




# GENERAL INTEREST

## DOMAINS OF EXPRESSIVE INTERACTION IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS ASSOCIATIONS WITH SATISFACTION AND COMMITMENT



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*The major purpose of this investigation was to examine the relative importance of three domains of expressive interaction—companionship, sexual expression, and supportive communication—in predicting relationship satisfaction and commitment. This issue was examined with data collected from both partners of 94 married or committed (engaged or cohabiting) couples. Results indicated that all three domains of expressive interaction were significantly related to relationship satisfaction and commitment and that supportive communication had the strongest association with satisfaction and commitment.*

People who are married to each other or are seriously involved with one another vary in how much time they spend together. Research has shown that partners who spend considerable time together tend to be more satisfied with their relationships than partners who do not. For example, Reissman, Aron, and Bergen (1993) reported that the average correlation between time spent together and marital satisfaction, as found in five separate studies, was .40. It is probably safe to assume that the causal link between time spent together and relationship satisfaction is bidirectional: time spent together increases relationship satisfaction and relationship satisfaction increases the desire to spend time together (Vangelisti & Banks, 1993; White, 1983; Zuo, 1992). However, we cannot assume that all activities in which couples engage while together are equally salient in their appraisal of relationship satisfaction. Some types of interactions may be more relationally consequential than others. Furthermore, we cannot assume that the same activities that contribute to partners' feelings of satisfaction are necessarily related in the same way to their commitment to remain in the relationship. Satisfaction and commitment are distinguishable relationship properties (Johnson, 1991; Kelley, 1983; Rusbult, 1983).

The main purpose of this investigation is to examine how certain types of expressive interaction or joint activities are related to satisfaction and commitment in intimate relationships. Thus, this study can inform therapists who are sometimes asked by distressed couples: "What can we do to restore or maintain our satisfaction (or commitment)?" We also look at the interrelationships among the different types of expressive interactions and the relationship between satisfaction and commitment (the two relationship outcome variables).

### *Domains of Expressive Interaction*

Scholars have distinguished between two general categories of coordinated activity in marriage: instrumental and expressive (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Indvik, 1982; Parsons & Bales, 1955; Scanzoni & Scanzoni, 1988). Although partners spend time together in instrumental activities (e.g., raising children, maintaining a household, or earning income), the expressive dimension is often considered the heart of a relationship. The expressive area of a relationship has been further divided into three basic domains. As described by Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1988), these domains are: "companionship (someone to be with and do things with), empathy (someone

who listens, understands, and cares), and physical affection (someone with whom love can be expressed through touch, caresses, and sexual intercourse)" (p. 314). They also state that the expressive side of the relationship includes behaviors for establishing and maintaining personal relationships, including empathy, showing affection, and warmth. It is in the expressive dimension of the relationship that rewards associated with interactions are most likely to contribute to the partners' satisfaction and commitment (Duck, 1992).

Although the three domains of interaction focus on somewhat different interactional properties, we expect that assessments of the quality of these three domains of interaction are positively associated. This hypothesis is based, in part, on the fact that an increase in the quality of one type of interactional activity tends to increase the quality of the

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others. Through their leisure activities together, couples both find and create things to talk about. Furthermore, couples usually converse while they are recreating together. Leisure time together can also contribute to an active sex life because the positive feelings generated by shared enjoyable experiences can enhance mutual sexual desire. Intimate partners may talk about personal issues before and after sex, and communication in one way (verbally) is likely to facilitate communication in another way (nonverbally, as through touching and sex) (Cupach & Comstock, 1990). Conversely, if a negative affective tone marks one domain of interaction, it is likely to pervade other domains (Clarke, 1987). For example, in relationships where defensive communication sets up a negative spiral of complaint-withdrawal (Gottman, 1982) or complaint-countercomplaint (Alberts, 1988), other expressive domains are likely to be affected.

Thus, because affective tone tends to generalize across domains (Clarke, 1987; Forgas, Levinger, & Moylan, 1994; Gottman, 1982), we predict that:

*Hypothesis 1: Assessments of the quality of the three forms of expressive interaction will be positively associated.*

### ***Relationship Satisfaction and Relationship Commitment***

Because our major focus is on how the domains of expressive interaction are related to both satisfaction and commitment, we also examine the association between these two relationship outcome variables. Correlational studies demonstrate that the two constructs are positively associated in marriages and other close relationships (e.g., Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). Moreover, satisfaction is often presumed to be associated with constructs similar to commitment, such as relationship stability, although the empirical evidence for this link is modest (White, 1990).

