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The Gender Differences in how Relationship Status Relates to Anxiety Levels and the Role of Social Support as a Mediating Variable

For most people, their closest relationship is their romantic relationship (Gätcher et al. 2015). Being in a romantic relationship has positive associations with individual's health and well-being. For instance, one longitudinal study found that stably married men and women had lower levels of depression and fewer symptoms of problematic drinking than those who were divorced or separated, widowed, or stably unmarried (Simon, 2002). Another study found that ambulatory blood pressure was lower for those in a happy versus unhappy marriage (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008), although there were no differences in the average levels of stress and depression. Other work looking at perceptions of the relationship found that for wives as marriage satisfaction increases mental well-being increases (Kanter & Proulx, 2021).

Yet, our current understanding of associations between relationships and health and well-being is incomplete. Notably, marriage is often studied as the marker of being in a relationship (Dash et al., 2020; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008), but there is an increasing number of individuals in a non-married, committed relationship (Goossens, 2021). Although there is some research demonstrating the benefits of relationships more broadly (Amato, 2014; Dush & Amato, 2005; Shiffman et al., 2020), there is a need to continue examining whether committed relationships have positive relationships with well-being. Indeed, some research has suggested little difference in outcomes between people who are married, dating, and cohabitating (Grunström et al., 2021). Additionally, it is important to test if the associations with mental well-being are different for women and men in relationships, due to potential differences in gender socialization that could impact the perceived benefits someone receives from being in a relationship. Finally, it is critical

to examine factors associated with being in a committed relationship versus not, including perceived social support, and the role these perceptions play in well-being.

Relationship Status and Anxiety

In this paper, we focus on anxiety as our measure of well-being. Anxiety is important to study given the high rates of anxiety that individuals experience. For example, between 2019 and 2020, researchers observed that the percentage of U.S. adults who were screened positively for anxiety disorders increased from 7.84% to 34.64% (Twenge et al. 2021). Another study done prior to COVID-19 found that 7% of adults have experienced incidences of anxiety (Essau et al., 2018). Anxiety also is important to study given its association with current and future health problems. For example, anxiety disorders have been found to be related to dependence on drugs and dependence on alcohol (Smith & Book, 2008). Anxiety has also been linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular mortality, coronary heart disease, and stroke (Emdin et al., 2016).

Despite anxiety's importance, anxiety has been relatively understudied relative to one's relationship status. Primarily studies have focused on depression (Brown et al., 2005; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008; Simon, 2002), stress or psychological distress (Kanter & Proulx, 2021; Uecker, 2012), self-esteem (Stronge et al., 2019), or substance use (Dash et al., 2020; Stronge et al., 2019). The research examining relationship status and anxiety has suggested that there is either no significant difference in anxiety levels between single individuals and married individuals (Hart et al., 1999), or that there are only small differences between single individuals and married individuals (Josefsson et al., 2018). Yet, these results are unexpected given the general associations between relationship status and mental well-being, including distress that can include anxiety as a component of this outcome (Yung et al., 2021). Thus, there is a need to continue to examine whether relationship status and stress are related, and to consider if there are moderators of this relationship that have obscured finding a consistent pattern to date.

Gender as a Moderator

The association between relationship status and anxiety might be moderated by one's gender due to potential differences in socialization. Socialization is the act of learning the roles that you must fulfill based on the societal expectations of a certain identity that you are aligned with (Dipti, 2022). In terms of relationships, men and women are socialized to expect similar things from a romantic relationship, such as reliability, however, women are less likely to have their needs met (Vangelisti & Daly, 2005). This may be because women are more likely than men to provide caregiving, including meeting emotional support needs, while men are more likely to put up and maintain boundaries in the context of a heterosexual relationship (Umberson et al., 2015). Further, femininity has been seen to be more associated with both seeking and receiving social support than masculinity (Reevy & Maslach, 2001). Similarly, another study found that men score lower than women on measures of social support (Roos & Cohen, 1987). In some prior work there has been support for examining gender as a moderator of the effects of relationship status. For example, marriage predicted the symptoms of alcohol use disorder for adult men but not for adult women (Dash et al., 2020). In another study, men in a cohabitating relationship had higher levels of depression than women, but men and women in a married relationship showed no difference (Brown et al., 2005). Given this work, we predict that gender will impact the effect of relationship status on anxiety levels, and specifically in men in relationships will have lower levels of anxiety than men who are single.

