

Simulated relationships offer insight into real ones

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"The interesting thing is that all the participants were reacting to the same person, the same scenario," said psychology graduate student Amanda Vicary, a co-author on the study with psychology professor R. Chris Fraley. "And yet the pattern of their responses was quite different." Credit: Photo by L. Brian Stauffer, U. of I. News Bureau

Is it me, or are you a less than ideal partner? For psychologists studying how people manage romantic relationships, that's not an easy question to answer. What if one of the partners is deeply afraid of intimacy? Could she be acting in ways that undermine the relationship? Or is her partner contributing to the problem?

In a new study appearing in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, researchers at the University of Illinois explore these issues by looking at the choices people make in simulated online dating relationships. By standardizing the behavior of the romantic “partner,” the study clarifies how each participant’s outlook influences his or her choices and satisfaction with the romance.

The online study took participants through a series of scenarios about a relationship with a fictional partner. Each scenario ended with two options, from which the participant chose his or her response.

“The interesting thing is that all the participants were reacting to the same person, the same scenario,” said psychology graduate student Amanda Vicary, a co-author on the study with psychology professor R. Chris Fraley. “And yet the pattern of their responses was quite different.”

Vicary and Fraley modeled their study on a 1979 Random House interactive fiction series, “Choose Your Own Adventure,” which allowed the reader to select from multiple options at critical points in the story. Each choice directed the reader to a new scenario.

This approach appealed to the researchers because earlier studies of individual behavior in relationships asked participants to make choices based solely on descriptions of isolated events. The sequential nature of the new study was more like an actual relationship, Vicary said, in that it involved ongoing interactions with the same partner.

The online study began with an assessment of participant attachment styles. A series of questions about how much the person trusts, confides in or relies on a current or former romantic partner allowed the researchers to profile the participant’s level of security or insecurity, anxiety, or intimacy-avoidance in romantic relationships. Fraley is a

creator of this Experience in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) inventory, a tool for measuring participants' attachment styles.

After completing the ECR-R inventory and reading instructions, participants answered a series of 20 relationship questions. Each question described an event in the relationship and gave the participant an opportunity to select one of two options for responding to the event. One of the options enhanced the relationship; the other undermined it.

The study included three experiments, each involving a different group of participants. In the first, all participants read the same story and selected from the same options at the end of each scenario. In the second, a participant interacted with either a supportive or unsupportive partner throughout the exercise. In both experiments, the participants' choices had no influence on the behavior of their partners or on the scenarios.

In the third experiment, however, their choices did influence the simulated partners' responses. If the participant made a relationship-enhancing choice, he or she got a positive verbal response from the simulated partner and then moved to a new scenario involving a supportive version of that partner. Making a negative choice elicited a negative, rejecting response from the partner and a new scenario in which the partner behaved in an unsupportive way.

The researchers found that a participant's attachment style (that is, secure or insecure, anxious or intimacy-avoidant) was a good predictor of the pattern of his or her choices.

"People who are highly insecure are more likely to interpret their partners' actions in a negative way and then choose to respond in kind," Vicary said. The more secure individuals more often chose the positive, relationship-enhancing options.

As they progressed through the list of scenarios, most of the participants increased the rate at which they made positive choices. The anxious or avoidant participants increased their relationship-enhancing choices more gradually than their peers, however. This was true even in the third experiment, when their choices elicited immediate feedback in the form of a positive or negative response.

“It is interesting that even when highly insecure individuals experience responses as a direct function of their actions, they are still relatively slow to adopt beneficial relationship choices,” the authors wrote. “It is possible that insecure individuals simply do not realize the detrimental impact that their actions have on their relationships.”

Not surprisingly, participants who interacted with supportive partners were quicker to make positive choices and tended to be more satisfied with the interaction.

The researchers also found that the nature of the choices each participant made determined his or her satisfaction with the simulated relationship: The more positive choices he or she made, the more satisfied the participant was with the relationship at the end of the experiment.

“This finding is noteworthy because it demonstrates that one’s own internal dynamics affect relationship satisfaction independently of the behavior of one’s partner,” the authors wrote.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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