However, the empirical and theoretical work of Rusbult (1983), Lund (1985), and others suggests that the origin and dynamics of satisfaction and commitment are different. Satisfaction generally refers to subjective feelings that the relationship provides more rewards than costs and that the accumulation of positive outcomes is better than would be expected by comparison to other relationships of the same type (e.g., Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). Commitment, on the other hand, generally refers to a long-term orientation toward continuity of a relationship stemming from assessments of satisfaction, quality of alternatives to the relationship

(dependence), and level of investments in the relationship. The type of commitment with which we are concerned is what Johnson (1991) has called personal commitment (which he distinguishes from moral commitment and structural commitment). Rusbult et al. (1994) refer to commitment as a "central macromotive" in relationships because it "encompasses the net effects of other dependence-enhancing variables—satisfaction, alternatives, and investments" (p. 123). In short, satisfaction is only one of several factors contributing to commitment to stay in the relationship.

This analysis suggests that, although we should expect a positive association between satisfaction and commitment, we should not expect an association so high as to suggest they are redundant indices of relationship quality (Berscheid, 1994). Thus, we predict that:

*Hypothesis 2: Satisfaction with a relationship will be (moderately) positively associated with commitment to that relationship.*

### ***Domains of Expressive Interaction and Relationship Satisfaction***

There is an extensive body of literature on predictors of marital satisfaction, as well as on satisfaction in other types of close relationships (for reviews, see Glenn, 1990; Worell, 1988). The link between each of the three domains of expressive interaction and satisfaction has been demonstrated. First, partners who spend more time together in leisure or companionate activities evidence greater marital satisfaction than partners who do not (Hill, 1988; Holman & Epperson, 1984; Orthner & Mancini, 1990; Palisi, 1984; Whyte, 1990). Second, partners who report higher levels of sensitive and supportive communication (empathy) also report high marital satisfaction (for a review, see Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). And finally, partners who have frequent sex and/or are satisfied with their sex life together are more satisfied with their entire relationship than are other partners (Birchler & Webb, 1977; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Greeley, 1991; for a review, see Sprecher & McKinney, 1993).

Interdependence theory (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult et al., 1994; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) can be used to understand why each of the domains of expressive interaction can increase relationship satisfaction. According to interdependence theory, especially as articulated in Rusbult's (1983) investment model, satisfaction increases as rewards increase and costs de-

crease (particularly as compared to expectation levels). The domains of expressive interaction—which we call *companionship*, *supportive communication*, and *sexual expression*—hold the potential to provide rewards to couples. According to Rusbult et al. (1994), "Relationships marked by a greater number or intensity of pleasurable interaction outcomes should be experienced as more satisfying" (p. 117). To the extent that these rewards are gained with few costs, interdependence (investment) theory would predict that they would increase relationship satisfaction. Consistent with this expectation, we propose that:

*Hypothesis 3: Each of the three forms of expressive interaction will be positively associated with relationship satisfaction.*

Although each of the three domains of interaction has been linked individually to satisfaction in prior research, to date, no study has examined the association between satisfaction and all three interactional domains. Because the three domains of interaction are expected to be intercorrelated, it is important to determine the extent to which each domain is a nonredundant predictor of satisfaction. Reis and Franks (1994) describe this as a common problem in relationship research and explain: "For example, many variables and processes are known to influence the course and outcome of marital interaction, but their predictive utility relative to one another is not often examined" (p. 195).

Furthermore, we were interested in whether one form of expressive interaction is more strongly related to satisfaction than the other two. Several therapists and writers have suggested that good communication is the essence of a good relationship (e.g., Stinnett & DeFraim, 1985) and some research suggests that communication is the key factor in marital happiness (Ting-Toomey, 1983). However, no previous research has compared perceived quality of supportive communication with quality of companionate activity and sexual expression as predictors of relationship satisfaction. Thus, we pose the following research question:

*Research Question 1: Which domains of expressive interaction are most strongly associated with satisfaction?*

### ***Domains of Expressive Interaction and Relationship Commitment***

Previous research has not considered how assessments of quality in the



domains of expressive interaction are related to commitment. As noted by Stanley and Markman (1992), "compared to other key constructs in the empirical literature (e.g., satisfaction, communication), commitment has been under-researched" (p. 605). This omission stems from conceptual "fuzziness" in the satisfaction and commitment constructs (Kelley, 1983) and from a methodological tendency to use satisfaction scores as indicators of commitment (Berscheid, 1994).

