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Spouses' demand and withdrawal during marital conflict in relation to their subjective well-being

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Abstract

This study investigated the link between spouses' demanding and withdrawing behavior during conflict and their subjective well-being (SWB) in a community sample of 126 couples. Demand and withdrawal were analyzed in combination in the demand/withdraw pattern, as well as individually. Results showed that the model with the individual conflict behavior provided a better representation of the data than the demand/withdraw pattern model. Women's, as well as men's, demands were directly associated with men's SWB. Furthermore, the individual conflict behavior was indirectly linked with both spouses' SWB via their own marital satisfaction. Results highlight the potential importance of couple's conflict behavior for spouses' SWB.

Keywords

conflict resolution styles, couple relationships, demand/withdraw pattern, marital interaction, marital relationships, subjective well-being

Disagreement is a natural part of every marital relationship. Research has shown that even frequent disagreements and conflicts are not necessarily harmful, if couples handle the conflict in a positive way, and are able to resolve it. Healthy conflict resolution is critical to marital quality, as well as the likelihood of marital stability (Bodenmann,

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2001; Gottman, 1994; Kurdek, 1996; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Research on well-being indicated that social interaction is one of the most significant determinants of physical and psychological well-being (Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2003; Gottman & Notarius, 2002). However, marital interaction, and more specifically conflict resolution behavior, has not often been investigated in relation to subjective well-being (SWB) (but see Marchand & Hock, 2000, 2003). It seems that conflict resolution behavior, above and beyond conflict frequency, is critical to understanding the SWB of married partners. Therefore, the present study aims to expand current knowledge in this area by considering the link between the dyadic pattern of demand/withdraw, as well as both spouses' individual demanding and withdrawing behavior, and spousal SWB.

Subjective well-being

According to Diener et al. (2003), SWB is a multifaceted construct, which includes affective and cognitive evaluations of one's life. The affective facet can be further differentiated into positive and negative affect. The cognitive area includes general judgments of life satisfaction as a key indicator, as well as domain-specific life satisfaction. Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith (1999) concluded in their review that marital satisfaction seems to be the only life domain with a significant influence on general life satisfaction.

In other research, Caprara and Steca (2006) distinguish between an affective dimension (i.e., the difference between positive and negative affect, called hedonic balance) and a cognitive dimension (i.e., positive thinking) underlying life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism. Taken together, theoretical and empirical work on SWB points to the need to assess SWB with multiple facets. The core aspects seem to be affect, life satisfaction, and self-esteem. All authors underscored that SWB is influenced by the quality of close social relationships, such as marital relationships (Diener et al., 1999, 2003) and by the behavior within and the evaluation of marital relationships (Caprara & Steca, 2006). However, research on the association between conflict resolution behavior within marital relationships and spousal SWB is still rare.

The demand/withdraw pattern

Within the domain of negative conflict behavior, demand and withdrawal styles can be readily distinguished. Spousal demand is typically thought of as a behavior characterized by criticizing, nagging, and making demands of the other partner. In contrast, withdrawal is defined by avoiding confrontation and becoming silent (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2007). These two styles often coexist within one dyad, with each partner taking on an opposing style. This interaction pattern, referred to as the demand/withdraw pattern, is well known among therapists and researchers alike (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Klinetob & Smith, 1996). There are some empirical findings on the connection between the demand/withdraw pattern and both spouses' SWB. The study by Uebelacker, Courtnage, and Whisman (2003), using a correlational design and both spouses' self-reports, found associations between the demand/withdraw pattern and

spouses' concurrent negative affect (as one facet of SWB). As far as we know, this is the only study examining SWB as an outcome. Other studies found a positive link between the demand/withdraw pattern and spouses' physiological stress responses (Denton, Burleson, Hobbs, Von Stein, & Rodriguez, 2001; Heffner et al., 2006; Malis & Roloff, 2006), which is also relevant for aspects of SWB, such as negative affect (e.g., McEwen, 2004). Altogether, there is some evidence that the demand/withdraw pattern can be harmful to an individual's SWB. Therefore, in the present study, we predict that the demand/withdraw pattern is inversely associated with both spouses' concurrent SWB (H1).

