

For relationship maintenance, accurate perception of partner's behavior could be key

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Married couples and long-term romantic partners typically engage in a variety of behaviors that sustain and nourish the relationship. These actions promote higher levels of commitment, which benefits couples' physical and psychological health. A new study from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign looks at how such relationship maintenance behaviors interact with satisfaction and commitment.

The work is [published](#) in the journal *Personal Relationships*.

"Relationship maintenance is a well-established measure of couple [behavior](#). In our study, we measured it with five main categories, which are positivity, openness, assurances, use of social networks, and sharing tasks," said Yifan Hu, a doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS), part of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at U. of I.

"Relationship maintenance is usually studied on an individual level. But two [partners](#) work together to maintain the [relationship](#). Each person contributes, and each person also perceives the efforts their partner is making. We wanted to look at both individual and interactive (or couple-level) relationship processes," she added.

The researchers analyzed data from 192 heterosexual married couples. Each partner completed an [online survey](#) separately. Participants reported their own relationship maintenance behaviors over the past two weeks, as well as their perception of the partner's behaviors. The surveys also included questions measuring relationship [satisfaction](#) and [commitment](#).

The results contained some unexpected findings, as there were few direct effects of relationship maintenance behaviors on commitment. However, relationship satisfaction appeared as a moderating factor between relationship maintenance and commitment. In other words, higher levels of satisfaction led to a more positive assessment of the partner's behavior, which strengthened commitment.

"Generally, we found people were relatively accurate about their partner's maintenance behaviors. We also found that it is better to have accurate perception when you are highly satisfied. If you are less satisfied, accurately perceiving your partner's efforts may not be

positive. And your partner's accuracy in perceiving your behavior may make you feel worse, because they are aware you may not be doing that much for the relationship," Hu said.

"When a [stressful event](#) happens, a couple that is less satisfied with each other may be more likely to react negatively than a couple with higher relationship satisfaction," she added.

Another unexpected finding was that similarity in relationship maintenance behaviors was negatively correlated with wives' level of commitment. Studies have shown that similarity in [personality traits](#), values, and attitudes enhance relationship satisfaction. However, for relationship maintenance strategies, complementary approaches may be more beneficial.

"We found that similarity in behaviors might not be helpful for promoting interactive relationship maintenance. A possible explanation could be that if partners are too similar in their approach, they have a smaller repertoire of coping behaviors," Hu explained.

"When partners are dealing with stressors, they need to work in concert, but using different strategies may be helpful. For example, one partner can use positivity and assurances, while the other can use social networks. They can be mindful of trying to have a larger skill set for relationship maintenance behaviors," she suggested.

Brian Ogolsky, professor in HDFS, is co-author on the paper. "Our study aligns with existing literature showing that relationship maintenance enactment and satisfaction are related to commitment," he said. "At the same time, we found that most relationship [maintenance](#) processes at the individual level are associated with commitment only when moderated by satisfaction, which underscores the complexity of couple dynamics."

Study authors include Yifan Hu, Brian Ogolsky, and Laura Stafford.

More information: Yifan Hu et al, The role of individual- and interactive-level relationship maintenance on married couples' commitment, *Personal Relationships* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/per.12517](https://doi.org/10.1111/per.12517)

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