According to interdependence theory (Rusbult, 1983), commitment is increased by satisfaction and, hence, indirectly by any rewarding experiences (e.g., joint leisure activities, supportive communication, sexual activity) that contribute to satisfaction. The theory also predicts that commitment is increased by having a low comparison level for alternatives and intrinsic and extrinsic investments, which are put into the relationship or become connected to the relationship and which cannot be easily retrieved if the relationship were to end. Rusbult (1983) states that time, emotional effort, and self-disclosures are examples of intrinsic investments. Therefore, domains of expressive interaction can be thought of as intrinsic investments in the relationship that increase commitment, which, in turn, decreases the likelihood of a breakup. Based on this reasoning, we pose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4: Each of the three forms of expressive interaction will be positively associated with commitment to the relationship.*

As with satisfaction, we were also interested in which forms of expressive interaction are the strongest predictors of commitment. Little theory and even less research has been devoted to this particular issue. Hence, we pose the following research question:

*Research Question 2: Which types of expressive interaction are most strongly associated with commitment?*

In order to clarify the associations between satisfaction and commitment, as well as to examine the associations between the domains of interaction and each of these potential outcome variables, we offer a mediational model, which is described in the following section.

### *Satisfaction as a Mediating Variable*

We have suggested that associations exist between commitment and satisfaction and between the three domains of

interaction and each relational construct. We have also noted, however, that satisfaction and commitment are not isomorphic. Interdependence theory views satisfaction as a function of the reward-cost ratio associated with interactions compared to what could be expected. Commitment is viewed as a more global appraisal that derives in part from satisfaction but also from perceived quality of alternatives and level of investments (Rusbult, 1983). Thus, although we predicted that rewarding interactions should be associated with both satisfaction and commitment, and that satisfaction and commitment should be related to each other, we also noted that interdependence theory considers satisfaction to derive from interactions and considers satisfaction as only one contributor to commitment. Thus, the influence of expressive interactions on commitment is expected to be indirect: Expressive interactions should influence commitment through the mediation of satisfaction.

This intriguing aspect of interdependence theory has received little direct empirical examination. Thus, it is important to test whether the quality of expressive interactions makes its contribution to commitment only through the satisfaction it evokes, or whether the quality of expressive interactions might make an independent contribution to commitment. With this in mind, we formulate our final hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5: Relationship satisfaction will mediate the influence of expressive interaction on relationship commitment.*

### *Moderating Effects of Gender*

Finally, it is important to consider the possibility that associations among the variables examined here may be moderated by gender. Such a possibility is consistent with several areas of gender differences in close relationships. For example, women have been found to have a greater concern with and desire to communicate about relationship features (Acitelli, 1992; Fitness & Strongman, 1991; Tannen, 1986; Wood, 1994). Women have also been found to emphasize affective behaviors to a greater degree than men, whereas men have been found to emphasize instrumental behaviors to a greater degree than women (Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974; Wood & Inman, 1993). This literature suggests that we will find that supportive communication is more highly associated with relationship outcomes for women than for men. Testing the moderating influence of gender is also one way to assess the generality of associations we have hypothesized. If there are no or few moder-

ating effects due to gender, we can infer that the patterns of association we have proposed apply equally well to both men and women. Therefore, we pose our final research question:

*Research Question 3: Does gender moderate (a) the associations among the three types of expressive interaction, (b) the association between satisfaction and commitment, or (c) the associations between expressive interactions and satisfaction and commitment?*

## **METHODS**

### *Sample and Procedure*

The sample consisted of 94 couples from a Midwestern university who were either married ( $N = 37$ ), cohabiting ( $N = 36$ ), or engaged ( $N = 21$ ) (nine of the engaged couples were also cohabiting). Couples were recruited through advertisements in a university newspaper, announcements made in classes, and flyers distributed to housing units for married students. (Dating couples were also surveyed, although they are not included in the analyses in this article.) Most of the respondents were university undergraduate or graduate students. The mean age was slightly over 24 years and most were Caucasian and from either middle-class or upper middle-class families.

Both members of the couple completed the questionnaire at the same time but independently of each other. Most of the couples completed the questionnaire in a university building, although some of the married couples completed it under monitored conditions in their own homes. Each couple received \$8 for participation.