Demand and withdrawal styles

Aside from studying the combination of demand and withdrawal with the demand/withdrawal pattern, it is also important to investigate the individual styles to separate the components of the demand/withdraw pattern. Previous research showed that studying the individual's conflict behavior provides further information in addition to considering only the demand/withdraw pattern (e.g., Eldridge et al., 2007). Investigating this phenomenon on both levels of analysis, the individual's behavior as well as spouses' interaction pattern, is expected to provide a more complete picture of spouses' conflict behavior (e.g., Kurdek, 1995).

There are only a few studies examining the link between individuals' demanding and withdrawing behavior and spouses' SWB, and these primarily examine spousal negative affect. A study, investigating couples' marital conflict strategy (assessed with observational data and combined for both spouses) and both spouses' negative affect, only revealed an association between spouses' verbal hostility and husbands' negative affect. No relations were found for spouses' withdrawal (Du Rocher Schudlich, Papp, & Cummings, 2004). However, Franck and Buehler (2007), using structural equation modeling, demonstrated the link between self-reported marital hostility and negative affect in both men and women.

When considering both spouses' conflict resolution styles, in the form of attacking (comparable to demand) and avoidance (comparable to withdrawal), Marchand and Hock (2000), using regression analyses, found that both spouses' self-reported avoidance styles were related to their own negative affect. For the attacking style, a link was found between husbands', but not wives', attacking style and their own negative affect. Overall, no relations with partners' negative affect were found. In another study by Marchand and Hock (2003), again relying on self-reports, wives' avoidance and attacking styles were associated with their own negative affect, whereas only husbands' avoidance was related to their own negative affect. Further, in this study, relations between wives' avoidance and attacking styles and their husbands' negative affect occurred. However, no associations between husbands' styles and their wives' negative affect were found.

In sum, in most studies, withdrawal (avoidance) and demand (attacking/hostility) styles were associated with decreased own SWB, particularly negative affect, while a few studies also pointed to effects on the partner. Therefore, in the present study, both spouses' demand and withdrawal styles are expected to be inversely related to their own, as well as to their partner's, SWB (H2).

Marital satisfaction, conflict behavior, and spousal subjective well-being

Research indicated that demand/withdraw behavior, as well as individual styles, are associated concurrently (e.g., Eldridge et al., 2007), as well as longitudinally, with marital dissatisfaction (e.g., Kurdek, 1995). Furthermore, other studies have demonstrated that marital dissatisfaction is related to lower life satisfaction and global SWB (for reviews, see Burman & Margolin, 1992; Diener et al., 1999). Also in the study by Uebelacker et al. (2003), spouses' marital satisfaction was related to their SWB. As far as we know, there is no study examining marital satisfaction as a mediator in the link between demand and withdrawal and both spouses' SWB. Given that studies found, on the one hand, relations between spouses' conflict behavior and marital satisfaction, and, on the other hand, between marital satisfaction and spousal SWB, both spouses' marital satisfaction was included as a mediator variable in the present study.

The present study

The aim of the present study was to investigate the association between demanding and withdrawing behavior in marital conflict and spousal SWB. In addition, the mediating role of marital satisfaction in the link between conflict behavior and spousal SWB was examined.

We included both spouses' ratings about their own, as well as their partner's, conflict behavior, overcoming the shortcomings of other studies that rely only on self-report data (e.g., Marchand & Hock, 2000, 2003). Spouses can have unique perspectives on the intensity and type of interaction that populates their marriage, and provide complementary or even supplementary information on marital communication (e.g., Rhoades & Stocker, 2006). Thus, eliciting information on conflict behavior from both spouses using a multi-rater approach is an important step in providing a more complete and accurate picture of dyadic functioning.

Most studies examining SWB as an outcome variable only considered negative affect as one component of SWB (e.g., Du Rocher Schudlich et al., 2004). As shown, SWB is a multifaceted concept, which includes diverse components (e.g., Caprara & Steca, 2006; Diener et al., 2003). Therefore, we included both spouses' negative affect, self-esteem, and general life satisfaction as components of SWB in our study.

Method

Procedure

The present study is based on the first assessment of an ongoing longitudinal study in the German-speaking part of Switzerland on the influences of dysfunctional family processes on children in transition into puberty. Most of the families were recruited through their children's schools in the city of Basel and the surrounding area. Trained university students presented information about the study to fourth-grade students in their classrooms, who then brought informed-consent letters home to their parents. A smaller percentage of the families (22.7%) were recruited through residents' registration offices. The average

response rate was 17% (22.6% for school recruitment and 10.5% for recruitment through residents' registration offices), which is comparable to that of other studies including several family members (e.g., 17.8% by Davila, Karney, Hall, & Bradbury, 2003).