Social Support as an Explanatory Mechanism

To research on the potential moderating role of gender suggests that perceived social support may be a key variable that explains why relationship status and anxiety are related (Roos & Cohen, 1987). Perceived social support is the subjective identification and perception of social resources provided by those individuals around you (Gülact, 2010). Those in a relationship may

perceive more social support in their lives than their single counterparts, as previous research has indicated (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015). In turn, the more perceived support a person has the better their mental well-being, including depressive symptoms (Eagle et al., 2019) and subjective happiness (Wilson et al., 2020). An interesting aspect is that the increased social support a person perceives is not just related to the romantic relationship itself but as a general assessment across all relationships (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015). Therefore, we test a model in which social support mediates the relationship between relationship status and anxiety.

The Present Study

The goals of the present study are to examine the associations between relationship status and anxiety. We first examine if those in a relationship - including both married and in a non-married but committed relationship - have differences in anxiety levels than those not in a relationship. Second, we test if these associations are moderated by a person's gender. Finally, we examine if perceived social support statistically mediates the association between relationship status and anxiety. It is important to acknowledge that we have a cross-sectional dataset and thus are not intending to test causal relationships with this model. We adopt this approach to allow for the model to test and account for shared variance between relationship status and social support, and to further test whether there are unique effects of either relationship status or perceived social support on anxiety.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 437 participants aged 20-71 ($M = 36.5$) years old. The sample was roughly split between men ($n = 232, 52.3\%$) and women ($n = 202, 46.3\%$). A small majority ($n = 266, 60.9\%$) indicated that they were not in a committed relationship, with 38.7% ($n = 169$) reporting they were either married or in a domestic partnership. In terms of ethnicity and race,

11.7% ($n = 51$) were of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, and with 80.8% ($n = 353$) of the participants identifying as White, 10.8% ($n = 47$) as Black or African American, 5.3% ($n = 23$) as Asian, 0.7% ($n = 3$) as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.2% ($n = 1$) as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 1.4% ($n = 6$) as another race category. The remaining group preferred not to report their race ($n = 3$, 0.7%).

Procedure

The data was collected completely online. Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and then directed to complete the surveys through Qualtrics where they first complete informed consent forms. Then they answered questions regarding their demographics, including gender, relationship, age, ethnicity, and race, along with other measures of leisure and personality not relevant to the present study. Two weeks later they completed another wave of data collection asking them about their anxiety levels, among other measures of health not relevant to the present study. Participants were compensated \$10 for the first survey, and \$5 for the second. All study procedures were approved by the local Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Relationship Status

Relationship status was assessed with the categorical question: "What is your current marital status?" Participants chose from the following options: married or domestic partnership, widowed, divorced, separated, or single or never married. For data analysis, we collapsed the widowed, divorced, separated, and single categories to compare to those in a relationship (although we conducted follow-up analyses to test for differences within these sub-categories).

Anxiety

Anxiety levels were measured using the 21-item Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) (Beck et al., 1988). The BAI measures the cognitive and physical symptoms of anxiety. Each of the items

is a symptom commonly associated with anxiety, and the respondents are prompted to indicate, how bothered they have been by the presence of the symptoms in the last month (e.g., “fear of losing control”; “indigestion”). Participants responded using a 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*severely - it bothered me a lot*) scale. The items demonstrated excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = .97$) and were summed to create an overall anxiety score.

Gender

To measure gender, we asked each participant to indicate which category they identified with from the following options: male, female, or other.

Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support was measured using the 23-item Social Support Appraisals (SSA) scale (Vaux et al., 1986). The SSA asks the extent to which a person feels loved and esteemed by people in their lives (e.g., “My family cares for me very much”). Participants responded using a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) scale. The items demonstrated excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = .96$) and were averaged to create an overall social score.

Analytic Plan

Data analyses were conducted in SPSS Version 28. To test the first hypothesis comparing anxiety levels by relationship status, we used an independent samples T-test to compare the means of the two relationship status groups with anxiety as the outcome. To test the second hypothesis with gender as moderator, we utilized Model 1 in the PROCESS (Version 4.1) app-on for SPSS. This model included both relationship status and gender and their interaction, as predictors of anxiety. Finally, to test our third hypothesis of social support as a mediator, we used Model 4 in the PROCESS (Version 4.1) app-on for SPSS. This model included relationship status as a predictor, social support as the mediator, and anxiety as the outcome. We further

explored these mediation models by gender to test if patterns were different for men and women.

Results

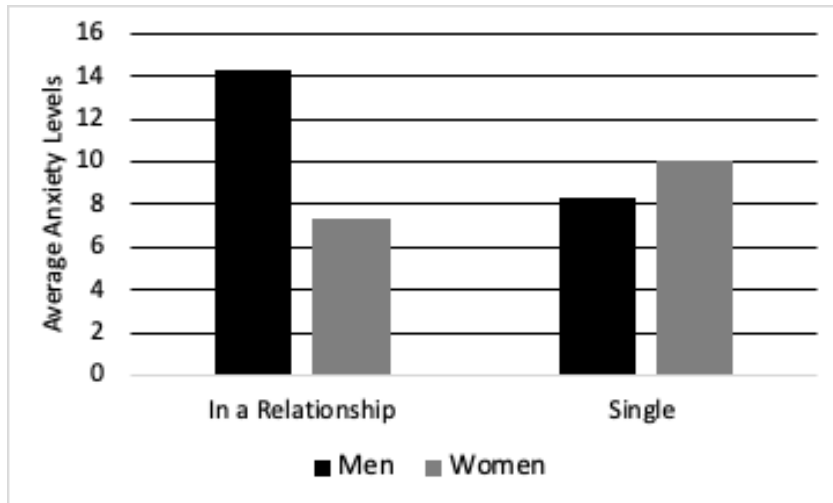
On average, the participants had a low level of anxiety ($M = 9.52$, $SD = 12.73$). The scale went for the BAI goes up to 63.

Our first research question examined if relationship status predicted anxiety levels. Using an independent samples T-test, we found no difference in anxiety levels between those who were single ($M = 9.07$, $SD = 11.88$) and those in a relationship ($M = 10.31$, $SD = 13.99$), $t(392) = 0.95$, $p = .345$.

Our second research question tested if gender moderated the effect between relationship status and anxiety. Using Model 1 in PROCESS, we found the overall model to be significant $F(3,389) = 4.56$, $p = .004$, $r^2 = .034$, with the interaction effect of relationship status by gender also significant, $b = 8.86$, $SE = 2.62$, $p = .007$. To help interpret the interaction effect, we plotted the values of anxiety based on relationship status groups. As can be seen in Figure 1, the interaction effect was driven by men in a relationship who reported the highest level of anxiety ($M = 14.29$), followed by single women ($M = 10.11$), men in a relationship ($M = 8.31$), and women in a relationship ($M = 7.34$)

Figure 1

Gender Moderates the Effect of Relationship Status on Anxiety Levels



Our final research question tested if social support mediated the relationship between relationship status and anxiety levels. As can be seen in Figure 2, using Model 4 in PROCESS we found that as someone went from being in a relationship (1) to single (2) their social support decreased ($b = -0.2, SE = 0.06 < .001$). We also saw that social support was negatively associated with anxiety levels ($b = -6.98, t = 6.72, p < .001$). Finally, when considering social support as a mediator, the indirect effect of relationship status on anxiety levels did not include zero indicating a significant effect, $b = 1.42, CI [0.62, 2.33]$.