### *Measurement*

*Domains of expressive interaction.* To measure the three domains of expressive interaction, as defined by Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1988), items from the Schaefer and Olson (1981) Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Inventory were used. Three subscales from the PAIR—the original recreational intimacy, intellectual intimacy, and sexual intimacy scales—were used to measure companionship, supportive communication, and sexual expression, respectively. In addition, two items from the original emotional intimacy subscale of the PAIR Inventory were added to the communication items because they also measured aspects of supportive communication. Each of the items was rated on a 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) response scale. For each set of

items, a mean was used as the score in subsequent analyses.

*Companionship* was measured by the following six items: (a) We enjoy the same recreational activities, (b) I share in few of my partner's interests (reverse scored), (c) We like playing together, (d) We enjoy the out-of-doors together, (e) We seldom find time to do fun things together (reversed scored), and (f) I feel we share some of the same interests. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .60 for men and .65 for women.

*Supportive communication* was measured by the following eight items: (a) My partner listens to me when I need someone to talk to; (b) My partner helps me clarify my thoughts; (c) I can state my feelings without him/her getting defensive; (d) When it comes to having a serious discussion, it seems we have little in common (reverse scored); (e) I feel "put-down" in a serious conversation with my partner (reverse scored); (f) I feel it is useless to discuss some things with my partner (reverse scored); (g) My partner and I understand each other completely; and (h) We have an endless number of things to talk about. Cronbach's alpha for the supportive communication scale was .76 for men and .78 for women.

*Sexual expression* was measured by the following six items: (a) I am satisfied with our sex life, (b) I feel our sexual activity is just routine (reverse scored), (c) I am able to tell my partner when I want sexual intercourse (or other physical affection), (d) I "hold back" my sexual interest because my partner makes me feel uncomfortable (reverse scored), (e) Sexual expression is an essential part of our relationship, and (f) My partner seems disinterested in sex (reverse scored). Cronbach's alpha was .81 for men and .76 for women.

*Relationship outcome variables.* Although no standard measure of satisfaction was included in the questionnaire, two items included as part of other indices or scales were combined to form a global measure of *satisfaction*. One item was included in a section that asked the respondent to imagine that he or she decided to break off the relationship with the partner and to think about how costly this action would be. This item was followed by several questions, including one that measured satisfaction: "... to what extent would you be giving up a very satisfying relationship?" (1 = *this is not a satisfying relationship* to 9 = *this is a very satisfying relationship*). The second item appeared in a different section of the questionnaire and was, "Overall, how satisfied are you with the

relationship with your partner?" (1 = *not at all satisfied* to 9 = *completely satisfied*). We consider the global nature of these items to be desirable because there is no overlap in content between the satisfaction measure and the expressive interaction variables (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). Moreover, this two-item index has obvious face validity as a measure of satisfaction. Cronbach's alpha for this index of global satisfaction was .75 for men and .82 for women.

*Commitment* was measured by four items, adapted from previous research in which commitment was defined as attachment and the likelihood of staying together in the future (e.g., Rusbult, 1983). These items were: "How committed are you to your partner?" (1 = *extremely uncommitted* to 9 = *extremely committed*), "How often have you seriously considered ending your relationship with your partner?" (1 = *never* to 9 = *several times*), "How likely is it that you will try to end the relationship with your partner during the next year?" (1 = *extremely unlikely* to 9 = *extremely likely*), and "How likely is it that you will try to end the relationship with your partner during the next five years?" (1 = *extremely unlikely* to 9 = *extremely likely*). The items were recoded so that higher scores reflected greater commitment. Cronbach's alpha was .79 for men and .75 for women.

women rated companionship and sexual expression more positively than did men (see Table 1). No difference, however, was found between men and women in how they rated supportive communication in the relationship. Furthermore, no gender differences were found in satisfaction and commitment.

The partners were similar in how they evaluated the relationship. We correlated, for each couple, the female partner's score for each relevant variable with that of her male partner. Partners viewed the domains of expression interaction similarly ( $r_s = .53, .46, \text{ and } .50$  for companionship, supportive communication, and sexual expression, respectively; all  $p_s < .001$ ). Partners also had similar levels of satisfaction with the relationship ( $r = .48, p < .001$ ) and commitment to it ( $r = .50, p < .001$ ). Because of the nonindependence of the couple data (Kenny, in press) and because of our secondary interest in examining gender differences in the associations among the variables, we present the analyses below for men and women separately.