Families were contacted for an initial interview after returning the signed informed-consent form. Mothers and children participated in standard interviews and completed questionnaires with trained interviewers during a two-hour session at their homes. Separate questionnaires, along with a postage-paid envelope, were left for the husband or partner of two-parent families, to complete and return. Mothers and children each received 15 Swiss Francs (equivalent to 14 U.S. Dollars) for participation. Fathers did not receive an incentive.

Participants

Two hundred and forty-six families participated in the study. Of these, 192 were two-parent families. A subsample of 126 couples provided self- and partner-reports of conflict behavior and was therefore included in the following analyses.

Most of the couples (95.2%; $n = 120$) had been married[1] for an average of 14.72 years ($SD = 4.83$; range = 2–42 years). All couples had at least one child, and the mean number of children was 2.52 ($SD = 1.07$). Most of the participants were Swiss (88% of women and 86.5% of men). The average age was 43.61 years for women ($SD = 4.46$) and 45.83 years for men ($SD = 4.99$). With respect to education, 31% of women had completed university, the majority had completed formal job training (65.8%), and 3.2% had completed only the nine years of compulsory schooling. Half of the men had successfully completed formal job training (50%, $n = 63$) and the other 50% had obtained a university degree ($n = 63$). Thus, the sample was biased toward higher education compared to the Swiss population (Federal Statistical Office, 2010). Most women (76.2%) were employed part time, 4% were employed full time and almost 19% of the women were not engaged in paid employment. Among men, 79.4% were employed full time, 19.8% part time, and one man was in vocational training.

Differences were revealed between the sample studied and the sample of two-parent families without men's participation ($n = 67$). In the study sample, compared to the sample without men's report, men and women were significantly older ($F(1, 190) = 16.28$, $p < .001$; $d = .42$ for men and $F(1, 190) = 8.31$, $p < .01$; $d = .59$ for women), were more highly educated (χ^2 (2, $N = 190$)= 25.84, $p < .001$ for men and χ^2 (2, $N = 190$)= 16.41, $p < .001$ for women), and more participants were Swiss (χ^2 (2, $N = 192$)= 9.19, $p < .05$ for men and χ^2 (2, $N = 192$)= 10.80, $p < .01$ for women). However, no significant differences between the two samples were found for marital status, marriage duration, number of children, and men's and women's employment.

Measures

Demanding and withdrawing behavior. To measure spouses' demand and withdrawal, both spouses completed the subscales conflict engagement (which serves as the measure of demand) and withdrawal from the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994; German adaptation by Gödde & Walper, 2000). Both spouses indicated how

frequently (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*) they use each of the styles when having an argument or disagreement with their partner. In a second part, they rated the same items for their partner's behavior. Both subscales had a high internal consistency: demand (four items; "It happens that I throw insults on her/him", "I explode and get out of control", "I launch personal attacks", and "I say things that aren't meant"; $\alpha = .84–.87$) and withdrawal (four items; e.g., "She/He doesn't listen to me anymore"; $\alpha = .81–.84$). Following the procedure of other studies (e.g., Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Kurdek, 1995; Vogel & Karney, 2002), we used a combination of the two separate conflict behavior styles, demand and withdrawal, to measure the demand/withdraw pattern.

Marital satisfaction. Both spouses' marital satisfaction was assessed with a single item taken from the Swiss Household Panel ("How satisfied are you with your partnership/sexuality?") on a five-point-scale (1 = *unsatisfied* to 5 = *very satisfied*).

Subjective well-being. Three scales were used to measure both spouses' SWB. First, both spouses completed a 15-item self-report short version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977; German adaptation by Hautzinger & Bailer, 1993) to assess negative affect. All items were rated on a four-point scale in reference to the previous week; 1 = *rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)* to 4 = *most or all the time (5–7 days)* (e.g., "During the last week I was sad"). The internal consistency of the scale was good with Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$ for men and $\alpha = .83$ for women.

Women's and men's self-esteem was assessed with the German adaptation of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989). The measure consists of 10 items (e.g., "I am able to do things as well as most other people") rated on a four-point scale (1 = *not true* to 4 = *exactly*). The scale had a good internal consistency with $\alpha = .79$ for women and $\alpha = .83$ for men.

