Consensus and Relationship Distress before and after a Brief Relationship Intervention for Low-Income Couples

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Consensus in Couple Relationships

- Lack of consensus is associated with greater relationship distress (Avivi, Launrenceau, & Carver, 2009; Gaunt, 2006; Gonzaga, Campos & Bradbury, 2007)

- Partners show little consensus on reasons for seeking couples therapy (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004), which may diminish their benefits from brief interventions (Biesen & Doss, 2012)

- Consensus on strengths may be less important than consensus on concerns
Why focus on brief interventions?

- Low income couples are at greater risk for relationship distress and dissolution, despite highly valuing marriage.
  
  (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003)
  
  (Trail & Karney, 2012)

- Yet they are underrepresented in the literature.
  
  (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012)

- Couples’ pre-treatment characteristics may impact intervention efficacy.
  
  (Rauer et al., 2014)
Current Study

Is couple consensus on presenting relationship concerns associated with presenting distress and changes in distress from pre- to post-intervention?

Is couple consensus on presenting relationship strengths associated with presenting distress and changes in distress from pre- to post-intervention?
Method: Participants

- Relationship Rx Program
- 1480 individuals (740 couples)
- Married ($n=867$) or cohabiting ($n=613$)
- Relationship length: $M = 9.14$ years ($SD = 9.55$)
- Ages: 18 to over 64 years
- Race/ethnicity: 79.2% White, 15.8% Black, 5% other
- Median household income: $10,000$ to $19,000$
- Median education: HS Diploma
Method: Procedure & Measures

1. Baseline
   Couple Satisfaction Index
   (CSI-16; Funk & Rogge, 2007)
   Relationship Checkup Questionnaire
   (Cordova, 2014)

2. Intervention
   Session 1: assessment
   Session 2: feedback

3. One-month follow-up
   Post-intervention RCQ & CSI
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B. RELATIONSHIP STRENGTHS.
   Relationship Strengths: Please indicate with an X the degree to which you experience each of the following areas as a strength in your relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>We chat, touch base, or check-in regularly about what's going on in our separate day-to-day lives.</td>
<td>Not A Strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>We regularly spend quality time together.</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>We both show our emotions in healthy ways.</td>
<td>Significant</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>We communicate our anger with each other in an open, respectful, and assertive manner</td>
<td>Significant</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>We're good at making up after a fight.</td>
<td>Significant</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>We're able to raise issues with each other in a kind and respectful way.</td>
<td>Significant</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>When one of us has been hurt, we are good at forgiving each other.</td>
<td>Not A Strength</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>We're happy with our sex life.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>My partner and I feel emotionally close to each other during and after sex (rather than more distant or lonely).</td>
<td>Not A Strength</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>My partner accepts who I am as a person, including my faults and weaknesses.</td>
<td>Not A Strength</td>
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Analyses

- Multi-level logistic regressions in Mplus, with interaction term
- Control variables: gender, marital status, poverty, race, and parenting status
Results

For Concerns
- Main effect of time (i.e. the intervention; 67% decrease in odds)
- Main effect of consensus (57% decrease in odds)
- Significant effect of Consensus x Time interaction

For Strengths
- No statistically significant effect of strengths consensus

Table 2. Consensus on Relationship Concerns Predicting Relationship Distress over Time

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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>B(SE)</th>
<th>B*</th>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>-.12(.15)**</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus</td>
<td>-.85(.20)**</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time x Consensus</td>
<td>.21(.12)*</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.29(.19)**</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority Status</td>
<td>-.21(.23)</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>.24(.22)</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>-.13(.25)</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Children</td>
<td>.08(.09)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
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>Note. *p < .05, **p < .001
Results – Concerns Agreement

**Figure 1.** Percentage of Distressed Couples in Each Level of Consensus for Concerns
Results – Concerns Agreement

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- Agreed least
Results – Concerns Agreement

Figure 1. Percentage of Distressed Couples in Each Level of Consensus for Concerns

- **agreed least**
- **agreed most**

![Graph showing percentage of distressed couples in each level of consensus for concerns before and after intervention.](image-url)
Results – Concerns Agreement

Figure 1. Percentage of Distressed Couples in Each Level of Consensus for Concerns

- 0 Consensus
- 1 Consensus
- 2 Consensus
- 3 Consensus

Pre-intervention vs. Post-intervention
Considerations and Conclusions

- Consensus on concerns appears to be more indicative of relationship satisfaction than consensus on strengths.
- This brief integrative approach appears to be most beneficial for couples with lower levels of initial consensus.
- Future studies that use random-assignment, include indicators of change beyond distress, and assess long-term change are necessary.
Implications

- Pre-treatment assessment of consensus on presenting concerns can help therapists to select a treatment modality.

- Consensus might indicate better relationship functioning, but it is not a prerequisite for improved satisfaction over time.

- Non-traditional brief interventions that integrate emotion-focused, acceptance, motivation, and behavioral techniques can reduce relationship distress.

- Even for couples with contextual barriers.
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and

all the couples who participated!