### Associations Among Domains of Interaction and Between Satisfaction and Commitment

Hypothesis 1, which predicted positive associations among the three types of expressive interaction assessed in this study, was tested by calculating zero-order correlations among scores on the companionship, supportive communication, and sexual expression scales. These correlations for men and women separately are reported in Table 2. As predicted, all three forms of expressive interaction were positively and significantly intercorrelated. Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive association between satisfaction with the relationship and commitment to it. This hypothesis was also supported: A substantial and significant positive association was observed between these variables for both men and women.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analyses

Overall, the participants rated their relationships as very expressive. The mean score for each of the three scales measuring the domains of expressive interaction was 3 or higher (on the 0 to 4 response scale). Although both men and women scored, on the average, near the high end of the scales, a significant difference was found between men and women on two of the three expressive interaction scales. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the variables. Paired  $t$  tests indicated that

Table 1  
Means and Standard Deviations on Perceptions of Expressive Interactions, Satisfaction, and Commitment

	Male Partners ( $N = 94$ )		Female Partners ( $N = 94$ )		$t$
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$	
Companionship	3.11	.58	3.29	.58	3.04**
Supportive Communication	3.01	.58	3.07	.65	0.86
Sexual Expression	3.11	.79	3.28	.69	2.20*
Satisfaction	7.95	1.22	8.03	1.29	0.74
Commitment	7.57	1.74	7.85	1.41	1.62

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

Table 2  
Intercorrelations Among Variables in the Study for Males and Females

	Companionship	Supportive Communication	Sexual Expression	Satisfaction	Commitment
Companionship					
Supportive Communication		.45***			
Sexual Expression	.34***		.43***	.41***	.27**
Satisfaction	.34***	.57***	.65***	.66***	.56***
Commitment	.47***	.67***	.63***	.52***	.39***
	.38***	.45***	.28**	.52***	.71***

Note. Correlations were conducted on the 94 men and 94 women separately, although the exact *N* for each analysis varies due to missing data. Correlations above the diagonal are for men; those below the diagonal are for women.

\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

### Domains of Expressive Interaction and Relationship Satisfaction

Hypothesis 3 predicted that each of the three domains of expressive interaction would be positively associated with overall satisfaction with the relationship. This hypothesis was also supported. As indicated in Table 2, satisfaction with the relationship was significantly and positively associated with each form of expressive interaction for both men and women (the correlations ranged from .41 to .67).

Research Question 1 asked which of the three types of expressive interaction was most strongly associated with relationship satisfaction. This question was addressed initially through multiple regression analyses in which satisfaction was regressed simultaneously on the three expressive interaction variables. These analyses are summarized in columns 1-4 of Table 3. All three expressive interaction variables contributed significantly to the prediction of satisfaction for women; the largest *beta* was observed for supportive communication. For men, only supportive communication was a significant predictor of satisfaction. Thus, for both genders, supportive communication was the expressive interaction variable most strongly associated with satisfaction.

### Domains of Expressive Interaction and Relationship Commitment

Hypothesis 4 predicted that each form of expressive interaction would be positively associated with commitment to the relationship. This hypothesis was supported. As shown by the correlations in Table 2, commitment to the relationship was significantly and positively associated with each form of expressive interaction for both men and women (the correlations ranged from .27 to .56).

Research Question 2 asked which of the three types of expressive interaction was most strongly associated with relationship commitment. This question was addressed through regression procedures similar to those used in evaluating RQ1. The results of these analyses are presented in columns 5-8 of Table 3. The results indicated that the three expressive interaction variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in commitment, although the amount was not as large as that for satisfaction. For males, supportive communication was the only significant predictor. For women, both supportive communication and companionship were significant predictors, with supportive communication having the larger *beta*. Hence, for both genders, supportive communication was the form of interac-

tion most strongly associated with commitment.

### A Test of the Mediation Model

Hypothesis 4 predicted that relationship satisfaction would mediate the association between the expressive interaction variables and relationship commitment. Simple path analyses utilizing hierarchical regression (see Biddle & Marlin, 1987) were employed to test this hypothesis. For each gender, two regression equations were computed for relationship commitment: One equation partialled the effects of the three expressive interaction variables from the association between satisfaction and commitment, whereas the other equation partialled the effects of satisfaction from the association between the expressive interaction variables and commitment. Biddle and Marlin (1987) recommend this comparative procedure as a way of testing whether proper intervening variables have been chosen for a mediated-effects model. If the mediated-effects model best describes the data, there should be no residual relationship between the three expressive interaction variables and commitment when controlling for satisfaction. If an independent-effects model better fits the data, then controlling for the effects of satisfaction should only minimally reduce the relationship between the expressive interaction variables and commitment.