The third scale is the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; German adaptation by Tesch-Römer & Wurm, 2006), used to assess spousal life satisfaction. All five items (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to my ideal") were rated on a five-point-scale (1 = *is not true* to 5 = *is absolutely true*). The internal consistency of the scale was good with $\alpha = .85$ for women and $\alpha = .83$ for men.

Analytical strategy

Structural equation modeling was employed for the evaluation of the hypotheses. The analysis for the second hypothesis was based on Kenny, Kashy, and Cook's (2006) recommendation to use the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) to deal with the interdependence of spouses' data. The two main components of the APIM are the actor and partner effects. Actor effects represent the association between an individual's own predictor variable (e.g., wife's withdrawal) and his or her own outcome variable (e.g., wife's SWB). Partner effects, measuring interdependence, reflect the association between the partner's own predictor variable (e.g., wife's withdrawal) and the other person's outcome variable (e.g., husband's SWB). In addition, two other features of the APIM should be considered. First, allowing covariation between both individuals' predictor variables (e.g., wife's and husband's withdrawal) ensures that the association

between either of the predictor variables and the outcome variable is controlled for the other predictor variable. Thus, actor effects are controlled for partner effects, and vice versa. Second, the residual scores of the outcome variables (e.g., wife's and husband's SWB) are allowed to covary, allowing for remaining interdependence after removing partner conflict style effects. The statistical program for both analyses is based on the maximum likelihood (ML) approach using Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS 16.0; Arbuckle, 2007). Incomplete data were handled with ML estimation in AMOS. In the models, all paths were assessed using one-tailed significance tests. Multiple fit indices are reported. The overall goodness of fit index is the χ^2/df ratio. Values of less than 3 indicate an acceptable fit and values below 1.5 are considered a good fit of the model to the data (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) values of less than .05 indicate good fit and values less than .08 acceptable fit. Comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) values of greater than .95 indicate good fit and values greater than .90 acceptable fit (e.g., Byrne, 2001). The Akaike information criterion (AIC) is used in the comparison of two models, with smaller values representing a better fit (e.g., Byrne, 2001).

Results

Pearson correlations, means, and standard deviations of all variables are shown in Table 1.

The creation of the demand/withdraw pattern implies the assumption that an increased level of demand in one partner is associated with an increased level of withdrawal in the other partner. To test this assumption, correlations between each spouse's demanding and withdrawing behavior were calculated (see Table 1). Considering self- as well as partner-reports, four correlations for each pattern (woman–demand/man–withdraw and man–demand/woman–withdraw) were obtained. Women's tendency to demand was significantly associated with men's tendency to withdraw (rs ranged from .19 to .50, ps < .05). The same was found for the combination man–demand/woman–withdraw. Men's demand during conflict was significantly related to women's withdrawal (rs ranged from .21 to .40, ps < .05).

However, also the demanding and withdrawing behavior within a person were positively linked. Women's tendency to demand was associated with their tendency to withdraw (rs ranged from .22 to .40, ps < .05). The same was found for men. Men's demanding behavior was positively related to their own withdrawing behavior during conflict (rs ranged from .24 to .42, ps < .05). In sum, demanding behavior was not only related to the partner's withdrawing behavior but to the same extent as to one's own withdrawal. This supports the use of an analytical strategy that examines not only the demand/withdraw pattern, but also the individual behavior.

Spouses' demand, withdrawal, and their subjective well-being

Two structural equation models, one for the demand/withdraw pattern and one for the individual conflict behavior, were calculated. The first model, illustrating the demand/withdraw-pattern and spouses' SWB, is presented in Figure 1. Both spouses' marital

Table 1. Correlations and means (with standard deviations) for both spouses' demand and withdrawal behavior and their SWB

