

Study challenges theory that good communication leads to marital satisfaction

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Justin Lavner. Credit: University of Georgia

One of the top reasons couples seek counseling is communication issues, so does better communication predict a more satisfying relationship?

The answer may not be that simple, according to a study by the University of Georgia's psychology department published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

"Although [communication](#) and satisfaction were correlated, communication wasn't a good guide for determining partners' satisfaction with their relationships over time," said the study's lead author Justin Lavner, an assistant professor in UGA's clinical psychology program in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences.

Although communication practices could predict satisfaction to some extent for some couples, the lack of a definitive causal relationship calls for additional attention to other factors that influence marital satisfaction, such as environmental stressors, what activities and interactions a couple has, and the personality traits of the individual partners.

"It's absolutely right to say more satisfied couples do communicate more positively, as well as to say couples who communicate better on average are more satisfied," he said. "But it gives us a lot more pause to say that one caused the other one, which is really important. I think what this leaves us wondering is what are some of the other factors that matter for couples' relationships and how these factors predict how couples do over time."

Previous research and theories emphasized communication—or the lack thereof—as a predictor of [marital satisfaction](#) and even divorce. Lavner and his co-authors decided to look at whether communication was really a cause or if communication was a consequence of being satisfied, or was simply connected to it instead.

More than 400 low-income newlywed couples in Los Angeles participated in the three-year-long study, during which they were

assessed four times. At each meeting, conducted in a couple's home, participants would first complete three different tasks to gauge communication and then fill out a report on their satisfaction with their marriage.

The communication tasks were meant to determine whether the couple used positive, negative or effective communication while completing tasks such as picking a problem in their marriage and discussing how to rectify it.

"In general, the correlational findings were pretty strong, showing—as we kind of expect—the more satisfied you are, basically, the better you communicate with your spouse," Lavner said. "What those results showed was that couples who were more satisfied also demonstrated higher levels of positivity, lower levels of negativity and more effectiveness."

The authors were surprised, however, to see that there wasn't a strong causal link showing that good communication caused satisfaction, Lavner said.

There was some evidence of communication being a predictor of satisfaction, but it wasn't "as strong as it should have been given how central that assumption is in theory as well as practice. Overall, the pattern was one that it wasn't as robust as theory would lead us to believe," Lavner said.

Indeed, in the majority of cases, communication did not predict satisfaction, nor did satisfaction predict communication, Lavner said.

"It was more common for satisfaction to predict communication than the reverse," he said. "I think the other thing that was surprising is that when one effect was stronger than the other, satisfaction was a stronger

predictor of communication. These links have not been talked about as much in the literature; we have focused on communication predicting satisfaction instead."

The authors chose to look at couples with incomes at or below 160 percent of the 1999 [federal poverty level](#) for families of four because of the unique stressors present in low-income households. The first few years of marriage are usually a high-stress transition period for [couples](#), with a high risk of divorce, Lavner said. Financial worries further compound the already stressful newlywed period.

Lavner is currently focusing on personality characteristics and how they affect relationships, [satisfaction](#) levels and divorce.

More information: Justin A. Lavner et al. Does Couples' Communication Predict Marital Satisfaction, or Does Marital Satisfaction Predict Communication?, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12301](https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12301)

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