Table 4 reports the summary of these regression analyses. The table shows the effect of entering each set of predictors (the expressive interaction variables and satisfaction) into the regression analysis initially. The mediating effect of satisfaction is determined by comparing the amount of variance explained by the expressive interaction variables (i.e., the *R*<sup>2</sup> increment) when entered first versus entered second.

The regression analyses summarized in Table 4 clearly indicate that relationship satisfaction powerfully mediates the effect of the domains of expressive interaction on relationship commitment. By themselves, the three predictor variables collectively account for 31% (for men) and 27% (for women) of the variance in commitment (see the analyses for RQ2 presented previously). However, when relationship satisfaction is entered into the regression first, thus partialling the effect of satisfaction from the influence of the expressive interaction variables, the three predictor variables collectively account for only a small (and nonsignificant) percentage of the variance in commitment (2% for men

Table 3  
Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Satisfaction and Commitment

	Satisfaction				Commitment			
	Male Partner		Female Partner		Male Partner		Female Partner	
	<i>beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>beta</i>	<i>t</i>
Companionship	.13	1.39	.25	3.45***	.02	.24	.26	2.63***
Supportive Communication	.52	4.85***	.39	4.71***	.53	4.39***	.37	3.29**
Sexual Expression	.12	1.16	.32	3.85***	.04	.32	-.01	-.12
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.46		.59		.32		.27	
<i>F</i> ratio	24.40 (3, 86)***		43.11 (3, 90)***		13.54 (3, 88)***		10.70 (3, 89)***	

Note. Degrees of freedom vary due to missing data.

\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Table 4

Summary of Regression Analyses Assessing the Meditational Effects of Relationship Satisfaction on the Association Between Expressive Interaction Indices and Relationship Commitment

Predictor Set		When Entered First		When Entered Second	
		R <sup>2</sup> Change	F ratio	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F ratio
Expressive Interaction Indices	Males	.31***	13.02	.02	1.05
	Females	.27***	10.70	.05	2.36
Relationship Satisfaction	Males	.50***	87.19	.20***	35.68
	Females	.27***	33.45	.06**	7.56

Note. Regressions were conducted on the 94 men and 94 women separately, although the exact *N* for each analysis varies due to missing data.

\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

and 5% for women). By itself, satisfaction explains considerable variance in commitment (50% for men and 27% for women). Even when the effect of the three predictor variables is partialled out, satisfaction continues to explain a significant amount of the variance in commitment (20% for men and 6% for women). Thus, the effect of the expressive interaction variables on commitment is almost fully mediated by satisfaction. In contrast, the linkage between satisfaction and commitment is strong and direct.

### Gender Differences in the Associations

The previously reported results indicate that there are some differences between men and women with respect to the variables assessed in this study. However, are there significant differences between men and women in the associations among variables? Research Question 3 asked whether gender moderated (a) the associations among the three types of expressive interaction, (b) the association between satisfaction and commitment, or (c) the associations between the three types of interaction and satisfaction and commitment. We examined the difference in magnitude between relevant pairs of associations by means of the *z* test for independent correlations (see correlations in Table 2). The *z* tests detected no significant differences due to gender for any of the relevant pairs of correlations; however, it is possible that this use of the *z* test may underestimate the significance of the differences between the correlations, and thus result in some Type II errors (the *z* test assumes independent samples and, as indicated previously, spouses' scores were correlated on all measures).

## DISCUSSION

The major purpose of this investigation was to examine how three forms of expressive interaction—companionship, supportive communication, and sexual

expression—were related to each other and to couples' levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment. We were also interested in examining the association between satisfaction and commitment, and the possibility that the effects of expressive interactions on commitment were mediated by satisfaction.