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1.	M report of M demand	–															
2.	M report of W demand	.41[b]	–														
3.	W report of W demand	.23[b]	.57[b]	–													
4.	W report of M demand	.57[b]	.19[a]	.35[b]	–												
5.	M report of M withdrawal	.42[b]	.50[b]	.19[a]	.24[b]	–											
6.	M report of W withdrawal	.40[b]	.40[b]	.27[b]	.21[a]	.44[b]	–										
7.	W report of W withdrawal	.35[b]	.22[a]	.35[b]	.37[b]	.20[a]	.44[b]	–									
8.	W report of M withdrawal	.41[b]	.39[b]	.38[b]	.41[b]	.48[b]	.22[a]	.41[b]	–								
9.	Negative affect of men	.43[b]	.45[b]	.32[b]	.23[a]	.31[b]	.24[b]	.15	.30[b]	–							
10.	Negative affect of women	.16	.12	.21[a]	.28[b]	.14	.08	.19[a]	.26[b]	.27[b]	–						
11.	Self-esteem of men	–.23[a]	–.29[b]	–.18[a]	–.06	–.27[b]	–.12	–.05	–.22[a]	–.50[b]	–.13	–					
12.	Self-esteem of women	–.08	–.14	–.17	–.17	–.07	–.20[a]	–.16	–.06	–.14	–.38[b]	.21[a]	–				
13.	Life satisfaction of men	–.33[b]	–.44[b]	–.24[b]	–.20[a]	–.34[b]	–.11	–.11	–.33[b]	–.61[b]	–.23[a]	.53[b]	.27[b]	–			
14.	Life satisfaction of women	–.18	–.22[a]	–.24[b]	–.30[b]	–.13	–.13	–.21[a]	–.25[b]	–.28[b]	–.53[b]	.13	.54[b]	.33[b]	–		
15.	Marital satisfaction of men	–.27[b]	–.38[b]	–.32[b]	–.34[b]	–.25[b]	–.36[b]	–.34[b]	–.36[b]	–.38[b]	–.23[b]	.29[b]	.22[a]	.42[b]	.35[b]	–	
16.	Marital satisfaction of women	–.20[a]	–.42[b]	–.44[b]	–.36[b]	–.28[b]	–.22[b]	–.32[b]	–.50[b]	–.33[b]	–.44[b]	.19[a]	.18[a]	.37[b]	.46[b]	.61[b]	–
	M	1.95	2.08	2.14	1.76	2.25	1.91	1.98	2.20	1.31	1.36	3.67	3.70	4.02	4.18	4.03	3.94
	SD	0.73	0.87	0.84	0.78	0.81	0.73	0.80	0.88	0.28	0.33	0.32	0.30	0.59	0.64	0.95	1.13

Note. *N*s range from 123 to 126. W = Women; M = Men.
[a] $p \leq .05$; [b] $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

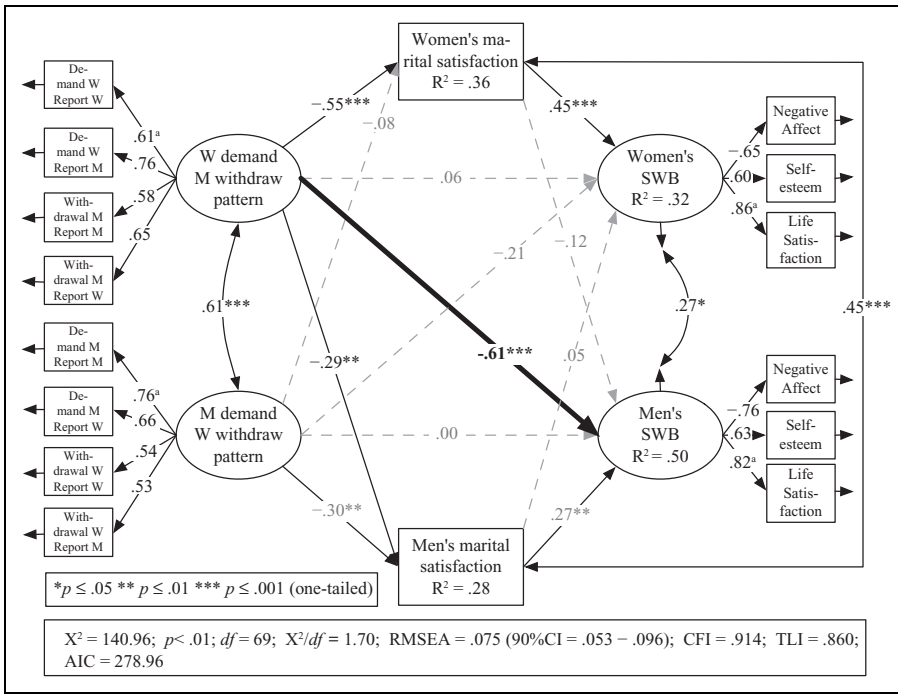

Figure 1. Structural equation model for the demand/withdraw pattern and both spouses' SWB
[a] Parameters set to 1.0 in the unstandardized solution. W = Women; M = Men.

satisfaction ratings were included as mediator variables in the model. Latent variables of the demand/withdraw pattern with both spouses' self- as well as partner-reports were built. The same person's report of the indicators of demand and withdrawal were allowed to covary, but not within the same pattern (e.g., women's report of their demand with women's report of their withdrawal, but not with their own report of men's demand). For a better presentation of the model, these covariances are not shown in Figure 1.

