

Journal of Family Psychology

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Online First Publication, December 12, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000620>

CITATION

Home, R. M., Impett, E. A., & Johnson, M. D. (2019, December 12). Exclude Me, Enjoy Us? Unmitigated Communion and Relationship Satisfaction Across 7 Years. *Journal of Family Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000620>

Exclude Me, Enjoy Us? Unmitigated Communion and Relationship Satisfaction Across 7 Years

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This study explored 2 key questions at the intersection of care, well-being, and development in romantic relationships. First, what are the links between unmitigated communion (i.e., being overinvolved with meeting a partner's needs to the exclusion of one's own needs) and both partners' relationship satisfaction over time? Second, are there gender differences in the longitudinal links between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction? We answered these questions using data from 1,340 couples who participated in the German Family Panel over a 7-year period. Latent change score modeling results revealed that on average, people declined in both unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction over time, and these declines occurred in concert with each other across each wave: A more rapid decrease in unmitigated communion occurred in tandem with a more rapid decrease in relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, higher initial levels of unmitigated communion predicted a slower rate of decline in relationship satisfaction, and higher initial levels of satisfaction stabilized future declines in unmitigated communion. Lastly, higher initial relationship satisfaction among men predicted a more gradual decline in female partners' unmitigated communion, but women's satisfaction did not predict male partners' unmitigated communion. Overall, this is the first study to demonstrate the codevelopment of and bidirectionality between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction in established romantic relationships. Unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction tend to bolster each other in ways that protect them from steeper declines across time, which may explain why people continue to give in relationships when it is personally costly to themselves.


Keywords: unmitigated communion, relationship satisfaction, couples, longitudinal, development

Supplemental materials: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000620.supp>

Caring about the welfare and needs of others is a defining feature of close, satisfying relationships. Provisions of care are particularly salient in romantic relationships, as partners are highly interdependent and rely on each other to fulfill their needs (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Romantic partners must, however, navigate competing personal and relational needs when allocating care and benefits to each other (Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008)—a process that may ebb and flow alongside each partner's develop-

ment and shifting relational dynamics. While being communally motivated to meet a partner's needs in ways that build mutual responsiveness is a beneficial form of care that balances personal and relational needs (Clark & Mills, 2011), care can also take on highly imbalanced forms. Specifically, unmitigated communion involves an overfocus on meeting the needs of a partner while excluding one's own needs in the process (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998). Cross-sectional work has demonstrated that unmitigated communion is linked to lower personal well-being (e.g., psychological distress; Fritz & Helgeson, 1998), but (perhaps surprisingly) higher relationship well-being (e.g., relationship satisfaction; Le, Impett, Lemay, Muise, & Tskhay, 2018) for both partners. Although unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction independently show some malleability across micro- (i.e., daily; Impett, Muise, & Harasymchuk, 2019) and macrotime frames (i.e., decades; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001), research has yet to determine if extreme care influences (or becomes influenced by) both partners' satisfaction as their relationship unfolds over time.

This research was guided by two overarching aims. First, we examined the ways in which unmitigated communion and both partners' relationship satisfaction are associated over a 7-year

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The ideas and data that appear in this article were presented at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference in Portland, Oregon, in February 2019, as well as at the 6th International German Family Panel User conference in Cologne, Germany, in May 2019.

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period, examining possible bidirectional links and codevelopment. Second, we sought to determine whether there are gender differences in the link between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction over time, as previous cross-sectional research documents strong theoretical (but mixed empirical) evidence for such differences (e.g., Helgeson & Fritz, 1998; Helgeson, Swanson, Ra, Randall, & Zhao, 2015). We draw on concepts from the relational developmental systems (RDS) metamodel and data from 1,340 couples who participated in the German Family Panel (“pairfam”) study to conduct bivariate autoregressive cross-lagged latent change score modeling (McArdle, 2009) to answer these questions.

Background

Need (Im)Balance and Care: Communal Motivation Versus Unmitigated Communion

A wealth of literature demonstrates that being communally motivated to care for and meet a romantic partner’s needs as they arise is linked to higher personal and relationship well-being for both partners (Clark & Mills, 2011; Le et al., 2018; Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). A key reason why communal motivation may be associated with mutually satisfying outcomes for both partners is because the focus on a partner is mitigated by some focus on the self (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). That is, one expects their partner to be responsive to their own needs as they arise (Clark & Aragón, 2013). Indeed, those who are communally motivated experience greater feelings of authenticity when forgoing their self-interests for a romantic partner (Kogan et al., 2010), but also perceive their partners as highly responsive to their own needs (Mills et al., 2004). Thus, the benefits conferred to each other in communal relationships also become benefits conferred to the self (Clark & Aragón, 2013), optimizing both partners’ well-being.