Our preliminary analyses indicated that the sample, as a whole, reported high levels of all three types of expressive interactions and reported a high level of satisfaction with and commitment to the relationship. These results are not surprising for a sample of couples who were either in the first years of marriage or were cohabiting or engaged. Previous research has also indicated that late stages of courtship (e.g., engagement) and early marriage are generally times when the partners focus on each other and are quite satisfied with their relationship (Glenn, 1990). The females were somewhat more positive than the males toward two of the domains of interaction—companionship and sexual expression. Similar results were found by Kingsbury and Minda (1988) using the PAIR Inventory in a study of dating relationships. Perhaps these gender differences occur because women and men use different yardsticks to evaluate these particular aspects of their relationship. To the extent that men have traditionally emphasized recreation in their friendships with other men (Tannen, 1990), they may rate companionate activities with women somewhat less satisfying than women rate these activities with men. Similarly, to the extent that men generally have more sexual experiences prior to marriage (Oliver & Hyde, 1993), they may have a greater range of comparison experiences in this particular domain of interaction. In addition, however, men may have lower sexual expression scores because several of the items on the sexual expression scale refer to perceived freedom in expressing sexual needs. It may be the case that men feel less comfortable, compared to women, talking about sexual issues with their partner. Other research also indi-

cates that men may feel less comfortable than women expressing on intimate topics (e.g., Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980).

### Patterns of Expressive Interaction

We expected to find that the three domains of interaction would be positively associated, and this was the case. Partners who feel positively about one form of expressive interaction were also positive about the other two forms. For example, partners who positively evaluated their shared recreational activities also positively evaluated their supportive communication and sexual interactions. These results suggest that it is unlikely that partners come to specialize in one form of expressive interaction and neglect the other ways of being expressive. These correlations also suggest that one form of interaction spills over to the others and that all forms of interaction reflect the partners' love for each other.

### Associations Between Expressive Interaction and Satisfaction and Commitment

Several of the hypotheses and research questions in this study focused on how the three types of expressive interaction were related to satisfaction and commitment in the relationship. Satisfaction and commitment, as the two outcome variables, were substantially correlated. Clearly, satisfaction and commitment co-vary in close relationships, in part because satisfaction is one major factor leading to commitment (e.g., Rusbult, 1983). However, satisfaction is not the only factor that contributes to commitment, which explains why the correlation between these two variables was not higher.

We had hypothesized that all three types of expressive interaction would be positively related to both relationship satisfaction and commitment. However, we further hypothesized that the effects of the domains of interaction on commitment would be mediated by satisfaction. Our hypotheses were supported. All three forms of expressive interaction were positively associated with both satisfaction and commitment, for both men and women. The hierarchical regression analyses indicated that the three forms of expressive interaction predicted satisfaction and that satisfaction predicted commitment, but that satisfaction mediated the relation between expressive interaction and commitment. Within an interdependence framework (e.g., Rus-

bult, 1983), companionship, supportive communication, and sexual expression can be considered rewarding interactions that contribute directly to satisfaction and indirectly to commitment. They can also be considered intrinsic investments in the relationship that increase the desire to stay in the relationship. Of course, our data are correlational and, therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility that other causal relationships are operating. For example, satisfaction may affect both commitment and desire to interact in different domains of the relationship. Furthermore, predictors of commitment not considered in this study may be direct predictors of commitment. Theorists of commitment have identified several predictors that directly affect commitment without being mediated by satisfaction, including barriers (children, religion) and investments (number of years together, material possessions) (e.g., Johnson, 1991; Rusbult, 1983).

We also examined which form of expressive interaction was most highly related to satisfaction and commitment. Of the three forms of expressive interaction, supportive communication was most highly related to both satisfaction and commitment. The strong association between supportive communication and satisfaction (and commitment) is consistent with other research (Ting-Toomey 1983) and clinical observations (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985), suggesting that quality communication may be the essence of a good relationship and the most important factor contributing to the happiness of the partners.

A comparison of the bivariate correlations (where each type of expressive interaction was found to be highly correlated with satisfaction and commitment) and the multiple regression (where supportive communication emerged as the strongest predictor of satisfaction and commitment and the other two expressive interaction variables were not significant predictors of one or both outcome variables) highlights a conceptual issue with which relationship researchers must deal. Relationship researchers, who cannot measure in one study all possible predictors of the variable they are trying to explain, must be open to the possibility that a correlation found between two variables can be explained by the effect of a third and unmeasured variable (Reis & Franks, 1994). For example, if we had measured only companionship and sexual expression and had neglected to measure supportive communication, we would have concluded that the effects of companionship and sexual expression were much

stronger than they actually were found to be in this study.