The second model, illustrating individual conflict behavior, and representing an APIM (Kenny et al., 2006), is presented in Figure 2. In the model, latent variables of both spouses' demanding and withdrawing behavior were built with self- as well as partner-reports. The same person's report of all indicators of demand and withdrawal were allowed to covary (e.g., women's report of own withdrawal and women's report of men's withdrawal). To maintain a better overview of the model, neither these covariances, nor the covariances of the latent variables for both styles, are shown in Figure 2. These latter covariances were all significant with $p < .05$ and varied between $r = .35$ (women's and men's demand) and $r = .62$ (men's demand and men's withdrawal).

As both models contained the same indicators, direct comparison was possible. Although the demand/withdraw pattern provided an acceptable fit to the data, the model illustrating the effects of individual conflict behavior provided a much better fit to the

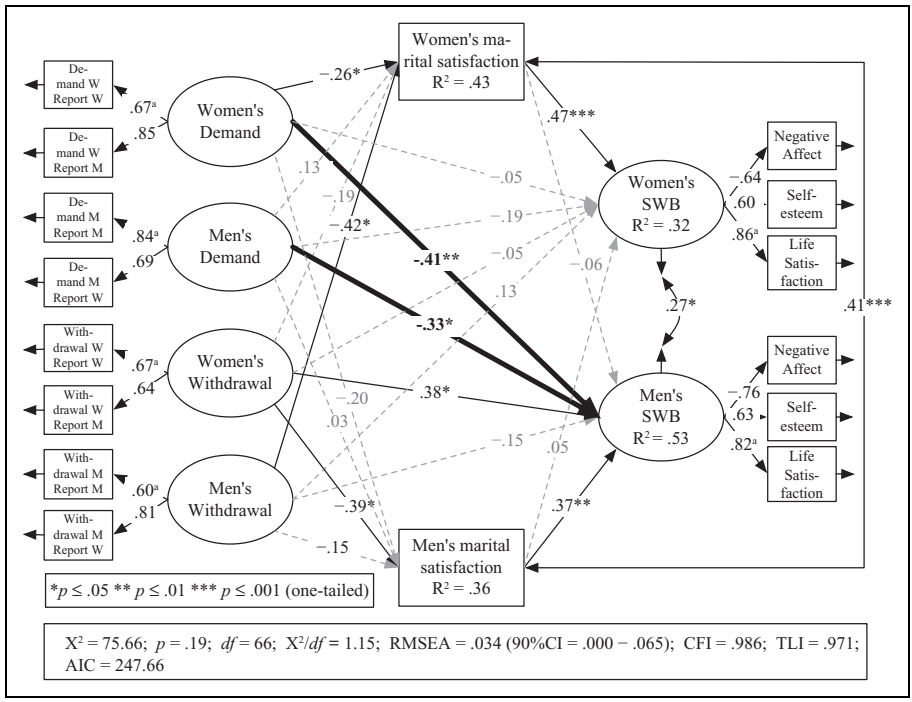

Figure 2. APIM for demand and withdrawal and both spouses' SWB
[a] Parameters set to 1.0 in the unstandardized solution. W = Women; M = Men.

data (see Figures 1 and 2, respectively). Further, the lower AIC for the individual conflict behavior model also indicated a better fit. Therefore, only the second model is reported and discussed in the following.

Of the direct effects from spouses' conflict behavior to their SWB, two effects in the model were significant, one actor effect and one partner effect. The actor effect reflects the significant negative link between men's demand and their own SWB. Thus, men's involvement in demanding behavior during conflict was related to their lowered SWB. Second, there was a significant negative association between women's demand and men's SWB (partner effect). This shows that women's demanding behavior during conflict was negatively related with their husband's SWB.

Unexpectedly, women's withdrawal was positively linked to men's SWB. Even though the relation of the two variables was significant in the model, strictly speaking, the association was not significant because the hypothesis was tested one-tailed. This association was based on a suppressor effect, because on the manifest level, women's withdrawal and men's SWB were not or even negatively correlated (see Table 1). To detect the variable that turned the association between women's withdrawal and men's SWB toward the positive direction, we added the variables into the model in a stepwise fashion. Men's withdrawal did not change the relation, whereas women's demand, men's

demand, and women's marital satisfaction changed the association into a positive, but non-significant, direction. The link became significant when men's marital satisfaction was included in the model.