Some forms of care, however, do not strike this personal-relational need balance as well. Individuals who are high in unmitigated communion are overinvolved with their partners to the exclusion of their own agency and needs (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). These individuals ground their self-worth in others’ evaluations of them and glean their sense of self from giving to others and sustaining relationships (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998). As such, unmitigated communion is routinely linked to poorer personal well-being, including more depressive symptoms and poorer self-reported health, lower emotional adjustment (e.g., anxiety, anger), and sustained negative mood from interpersonal conflict (Aubé, 2008; Helgeson, 2003; Piro, Zeldow, Knight, Mytko, & Gradishar, 2001; Reynolds et al., 2006).

However, a recent meta-analysis of 100 studies found that unmitigated communion was positively associated with global relationship well-being for the self and the partner (Le et al., 2018). Similar results have been found in the context of negotiation. While negotiators high in unmitigated communion were more likely to forfeit personal outcomes and have poorer joint economic outcomes with their negotiation partner, they nevertheless reported high satisfaction with this partner (Amanatullah, Morris, & Curhan, 2008). Although communal motivation and unmitigated communion are conceptually distinct in regard to whose needs are

being prioritized and empirically distinct in their associations with personal well-being, it appears as though caring for a partner’s needs—even if taken to an extreme—is positively linked to relationship satisfaction cross-sectionally. However, research has yet to uncover the valence or directionality of the link between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction longitudinally.

Theorizing the Development of Unmitigated Communion and Relationship Satisfaction

The RDS perspective provides a strong conceptual framework for exploring the links between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction over time. RDS is a metatheory on human development that posits an individual’s developmental trajectory invariably shapes (and becomes shaped by) various (sub)systems in their ecology (Lerner, Johnson, & Buckingham, 2015), with romantic relationships being among the most proximal and influential systems. Three core concepts espoused by the RDS perspective focus on plasticity, time, and bidirectionality. Plasticity states that the potential for change always exists within and between individuals’ traits, cognitions, and behaviors across the life span (Lerner, 1984). These changes can be best understood by parsing apart processes that occur within certain periods of time (e.g., how cognitions and behaviors codevelop together) and between certain periods of time (e.g., how earlier cognitions may predict later behaviors). Finally, bidirectionality states that there is mutual influence between individuals and all levels of their micro- and macrocontexts (Lerner et al., 2015), which suggests that romantic partners’ cognitions and behaviors will influence each other in meaningful ways over time.

Applied to the present study, a RDS perspective necessitates an exploration of potential bidirectional links between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction through the use of “change-sensitive methodologies” (Lerner, Agans, DeSouza, & Gasca, 2013, p. 179) that can detect changes within and across periods of time. The development of unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction can thus be conceptualized in (at least) two different ways that integrate the RDS principles of plasticity, time, and bidirectionality: exploring whether (a) original levels in unmitigated communion influence future changes in relationship satisfaction (and vice versa), and (b) unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction change together within the same periods of time. We also explore a third potential developmental process in which changes in unmitigated communion influence future changes in relationship satisfaction (and vice versa), which we detail in the supplement (Appendix S.A in the online supplemental materials).

The first way to highlight developmental patterns in unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction is by exploring how initial levels of unmitigated communion predict the rate of change in partners’ relationship satisfaction (and vice versa), as studies suggest both variables demonstrate malleability over time. Indeed, relationship satisfaction decreases over time in newlywed couples (Kurdek, 1999), in more established relationships (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005; VanLaningham et al., 2001), and even among those who are highly satisfied with their intimate unions (Kamp Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008). Recent evidence also suggests that unmitigated communion fluctuates on a daily level (at least within the domain of sexuality; Impett et al.,

2019) and diminishes over longer periods of time (Johnson, Horne, & Neyer, 2019). Taken together, provisions of extreme care and relationship satisfaction seem to undergo normative declines over time, but they may each play a role in slowing the rate of decline in the other's trajectory. This may be the case because individuals high in unmitigated communion have a need to provide unwavering care to their partners, and their partners have continual access to support for their needs (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998), with this need fulfillment sustaining their relationship satisfaction. Likewise, individuals high in unmitigated communion might sustain their provisions of extreme care if their partners are high in relationship satisfaction, as their partner's positive relationship appraisals reaffirm their sense of self as responsive, giving, and relationally focused (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998). As such, we predict that if one partner is initially high in unmitigated communion, then both partners will experience more gradual declines in their future relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 1a). Moreover, if both partners are initially satisfied in their relationship, then declines in one's level of unmitigated communion will not be as steep over time (Hypothesis 1b).

