Investigating gender differences in romantic relationships

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There exists a plethora of research suggesting that men and women perceive and act differently in romantic relationships. However, this claim has been challenged in recent years with studies of couples reporting a lack of gender differences. In this paper, Karantzas and his colleagues build on this emerging inconsistency in the relationships research field by reporting on a recent study of Australian married and cohabiting couples that suggests that gender differences may in fact have been overstated in relationship research.

Gender differences have been widely researched and reported in relationship research. Much of this research was inspired by the provocative work of Jessie Bernard (1972) whose book, The Future of Marriage, argued that men and women hold very different enduring beliefs and expectations about marriage. Bernard argued that the differences were so stark between men and women that all marriages consist of two relationships: "his" and "hers". Since Bernard's publication, both scientific (e.g., Implett & Peplau, 2006; Schmidt, 2002) and pop culture (e.g., Gray, 1992, 2008) writings have consistently highlighted the disparate ways that men and women think and feel about relationships, and the way the genders behave towards one another (e.g., Regan & Berscheid, 1996; Rosen-Gradon, Myers, & Hattie, 2004; Winstead, Derlega, & Rose, 1997; Wood, 1996). The aim of much of this research has been to understand the origins and manifestation of these gender distinctions, to provide strategies for how couples can work on appreciating partner differences, and in doing so, learn how to make relationships "work".

Nevertheless, contrasting research suggests that while men and women may behave differently in relationships, their underlying needs, wants and perspectives may not be so different; especially for those couples in committed relationships (e.g., Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For instance, in a longitudinal study of couples, Kurdek (2005) found few marked differences over time in men and women's ratings of marital satisfaction, social support and spousal interactions. Moreover, the strength of the associations between these factors was similar for men and women. Kurdek (2005) and Parker (2007) both highlighted that the reason for these disparate findings relates to the level of analysis at which the research was conducted. Specifically, much relationship research has failed to analyse the responses of couples (i.e., the couple as the unit of analysis). Rather, the majority of studies have compared the responses of men and women from different relationships (i.e., the individual as the unit of analysis).

Thus, it is unclear if these gender differences are due to actual differences between men and women, or the result of comparing men and women from different relationships. These arguments are echoed by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) who suggested that generalisations about differences between the genders are often inappropriately made to couples when the analysis has in fact been conducted on individuals. It makes sense then that looking at differences between members of existing couples rather than partners from different relationships would help to develop a clearer understanding of the effects of gender on relationships.
In the present study, gender differences within enduring and committed romantic relationships were examined by comparing men and women in relationships across a wide array of factors known to directly or indirectly influence relationship satisfaction: attachment style, trust, provision of partner support (sometimes referred to as caregiving), the use of destructive conflict-centred communication strategies (such as coercion and withdrawal), intimacy and relationship satisfaction (for a comprehensive rationale for the investigation of these relationship factors see Karantzas, Feeney, Goncalves, & McCabe, 2010).

**Participants**

Seventy-five couples (75 men and 75 women) involved in a cohabiting or marital relationship were recruited across metropolitan Melbourne through the relationship education courses of Centacare and Humaneed - two Australia-wide relationship education and counselling organisations. Participants in these courses ranged in age from 19-73 years, and over 95% of participants were Anglo-Australian. Sixty-two percent were married, while the remainder of the couples were in cohabiting relationships. Relationship length ranged from 10 months to 50 years and 6 months, with a mean of 15.04 years.

**Procedure**

Each member of the participating couples individually completed a questionnaire providing information on: demographics; attachment style; provision of partner support; trust; destructive conflict-centred communication; intimacy; and relationship satisfaction. (Refer to Box 1 for further details on the measures used.)

**Box 1. Study methodology**

- Demographic information was recorded regarding participants' age, gender, ethnic background, relationship status and relationship length.
- Attachment style was assessed using the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller & Hanrahan, 1994; Karantzas, Feeney, & Wilkinson, in press). Items from this measure can be used to generate scores on the two primary dimensions of attachment - avoidance and anxiety. All items are rated along a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). Higher scores on each dimension indicate greater attachment avoidance and anxiety respectively.
- The provision of partner support was measured using the Caregiving Questionnaire (CQ; Kunce & Shaver, 1994) The CQ consists of items relating to different styles of caregiving in romantic dyads. Items are rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A total caregiving index was calculated with higher scores indicating the provision of sensitive, responsive and non-compulsive partner support.
- Trust was assessed using the Rempel and Holmes (1986) Trust Scale. Items are rated along a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with higher scores indicating greater trust.
- Destructive conflict-centered communication was measured using the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ, Christensen, 1988). Items on the CPQ are rated on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 9 (very likely). The scale was computed such that higher scores indicate more destructive conflict-centred communication.
- The Marital Intimacy Questionnaire (MIQ, Van den Broucke, Vertommen, & Vandereycken, 1995) was used to measure intimacy. The items are rated on a 10-
point scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater intimacy.

- The Dyadic Adjustment Scale - Short Form (DAS-7, Sharpley & Cross, 1982) was used to assess relationship satisfaction. The scale consists of two 3-item subscales (couple consensus and cohesion) rated on various 6-point scales, while the final item is a measure of general satisfaction rated on a 7-point scale. The items can be summed to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating greater relationship satisfaction.