It was not possible to explore marital satisfaction as a mediator of the direct effects between the individual conflict behavior and both spouses' SWB. However, there were indirect effects via both spouses' marital satisfaction. Women's demand and men's withdrawal were negatively related to women's marital satisfaction. The more demanding behavior women were showing and the more men were withdrawing during conflict, the lower women's marital satisfaction. In addition, women's withdrawal was related to men's marital satisfaction. The more women tended to withdraw during conflict, the lower men's marital satisfaction. In turn, both spouses' ratings of marital satisfaction were positively correlated with the same person's SWB, although marital satisfaction was not associated with partner's SWB.

Discussion

This study was conducted to evaluate the associations between spouses' demand and withdrawing behavior during conflict and their concurrent SWB. Demand and withdrawal were analyzed as a combination in the demand/withdraw pattern, as well as individually. Marital satisfaction was included as a mediator variable. We found that the model of individual conflict behavior provided a better fit to the data than the demand/withdraw pattern. The results indicated that women's, as well as men's, demand were directly related with men's SWB. Further, marital satisfaction was not confirmed as a mediator variable in the link between the individual conflict behavior and both spouses' SWB. However, indirect effects via both spouses' marital satisfaction were revealed.

The present study provides stronger evidence for the individual conflict behavior approach than for the demand/withdraw pattern. First, this result was supported by the better fit of the model with the individual styles compared to the model with the demand/withdraw pattern. Furthermore, contradictory to the demand/withdraw pattern, withdrawal and demand within the same person and each spouse's level of demand and his/her partner's withdrawal were positively correlated. This result indicates that simply combining demand and withdrawal without examining them individually, as often done in previous research (e.g., Uebelacker et al., 2003), may not be the best practice. However, these findings do not mean that the demand/withdraw pattern is not relevant in couple interactions. In addition, previous studies showed that both the demand/withdraw pattern, as well as the individual styles, are important and used in couple conflict discussions (e.g., Eldridge et al., 2007; Kurdek, 1995).

One possible explanation for the stronger evidence in favor of the individual conflict behavior approach in our study could be that the demand/withdraw pattern may only fully emerge in distressed couples. In our study, most couples were married for a long time and their reported marital satisfaction was quite high. The explanation is supported by Klinetob and Smith (1996), who revealed that healthier couples demonstrate greater flexibility in their communication than distressed couples. Other studies have also indicated that the demand/withdraw pattern is more likely to occur in dissatisfied than in satisfied couples (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990). In addition to studying the

demand/withdraw pattern, future studies should investigate demand and withdrawal individually as well, ideally with couples that vary widely in their marital satisfaction and length of marriage (see for example the study of Eldridge et al., 2007). This would allow more specific conclusions about couples' use of the demand/withdraw pattern and the individual styles of demand and withdrawal.

Considering the direct effects, first, women's demand was associated with men's SWB. The more women engage in conflict, the lower men's SWB. This result supports the study by Marchand and Hock (2003), which found a positive relation between women's attacking style and men's negative affect. A possible explanation is given by the individual differences perspective (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990), even though this theory seems never to have been used so far to explain gender differences in the association between the individual conflict behavior and spouses' SWB. According to the theory, it may be that most men desire autonomy, and at the same time they must deal with their wife's criticism or blaming behavior. This situation could be very stressful.

Second, a negative association between men's demand and their own SWB was found. The more men become demanding or even criticizing or blaming, the more their SWB decreases. In line with the individual differences perspective, a possible explanation could be that demand is an atypical conflict behavior for men because of their desire for independence. Thus, men try to avoid discussions and are more often in the withdrawing role. As a consequence, to be in the demanding role is more stressful for them. When they find it important to demand change in their marriage, it is possible that they do not feel comfortable in this role and they experience a lower concurrent SWB.

Another interpretation of these results is that the direction of effects flows in the opposite direction, and men with lower SWB tend to be more demanding. When we tested a reverse model with the effects from both spouses' SWB to their conflict behavior we found that men's SWB is also negatively related with their own demand and withdrawal and their women's demand. However, the real direction of effects cannot be specified with cross-sectional data. More research on individual conflict behavior with longitudinal data is needed to further explore this relationship.

