally) maintain their marriages using prosocial relationship maintenance behaviors when they are autonomy supported. The obtained dyadic effects further suggest that marital autonomy for one partner corresponds with the other partner's motivation to maintain the relationship as well. This study complements the established theoretical perspectives guiding relational maintenance scholarship (e.g., equity theory, attachment theory, uncertainty reduction theory, self-expansion theory) by adding an additional theoretical perspective (SDT; RMT) to explain why marriages are maintained. Therefore, future researchers should consider using SDT/RMT as another theoretical framework to further explore the manner in which couples elect to maintain their marriages and remain intrinsically motivated to do so.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. We also estimated APIMs with length of the relationship (years of marriage) serving as a between-dyads covariate. Controlling for length of the relationship accounted for a small proportion of variance and did not fundamentally change the estimates of actor and partner effects. For wives, the proportion of variance in relational maintenance uniquely explained by the covariate was .003 (positivity), .041 (openness), .000 (assurances), .000 (social networks), and .013 (shared tasks). For husbands, the proportion of variance in relational maintenance uniquely explained by the covariate was .006 (positivity), .057 (openness), .006 (assurances), .000 (social networks), and .016 (shared tasks). Length of the relationship served as a significant covariate (unstandardized estimates) only in the openness APIM (-0.025 , $p < .001$) and shared tasks APIM (.013, $p < .001$). Controlling for relationship length in the APIM predicting openness, the overall actor effect was $b = .257$ [95% CI: .179, .336] with an overall partner effect of $b = .026$ [95% CI: $-.052$, .104]. Controlling for relationship length in the APIM predicting shared tasks, the overall actor effect was $b = .270$ [95% CI: .197, .342] with an overall partner effect of $b = .137$ [95% CI: .064, .210].
2. To more fully explore mutuality of autonomy, actor-by-partner interactions (actor autonomy \times partner autonomy) were estimated using the product approach (Kenny et al., 2006). We found no evidence of actor-by-partner interactions in the APIMs. All actor-partner interactions (unstandardized) were nonsignificant in predicting positivity (.023, $p = .321$), openness (.039, $p = .240$), assurances ($-.028$, $p = .284$), social networks ($-.027$, $p = .365$), and shared tasks ($-.023$, $p = .389$).

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