Exploratory Analysis

Based on the results of each of the tests that we had thus far run, it was clear that relationship status only impacted anxiety levels when gender was moderating the impact or when social support was mediating the impact. Thus, we decided to run two more mediator tests, this time distinguishing the sample by gender, to see if there were gender differences in how social support mediates the impact of relationship status on anxiety levels. First, we ran a mediator test with only the data that came from the men. The test showed that the impact of relationship status on social support was not statistically significant ($b = -0.14, SE = 0.09, p > 0.05$). A visual representation of this finding can be seen in Figure 3. Based on the outcome of this analysis, it

would not be possible for social support to mediate the impact of relationship status on anxiety levels, for men.

Figure 3: Mediation for Men

Next, we ran a mediator test with only the data that came from the women. The test indicated that there is a negative association between relationship status as social support ($b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = 0.002$). It also showed that there is a negative correlation between social support and anxiety levels ($b = -6.3$, $SE = 1.2$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, the test indicated that the indirect effect of relationship status and anxiety levels through social support is significant, for women ($b = 1.76$, $CI (0.62, 3.07)$). A visual representation can be seen below in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Mediation for Women

What the results of these two mediation tests indicate is that gender does have an influence on how social support mediates the impact of relationship status on anxiety levels. That is, only social support only mediates the impact of relationship status on anxiety levels for women. To further support our justification as to why we included the widowed, as well as the divorced and separated, in the “single” group, we ran a two-way ANOVA test to analyze the effect that relationship status and gender have on anxiety levels. To this test, we excluded all participants who were married or in a domestic partnership. There were three groups being examined. Group 2 included participants who were widowed. Group 3 included participants who were divorced or separated. Group 4 included participants who were single or never married. First, the test indicated that there was not a statistically significant interaction between the effects of gender and relationship status on anxiety levels ($F(2, 234) = .824$, $p = .44$). Second, a simple main effects analysis indicated that relationship status did not have a statistically significant effect on anxiety levels ($p = .913$). We then ran a second two-way ANOVA, this time with the aim of analyzing the effect the relationship status and gender have on social support. Our groupings for

relationship status were the same for this test as the previous test. First, the test revealed that there was not a statistically significant interaction between the effects of gender and relationship status on social support ($F(2, 258) = .453, p = .636$). Second, a simple main effects indicated that relationship status did not have a statistically significant effect on social support ($p = .696$). The results of these two two-way ANOVA tests support our inclusion of divorced, separated, and most importantly, widowed, individuals in the “single” group.

Discussion

The results were both different from and similar to what we expected to find. We thought that relationship status would affect anxiety levels. This is because of what some of the previous literature had indicated about the impact of marital status on various aspects of one’s well-being, in that it generally has a positive effect (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008; Simon, 2002). The results, however, showed no statistically significant relationship between these two variables, and therefore disproved this hypothesis. On the other hand, our hypothesis that gender would affect the strength of the relationship between relationship status and anxiety levels was correct. Specifically, we found that, as expected, men who were in relationships would have higher levels of anxiety, and women who were in relationships would have the lowest levels of anxiety. Not only did our results show that gender did affect the strength of the relationship between the two main variables, but it also showed that our prediction of how exactly it would affect the relationship was not disproved. It showed that our expectations that men’s anxiety levels would be more greatly impacted by relationship status, which had been based on previous literature that examined the impact of marital status on other aspects of well-being and mental health had statistical backing (Brown et al., 2005; Dash et al., 2020). Additionally, our hypothesis that social support would mediate the impact that relationship status has on anxiety levels was shown

to be true. This outcome aligns with previous research that indicates that social support positively benefits the mental well-being of an individual (Eagle et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2020). Further, our investigation into if there were gender specific outcomes for the potential mediating effect of social support indicates that who may benefit from the idea of social support may be associated with the socialization of gender, which we had suspected to be an outcome based on previous findings from a previous study that examined the relationship between gender and gendered characteristics and social support (Reevy & Maslach, 2001).