Overall, only the demanding behavior was directly related to concurrent SWB. This could be explained by considering the negative character of demand compared to withdrawal, particularly in this study. Although the CRSI measure of demanding behavior is composed of blaming behavior and criticism, the scale contains more aggressive items than the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen, 1988), a common measure to assess the demand/withdraw pattern (see also the items in the method section). As a consequence, demand in our study is more negative in its content. Exploding or insulting one's partner might be more stressful for the partner than when the reacting party becomes silent or avoids the conversation. Results from the study by Du Rocher Schudlich et al. (2004) seem to support our findings. As in our study, they reported only significant relations between spouses' verbal hostility (defined as using an angry tone of voice) and spouses' negative affect.

Both spouses' marital satisfaction could not explain the effects from spouses' conflict behavior to their SWB. Nevertheless, indirect effects via marital satisfaction were found. Thus, although conflict behavior and marital satisfaction are linked, both reveal specific associations with SWB.

In interpreting the results of the study, consideration of limitations is important. Data used in the current study were cross-sectional in nature. Therefore, it is difficult to determine directionality of effects for conflict behavior and spouses' SWB. The perspective of the current study is that conflict behavior influences SWB. However, as outlined above, SWB may influence conflict behavior as well (see Marchand & Hock, 2000, 2003). Further, with cross-sectional data, there is no clear evidence that marital satisfaction really operates as an indirect variable in the model. Even still, Kurdek (1995), testing both directions with longitudinal data, only found effects from spouses' conflict behavior to their marital satisfaction. More longitudinal investigations would be necessary to identify the specific causal processes by which the constructs are related.

Another limitation is the one-item assessment of marital satisfaction, which might be a less reliable measure compared to larger scales. In addition, in our study, the demand/withdraw pattern was measured by a combination of the individual styles demand and withdrawal of Kurdek's (1994) CRSI and not by the often used CPQ (Christensen, 1988). The CPQ assesses a combination of demand and withdrawal in every item (e.g., "Woman/Man nag or blame the partner and he/she becomes silent or refuses to discuss the matter further"). However, previous studies (e.g., Eldridge et al., 2007) showed that the combination of the individually assessed demand and withdrawal styles and the demand/withdraw pattern measured with the CPQ revealed comparable results. Thus, both ways of assessment seem to be equivalent, but the CPQ does not allow for disassembling demand and withdrawal into individual behaviors.

Furthermore, the results of our study may only be generalizable to more highly educated couples with children. The bias towards higher education was due to the low response rate of less-educated couples in our study. Replication of our findings with other couples (e.g., couples without children, couples with lower socio-economic status, more distressed or clinical couples) would be useful.

In the present study, constructs were assessed via questionnaires, which could be influenced by social desirability and recollection biases. Observational data from couple interaction would give researchers additional information beside the perceptions assessed with self-report measures. However, in our study, both spouses' also provided information on their partner's conflict behavior. Self- and partner-report on the same behavior were correlated. This shows that spouses were able to provide information about their actual conflict behavior. Further, in several studies including self-report as well as observational data, demand/withdraw interaction is reliably identified and reported by both spouses (e.g., Heavey et al., 1993). Usually, spouses' extensive knowledge of their partner is gathered from years of observations across a variety of situations and over an extended period of time, making them valuable informants on conflict resolution behavior (Rhoades & Stocker, 2006). Nevertheless, a combination of self-report and observational data would provide more objective information of how couples handle conflict.

Despite the limitations of our study, the present study suggests that conflict behavior is important for both spouses' SWB. When the use of negative conflict behavior by a couple undermines SWB, it could have multiple ramifications over time, and leading to further declines in SWB. On the other hand, it is possible that the use of positive problem solving can enhance spouses' SWB or even buffer individuals within a couple from

becoming physically or mentally ill. Research on couple relationships provides a wealth of information for therapists to use in helping couples to deal with conflicts. Basing practice on research, therapists can provide couples with alternative ways of dealing with conflict; for example, constructive problem solving. Furthermore, therapists may help couples to understand the consequences of negative conflict behavior. They can train couples to use appropriate communication skills to improve their conflict resolution behavior. Thus, important future research should enhance knowledge on conflict behavior and spouses' SWB, which can be applied to prevention and couples therapy.

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Conflict of interest statement

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Notes

1. As most of the couples were married, the term "married" will be used to refer to all couples hereafter.

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