Another important way that we can explore how unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction are intertwined over time is by testing whether their respective changes co-occur or codevelop during the same period of time. Given the strong degree of interdependence between romantic partners (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Lerner et al., 2015), partners may experience similar ebbs and flows in their cognitions and behaviors during certain periods of time as they weather relationship changes and life events together. Indeed, research points to similarities in the developmental trajectories of both unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction. Johnson et al. (2019) found that the steepest declines in unmitigated communion occurred earlier on in time and then stabilized as individuals progressed in their relationships over a 7-year period. In addition, Kurdek (1999) showed that the steepest declines in relationship satisfaction occurred earlier (i.e., Years 1–4) and later on (i.e., Years 8–10) in new marriages, with more stability in between, a finding replicated by VanLaningham et al. (2001) on a much larger time scale (i.e., steepest declines between Years 1–10 and Years 40–50). In addition to these comparable patterns of decline over time, unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction are also positively correlated in cross-sectional work (Le et al., 2018). Thus, our last prediction is that unmitigated communion and both partners' relationship satisfaction will codevelop (i.e., decline together) across the same windows of time in our study (Hypothesis 2).

In sum, we add a novel contribution to the small body of work on the association between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction by exploring this link over a 7-year period, which allows us to better clarify the valence and directionality of these pathways. This longitudinal approach is particularly important because unmitigated communion tends to be theorized as a personality trait that influences relationship outcomes (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998), and most cross-sectional studies also assume this direction of effect. But it is also possible that partners' satisfaction in their relationship motivates their willingness to engage in high levels of care, heightening or protecting levels of unmitigated communion in the future. Even further, these variables may be bidirectionality linked, such that changes in partners' unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction mutually reinforce each

other. Latent change score modeling will allow us to simultaneously test these developmental patterns and shed light onto how unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction are associated within and across time.

Gender Differences in the Unmitigated Communion–Relationship Satisfaction Link

When exploring the longitudinal links between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction, it is also important to consider the role of gender, as unmitigated communion was originally conceptualized as a gendered personality trait more common in women than men (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998). The characteristics of communal motivation are consistent with how women are socialized into traditional feminine roles; however, providing consistent, responsive care may be burdensome and might account for why women experience more psychological distress than men (Helgeson, 1994). Given that most research suggests that communally motivated women (as well as men) experience positive personal and relationship outcomes (Le et al., 2018), unmitigated communion was proposed as the key trait that heightens women's psychological distress due to its self-exclusionary nature (Helgeson, 1994). This gendered conceptualization is further supported by work that argues that evolutionary, cultural, and psychological forces circumvent men's adoption of communal roles (Croft, Schmader, & Block, 2015), reducing their likelihood of engaging in unmitigated forms of care.

Yet the empirical evidence to substantiate gender differentiation in unmitigated communion is conflicting. While many studies found that women tend to have higher levels of unmitigated communion than men (e.g., Amanatullah et al., 2008; Fritz & Helgeson, 1998; Helgeson, 1994), more recent work found no gender differences in unmitigated communion (Helgeson et al., 2015), or that women had lower levels of unmitigated communion than men (Johnson et al., 2019). Similar inconsistencies are found when extending this question to determine if there are gender differences in the link between unmitigated communion and relationship quality. For example, some work has suggested that communal traits are more closely linked to relationship outcomes for women than men given their parallels to traditional norms of femininity (e.g., Helgeson, 1994; Hughes & Snell, 1990), yet Le et al. (2018) found no gender differences in associations among several forms of communal motivation (including unmitigated communion) and personal and relationship well-being. Given the strong theoretical case for the gendered nature of unmitigated communion (Helgeson, 1994; Helgeson & Fritz, 1998), but mixed empirical evidence for whether the link between unmitigated communion and relationship well-being differs for men and women (e.g., Hughes & Snell, 1990; Le et al., 2018), we test for gender moderation in an exploratory manner.