**Findings**

To examine whether men and women in couples differed in their perceptions of attachment style, provision of partner support, trust, the use of destructive conflict-centred communication, intimacy and relationship satisfaction, we tested the differences between the mean scores on these factors for men compared to women. We also examined whether men and women's perceptions differed as a function of relationship length and relationship status (i.e., cohabiting versus married). Importantly, when conducting these analyses we accounted for the relatedness of the data (i.e., that the men and women were in relationships with each other). No significant differences between couple members were found.

Men and women reported low levels of attachment insecurity, with means for anxiety and avoidance falling below the mid-point of the scale range. Similarly, both men and women reported low use of destructive conflict-centred communication. In contrast, couples reported high levels of the provision of partner support, trust and intimacy, and moderate relationship satisfaction. When examining the effects of relationship length and status on these variables, we found three significant associations. Firstly, relationship length was positively associated with commitment for both men and women. Secondly, relationship status was also positively correlated with commitment for men and women, suggesting that for both genders, commitment was higher for married compared to cohabiting couples. We also investigated for each couple if the difference in men and women's perceptions was a function of their relationship status and length. For example, would romantic partners that have been together for only 10 months, show bigger differences in relationship perceptions and attitudes compared to couples that have been together for 20 or more years? This correlation analysis revealed that differences between partners' perceptions were not associated with either relationship length or status.

**Implications**

The lack of gender differences reported in this study is in line with recent couple research (Burleson, 2003; Kurdek, 2005). These results are further supported by Karantzas et al. (2010) in which the authors developed and tested a model of relationship functioning and examined the strength of the relationships between the variables reported on in this paper, analysing the data at the couple level. In that study, no significant differences were found in the strength of the relationships between the variables for either gender. In sum, this recent research supports the claim that when investigating individuals involved in satisfying long-term relationships (i.e., not couples or dyads) gender differences may be overstated. Using dyads in couple research fails to support major gender differences.

Two possible reasons can be proposed for the lack of gender differences. On the one hand, the couples in our sample may have consisted of relationship partners who were initially attracted to one another because of the similarities they shared regarding their relationship
beliefs, attitudes, values and ways of behaving. On the other hand, it may be that each member of the couple held quite different relationship attitudes and beliefs during the early stages of the relationship, but over time, the cognitions and behaviours of the partners converged. Having said this, our analyses of whether partner perceptions differed as a function of relationship length and status seem to provide support for the first of these reasons. We found no evidence in the present sample that partners started out with different beliefs and attitudes regarding their relationships. Rather, couples seemed to share very similar views from the beginning. Nor were the differences between partners greater for cohabiting compared to married couples. We did however find that relationship commitment increased for both men and women as a function of relationship length and relationship status. These findings support previous research that has found both genders to feel more committed to their relationships with the passing of time, and as couples' transition from a status of dating and cohabitation to marriage (e.g., Bouchard, Lachance, & Goguen, 2008; Young & Acitelli, 1998).

However, two methodological issues may also contribute to the study findings. Firstly, we emphasise that our data are cross-sectional and more longitudinal studies are required to determine whether changes occur over the course of a relationship that shape the extent to which partners' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours converge. Secondly, study participants were sampled from those attending a relationship education course: these couples might be systematically different from other couples. Specifically, these couples may be more likely to view their relationships in similar ways and therefore demonstrate greater motivation to attend relationship education and to complete the dyadic surveys.

Our findings have implications for relationship educators and counsellors. Various relationship education courses emphasise the notion that men and women view relationships differently; that is, there are "his" and "her" views of relationships. For instance, much is made of the way that men and women differ in terms of how they communicate in relationships. While we do acknowledge that gender differences have been found in relationship research in the past, we ask that educators and therapists rethink the extent to which differences between men and women are as common as first thought.

These findings also highlight the importance of considering the like nature of men and women involved in committed and enduring relationships. We therefore encourage relationship educators and counsellors to consider emphasising these similarities to couples as it may well be that a couple's awareness of their similarities acts as the glue that binds them together.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that any differences that may be identified between relationship partners should not be merely put down to stereotyped differences between the genders. Consequently, educators and therapists may need to think twice in proposing to couples that the source of their relationship differences is primarily the result of men and women thinking differently about relationships. Rather, points of difference for couples may be due to other reasons, such as people's differing personalities or cultural backgrounds. Thus, we encourage the continued use of inventories such as PREPARE-ENRICH (Olsen, 1996), by educators and therapists. Since these inventories can help pinpoint issues where partners differ, they provide an evidence-base from which professionals can provide appropriate advice and interventions to assist couples in working through relationship differences that may be causing problems for couples.
In closing, the existence of a "his" and "her" marriage depends on one's perspective. As Impett and Peplau (2006) put it:

In everyday life, men and women often engage in quite different activities ... At a more basic level, however, men and women are remarkably similar - both fall in love, form enduring attachments, suffer the pain of loneliness, and benefit from social support. (p. 287)

Could it be that men and women are not from different planets after all?

References


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Endnote

1. We also corrected for the number of comparisons we were making across our variables of interest.