It is also important to examine how associations among variables representing relationship phenomena are moderated by other variables, including characteristics of the relational partners. In this study, we considered how gender moderated the effects of the domains of interaction on satisfaction and commitment, as well as how it moderated the other associations examined. We found that the results were generally the same for men and women. The absence of a moderating effect for gender is important for at least two reasons. First, the absence of moderating effects makes it possible to articulate more parsimonious models of the linkages between types of interaction, satisfaction, and commitment. That is, models of the associations between these variables do not need to take gender into account, nor do separate models need to be developed for men and women. Second, it is theoretically important to observe that men and women appear to value the same things in their intimate relationships, and those values seem to be equal predictors of satisfaction with the relationship. We recognize, of course, that these conclusions are based on a volunteer sample of nonclinical, very satisfied couples. Whether gender moderates these associations in distressed or highly conflictual couples is an important question for additional research.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The results of this study have implications for distressed couples and the therapists and counselors they come to for help. Some couples seek therapy or attend relationship enrichment workshops because they are no longer satisfied with their relationships, although they are still committed to them. The source of their commitment may be factors that have been identified as uniquely associated with commitment but which are unrelated to satisfaction—barriers, investments, and a moral obligation to stay together (Johnson, 1991; Rusbult, 1983). The partners seek help in restoring some of the passion and satisfaction to their relationship. The results of this investigation may be used by therapists for developing strategies to treat such couples.

Specifically, our findings suggest four points of interest to counselors and therapists. First, we found that all three domains of expressive interaction—companionship, supportive communication,

and sexual expression—were associated with satisfaction (at least in the bivariate results). Treatment for couples experiencing diminished satisfaction in their relationships should assess and possibly address all three of these domains. Second, we also found, however, that supportive communication contributed to variance beyond that accounted for by the domains of sexual expression and recreational activities. Thus, supportive communication appears to play a pivotal role in overall satisfaction. This result suggests that efforts directed at enhancing the other domains of expressive interaction that do not also attend to the quality of supportive communication may be ineffective, or at least less successful.

Third, our findings have implications for relationship stability as well. We found that high levels of satisfaction were associated with high levels of commitment. Indeed, the type of commitment that comes from satisfaction may be a more positive form of commitment than that which exists because partners feel obligated or pressured to stay together (e.g., Johnson, 1991) or have to stay together because of lack of alternatives (e.g., Rusbult, 1983). Hence, if practitioners can help distressed couples find ways to have fun together and increase their satisfaction, personal commitment may be increased as well.

Finally, we found that gender did not moderate the effects of the domains of interaction on satisfaction or commitment. Although researchers have argued in other contexts that gender constitutes a culture (i.e., values, needs, beliefs, and rituals) distinguishing men and women (e.g., Tannen, 1986; Wood, 1994), we found no evidence of its effect here. To the contrary, whatever processes that link expressive interactions to satisfaction and commitment are common to both men and women. This is also contrary to prevailing gender stereotypes, which suggest that men and women possess very different views of almost everything, including love, commitment, and intimacy. A slew of popular books insist that *You Just Don't Understand* (Tannen, 1990) or *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* (Gray, 1993). Many critics, however, have sharply criticized the contention that men and women differ markedly in their views of love, commitment, and intimacy. They argue that theorists have grossly exaggerated existing gender differences (e.g., Hatfield & Rapson, 1987, 1993). Our results provide additional support for the second contention. Therefore, therapists can be less concerned with gender differences than



with individual differences in attitudes, temperaments, and behaviors.

## Limitations and Conclusions

There are several limitations to this research that should be noted. First, the sample was limited to young couples. In future research, a greater diversity of couples should be surveyed. This study was also limited because the data were collected at only one point in time. Longitudinal studies are needed to see how the types of expressive interactions change over time and to provide better tests of the causal relationships between the domains of interaction and satisfaction and commitment.

Furthermore, through longitudinal research, we could examine how the domains of interaction predict relationship stability. Third, at least one measure (companionship) had relatively low reliability, which may explain its modest association with satisfaction and commitment.

It is also important that future researchers consider the instrumental side of marriage along with the expressive side. Some relationships are satisfying and have a high level of commitment because the partners spend a great deal of time together in the *instrumental* side of marriage. They do housework together, balance the budget together, and work together in the family business. Cuber and Harroff (1965) identified "total" marriages as those in which partners do everything together—play and work. Furthermore, future research should take into account more individual differences that moderate the relationship between predictors of satisfaction and satisfaction, including individual beliefs about what types of interactions should increase satisfaction (e.g., Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1992). For some individuals, what may be most important is the sexual expression of the relationship, whereas for others, shared hobbies and leisure activities are the essence of the relationship.

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