The Present Study

Our first research aim is to investigate the development of unmitigated communion and both partners' relationship satisfaction over a 7-year period in a sample of 1,340 couples. We explore this development by testing whether prior levels of one variable predict future rates of change in the other variable, as well as whether unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction

change together within the same periods of time. Our second research aim is to examine whether there are gender differences in associations between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction over time.

We also included several covariates in our analysis. We control for relationship duration because couples in the current study have wide-ranging relationship lengths. In addition, we control for willingness to sacrifice (i.e., the inclination to forgo one's immediate self-interest to meet a partner's desires) as a proxy for communal motivation because we want to ensure we were capturing the (over)involvement with others and self-neglecting facets of unmitigated communion above and beyond typical communal caring behaviors. This proxy is conceptually sound because sacrifice-related items are a core component of how communal motivation is typically measured (Mills et al., 2004). Finally, we include self-esteem and fear of love withdrawal as covariates because those high in unmitigated communion tend to have low self-regard, but high positive regard for others and attachment insecurity (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998).

Method

Procedure

We drew on data from Waves 1 (2008), 3 (2010), 5 (2012), and 7 (2014) of the German Family Panel (pairfam) study (Brüderl et al., 2018). Pairfam focuses on four major areas of family life: intimate partnership dynamics, family planning, parenting and child development, and intergenerational ties (Huinink et al., 2011). To capture multiple stages of the family life course, pairfam surveys adolescents born between 1991 and 1993 (15–17 years old at Wave 1), young adults born between 1981 and 1983 (25–27 years old at Wave 1), and adults approaching midlife born between 1971 and 1973 (35–37 years old at Wave 1). In 2008, nearly 350 municipalities across Germany were randomly sampled to accrue 42,074 addresses, from which 12,402 focal (anchor) participants were recruited (Brüderl et al., 2018). Pairfam also asked anchors in intimate relationships for permission to contact their partners, which resulted in 3,743 intimate partners joining the study. Anchors and partners complete yearly surveys, but anchors are interviewed with computer-assisted personal and self-interviewing and rewarded €10, while partners are surveyed with paper-and-pencil questionnaires and rewarded €5. Additional information about pairfam can be found in the study's concept paper (Huinink et al., 2011). Matthew D. Johnson received ethics approval for the present study from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (proposal title: Relations in the Pairfam Study; Pro00060173).

Sample Description

We began with the sample of 3,743 couples to investigate the codevelopment of unmitigated communion (only measured in anchors in this sample) and both anchor and partner relationship satisfaction. We first filtered the sample to only include couples in continuing partnerships across Waves 1 to 7 ($n = 1,369$). We then excluded adolescent couples ($n = 29$) given their notable differences from adult relationships (Seiffge-Krenke & Schulman, 2012), leading to a final subsample of 1,340 couples (see Appen-

dix S.B in the online supplemental materials for analyses comparing our subsample to the original pairfam sample of couples).

The sample consisted of 742 (55.4%) female and 589 (44.6%) male anchor participants and their romantic partners. Nearly two thirds ($n = 865$) of couples were in the cohort approaching midlife (anchor age: $M = 36.15$, $SD = .89$; partner age: $M = 36.64$, $SD = 5.21$), and the remaining third ($n = 475$) were young adults (anchor age: $M = 26.13$, $SD = .88$; partner age: $M = 27.96$, $SD = 4.90$). Couples were together for 9.45 years on average ($SD = 5.54$), and 66.5% were married, 22.8% were cohabiting, and 6.9% were living apart together. Of the 66.9% participants who had children, 25.0% had one child, 29.0% had two children, and 12.9% had three or more children. Over half of the sample (55.4%) was female, and the majority (99.0%) of participants were heterosexual (.6% were gay and .4% were lesbian). Most (80.1%) participants reported a German ethnic origin with no migration background, and the remaining individuals reported half-German (6.9%), non-German (6.3%), ethnic-German immigrant (4.8%), or Turkish (1.9%) backgrounds. Over one third of anchors (37.3%) and partners (35.4%) completed a university degree. Most anchors (73.7%) and partners (75.6%) were in the paid labor force, and the median monthly household income was €2,700.00 ($M = €2,897.22$, $SD = €1,332.19$).

Measures

Descriptive statistics for the focal study variables are shown in Table 1.

