



Cautious to a fault: Self-protection and the trajectory of marital satisfaction[☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ When does practicing self-protective if-then rules erode marital satisfaction?
- ▶ Fit between “if-then” rules and risk forecast newlywed declines in satisfaction.
- ▶ When self-protected more, satisfaction declined more in low-risk relationships.
- ▶ When self-protected less, satisfaction declined more in high-risk relationships.
- ▶ In low-risk relationships, less trust predicted caution and declines in satisfaction.

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ABSTRACT

A contextual model of self-protection is proposed to explain when adhering to cautious “if-then” rules in daily interaction erodes marital satisfaction. People can self-protect against partner non-responsiveness by distancing when a partner seems rejecting, promoting a partner's dependence when feeling unworthy, or by devaluing a partner in the face of costs. The model implies that being less trusting elicits self-protection, and that mismatches between self-protective practices and encountered risk accelerate declines in satisfaction. A longitudinal study of newlyweds revealed that the fit between self-protection practices and risk predicted declines in satisfaction over three years. When people self-protected more initially, satisfaction declined more in low-risk (i.e., low conflict, resilient partner) than high-risk relationships (i.e., high conflict, vulnerable partner). However, when people self-protected less initially, satisfaction declined more in high-risk than low-risk relationships. Process evidence was consistent with moderated mediation: In low-risk relationships only, being less trusting predicted higher levels of self-protective caution that forecast later declines in satisfaction.

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Of all the forms of caution, caution in love is perhaps the most fatal to true happiness. Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*.

Introduction

Is caution in love truly fatal to happiness? Some degree of self-protective caution does seem prudent. Because partners are

interdependent in multiple ways, they cannot help but hurt and disappoint one another (Murray & Holmes, 2009). Given such rejection risks, partners might be wise to hesitate to depend on one another at certain times (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Nonetheless, being unduly cautious could easily prove fatal to happiness. Indeed, growing evidence suggests that sustained relationship satisfaction involves risking connection and making a leap of faith (see Gagne & Lydon, 2004; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010 for reviews). For instance, people who believe that their presumably imperfect partner mirrors their ideals experience no decline in satisfaction over the newlywed years (Murray, Griffin, Derrick, Harris, Aloni, & Leder, 2011).

Because caution could help or hinder relationships, this paper advances a contextual model of self-protection and its effects on new marriages. Building on a new theory of interdependence (Murray & Holmes, 2009, 2011), we conceptualize self-protection in terms of the “if-then” rules that govern thought and behavior. Our model assumes that Gayle

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can protect against rejection through her tendency to push Ron away when she fears rejection, to make efforts to increase his commitment to her when she feels unworthy of him, or to value him less when he interferes with her personal goals. Our model further assumes that the amount of self-protective caution Gayle exercises should depend on both her trust in Ron and the risks of rejection and non-responsiveness she actually encounters in her relationship. Consequently, being less trusting should only inspire self-protective caution that is fatal to satisfaction when such caution is not warranted by the severity of the encountered risks (Murray & Holmes, 2011).

The “if-then” rules for motivating responsiveness

Relationship satisfaction and stability depend on partners being mutually responsive to one another's needs (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). However, behaving responsively is not always an easy task. Consider the typical experiences of newlyweds. Once married, partners shift their joint pursuits from leisure activities both partners desire to household drudgery neither partner enjoys (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). Conflicts also increase as partners discover ways in which their personalities and relationship goals are incompatible (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Huston et al., 1986). For interactions to be rewarding in the face of emerging conflicts of interest, each partner must learn to accommodate his or her own interests and goals to meet the other partner's interests and goals.

The motivation-management model of interdependence asserts that people's general working models of relationships contain the “know-how” to coordinate mutually responsive behavior (Murray & Holmes, 2009, 2011). This know-how corresponds to “if-then” rules that match Gayle's willingness to depend on Ron to his perceived willingness to be responsive to her needs. Our research has demonstrated that these rules coordinate partners' motivations by linking the level of risk in a given situation to correspondent interpersonal goals and behavioral strategies for goal pursuit (Murray, Aloni et al., 2009; Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008; Murray & Holmes, 2011; Murray, Holmes et al., 2009). Fig. 1 illustrates how these “if-then” rules govern partner interaction in situations that involve more or less apparent risk of a partner being non-responsive.

Imagine a conflict in which Gayle, a sports enthusiast who barely tolerates her in-laws, plans to golf the same weekend Ron wants her to attend his family reunion. Ron's perception of such preferences makes the situation high in the risk of her non-responsiveness. Expecting Gayle's rejection in such a situation (i.e., “if”) activates Ron's state goal to self-protect against the possibility of her rejection

and non-responsiveness. The activation of this goal then activates two complementary strategies (i.e., “then”) for meeting this goal (Murray, Aloni et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2008). Namely, it activates the inclination to distance himself from Gayle until he has taken concrete steps to ensure that she depends on him in important ways, thereby ensuring her motivation to be responsive to him. For instance, he might not ask her to attend (i.e., reduce-own-dependence) until he fixes a computer problem for her (i.e., promote-partner-dependence).