The results of this study are important for a multitude of reasons. First, it helps to contribute to our knowledge regarding the potential benefits of romantic partnerships. Second, the results regarding the role of gender as a moderator have implications for men's mental health. Men had the highest average level of anxiety, which means that this group of people may require increased mental health support services. Finally, it provides us with a further understanding of how romantic relationships can act as sources of social support, and who is more likely to benefit from a romantic relationship as a source of social support. The results of our exploratory analysis showed that in terms of how our social support changes depending on certain relationship statuses, there is no tangible difference in social support between widowed, divorced or separated, or single or never married individuals. This creates the implication that a lack of romantic partnership, no matter the reason why, can decrease the level of social support an individual perceives that they have, which can, in turn, cause negative outcomes for their mental well-being.

Limitations

There were limitations within the study. For instance, we were limited in the data that we had available, as we utilized previously collected data. This data limitation made it so that we were unable to look at certain factors that may have been affecting the impact of

relationship status on anxiety levels, such as the length of the partnership. Another limitation is that the sample was made up, primarily, of white individuals. This makes it more difficult to generalize the findings to the larger population. This is because different people of different races may have different rates of anxiety. Whites are more likely to have higher rates of general anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and panic disorder than African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans (Asnaani et al., 2020). Based on this, we can infer that if the sample was more racially diverse, the rates of anxiety symptoms would be lower for the general sample, as there would have likely been lower rates among the non-White participants. Lastly, the study was limited by the number of individuals in the widowed subgroup. There were few participants that identified as widowed, and because of this, the subgroup could be non-representative of the general widowed population. This is because the ability of an outlier to skew the data is greater. If one of the widowed participants had an anxiety level, for instance, that was much greater than the rest of the widowed participants, it could create an average rate of anxiety that does not represent the entire group properly. Further, a small sample such as the one we encountered can make it difficult to account for individual differences. In the case of the widowed participants, this could include age, length of marriage before the partner's death, or the number of years since the partner's death. Each of these factors could have an influence on the individual's anxiety levels. Individual characteristics, however, would matter less if we had a larger subgroup size. This limitation was especially relevant during the exploratory analysis that we did to justify our inclusion of the widowed participants in the "single" category

Future Research

We recommend that future research looks at more variables to gain a more complete picture of the impact of relationship status on anxiety levels. These variables include employment status and relationship satisfaction. Future research should also look at different sample populations,

such as a non-western, collectivist population. We believe that it would be valuable to do this research in a non-western population because our culture tends to shape our beliefs regarding if any expression of emotions is acceptable (Butler, et al, 2007). That is, the suppression of emotions is more accepted and encouraged in eastern cultures than it is in western cultures. Thus, we believe that if the present study were to be replicated in an eastern population the findings, specifically regarding the general anxiety levels of the sample, would differ. That is, we believe that anxiety levels would be higher, on average, in a non-western population. We believe that this will be the outcome because suppression of emotions has been seen to increase anxiety levels (Amstadter, 2008). Additionally, looking into other populations could be valuable as it may show us how different populations value romantic partnerships as a source of social support that may potentially impact our mental well-being, such as anxiety levels. Finally, we believe that future research should examine if there are potentially mediating factors that would explain the impact that relationship status has on anxiety levels, for men specifically, as the current study found that social support does not mediate the impact of relationship status on anxiety levels for men. We believe that it would be important to look at perceptions of domestic workload as a potential mediator. This is because, typically, people expect women to fulfill the household duties, specifically cleaning, more than men (Thébaud et al., 2019). Based on this, we suspect that perceptions of domestic workload would likely mediate the impact that relationship status has on anxiety levels, for men.

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