Now imagine that Gayle only goes on golf weekends to make business connections and she enjoys her in-laws' company. Ron's perception of such preferences makes this situation low in the risk of her non-responsiveness. In such a situation, expecting Gayle's responsiveness activates his state goal to connect to her. The activation of this goal (i.e., “if”) elicits two complementary strategies (i.e., “then”) for meeting this interpersonal goal. Namely, it activates the inclination to draw closer to Gayle and justify any costs he incurs as a result of his stronger connection (Murray, Holmes et al., 2009). For instance, he might ask her to skip golfing to attend the reunion (i.e., increase-own-dependence). On her acceptance of his request, he then might see her athleticism more positively when she wakes him to go running on the morning of the reunion rather than letting him sleep as he wished (i.e., justify-own-costs).

Experimental and daily diary research supports the existence and function of each of these “if-then” rules. In formal terms, the “promote-partner-dependence” rule links acute feelings of inferiority to the partner (i.e., “if”) to the tendency to put the partner in one's debt (i.e., “then”). For instance, subliminally priming the exchange script, and thereby activating acute feelings of inferiority, elicits the desire to do instrumental favors for one's partner (Murray, Aloni et al., 2009). In daily interaction, newlyweds react to acute feelings of inferiority to their partner by providing more instrumental favors for their partner on subsequent days (e.g., doing their partner's chores, running their errands). The “reduce-own-dependence” rule links acute concerns about the partner's rejection (i.e., “if”) to the tendency to distance oneself from the partner (i.e., “then”). For example, priming a partner's past transgression automatically elicits hostility-related thoughts (Murray et al., 2008). People who are likely to act on the “if-then” rules because their executive resources are taxed also respond to a dating partner's imagined transgressions with hostility (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). The “justify-own-costs” rule links acute awareness of the costs a partner imposes (i.e., “if”) to the compensatory tendency to value the partner more (i.e., “then”). In daily interaction, putting the “justify-own-costs” rule into practice fosters a stronger sense of connection to the partner. For example, newlyweds behave more responsively toward their partner on the days after they compensated for the costs their partner imposed on their personal goals. Newlyweds who respond to their partner's daily obstruction of their personal goals by valuing their partner on subsequent days also report more stable satisfaction over the first year of marriage (Murray, Holmes et al., 2009).

The motivation-management model further assumes that practicing self-protection can simultaneously protect and strengthen relationships because some of the situations that partners encounter truly merit caution. The risk of non-responsiveness varies across situations within a given relationship and across relationships because partners are interdependent in life tasks, personality, and relationship goals (Kelley, 1979; Murray & Holmes, 2009; Overall & Sibley, 2008). In fact, partners do not selectively assort on basic dimensions of personality, ensuring that some incompatibility is the rule for all but the fortunate few (Lykken & Tellegen, 1993). Because incompatible preferences increase the risk of non-responsiveness (Kelley, 1979), partners with less objectively compatible preferences are likely to face more high-risk situations – making applying self-protective “if-then” rules a better bet for soliciting partner responsiveness and fostering fluid interaction patterns (Murray & Holmes, 2009, 2011).

For instance, if Gayle really is likely to be non-responsive, Ron taking a necessary self-protective step to make her need him increases his chance of avoiding rejection (relative to simply approaching Gayle).

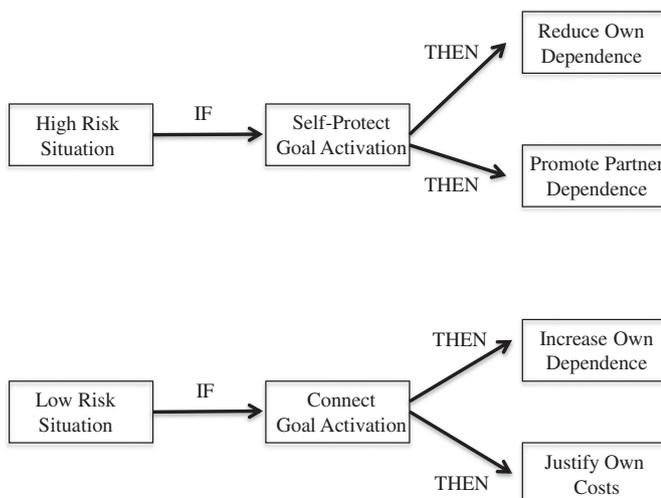


Fig. 1. The “if-then” rules for motivating mutual responsiveness.

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