Unmitigated communion. One item from the Marburg Attitude Inventory for Styles of Loving (Bierhoff, Grau, & Ludwig, 1993) measured the extent to which individuals give to their intimate partners and exclude themselves at Waves 1, 3, 5, and 7: "Often, I leave everything else aside in order to support my partner." Responses ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *absolutely*. This question was presented to anchor participants only. Importantly, we conducted a study ($n = 486$) using Amazon's Mechanical Turk to validate the unmitigated communion item (as well as several other items from pairfam) by comparing it against the well-established Unmitigated Communion Scale UCS (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998), as well as to distinguish it from the related construct of communal motivation using the Communal Strength Scale (Mills et al., 2004) through a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using guidelines from Kline (2016). We ran this validation study prior to running the analyses for the present study. Results of the first CFA revealed that the pairfam unmitigated communion item had strong construct validity, with a standardized factor loading of .73 (which was the highest loading item on the factor, with the other indicators ranging from .64 to .70) on the unmitigated communion latent variable. Moreover, the second CFA demonstrated that the pairfam item was empirically distinct from communal motivation, as it was a significantly stronger indicator of unmitigated communion (standardized factor loading = .82) than of communal motivation (standardized factor loading = $-.14$). Further details about the Mechanical Turk sample and this validation process are provided in the supplement (see Appendix S.C in the online supplemental materials).

Relationship satisfaction. One item from the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998) assessed anchor relationship satisfaction and partner relationship satisfac-

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics Among Focal Variables for Female Anchors Above and Male Anchors Below the Diagonal
($n = 1,340$ Anchors and Partners)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% Miss
Anchor															
Unmitigated communion															
1. W1	—	.44*	.41*	.41*	.10*	.06	.06	.05	.12*	.04	.09*	.12*	3.58	.99	1.20
2. W3	.41*	—	.48*	.45*	.15*	.19*	.14*	.07	.17*	.18*	.19*	.14*	3.50	.93	4.00
3. W5	.38*	.46*	—	.49*	.07	.10*	.19*	.17*	.11*	.14*	.21*	.17*	3.41	.90	2.70
4. W7	.37*	.42*	.50*	—	.09*	.16*	.16*	.13*	.06	.11*	.10*	.16*	3.36	.93	.30
Relationship satisfaction															
5. W1	.20*	.13*	.12*	.07	—	.34*	.32*	.17*	.26*	.18*	.20*	.14*	8.35	2.03	.80
6. W3	.13*	.15*	.10*	.11*	.25*	—	.38*	.38*	.26*	.31*	.23*	.23*	8.06	2.02	3.40
7. W5	.18*	.09*	.17*	.17*	.27*	.32*	—	.43*	.23*	.27*	.44*	.30*	7.85	2.08	3.00
8. W7	.10*	.06	.13*	.22*	.17*	.35*	.36*	—	.21*	.28*	.31*	.31*	7.55	2.27	.40
Partner															
Relationship satisfaction															
9. W1	.13*	.01	.07	.09*	.14*	.16*	.16*	.14*	—	.47*	.44*	.37*	8.44	1.67	2.40
10. W3	.07	.06	.03	.11*	.13*	.18*	.16*	.18*	.43*	—	.56*	.47*	8.23	1.62	23.20
11. W5	.06	-.03	.09*	.08	.10*	.23*	.32*	.22*	.42*	.49*	—	.57*	8.13	1.66	26.80
12. W7	.07	.03	.14*	.19*	.17*	.19*	.28*	.29*	.44*	.44*	.68*	—	7.92	1.89	30.10
<i>M</i>	3.64	3.55	3.47	3.46	8.39	8.03	7.78	7.61	8.46	8.21	8.11	7.92			
<i>SD</i>	.94	.90	.87	.90	2.04	2.06	2.15	2.24	1.68	1.71	1.68	1.89			
% Miss	.20	4.20	2.50	.30	.50	3.80	2.30	.20	2.30	16.20	16.70	17.90			

Note. W = Wave; Miss = missing data. Unmitigated communion range = 1–5; relationship satisfaction range = 1–10. Partner variables above the diagonal are for partners of female anchors, while those below are for partners of male anchors.

* $p < .05$.

tion at Waves 1, 3, 5, and 7: “All in all, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” Responses ranged from 0 = *very dissatisfied* to 10 = *very satisfied*. Although relationship satisfaction was asked at all waves, we only included its assessment at odd-numbered waves to parallel the unmitigated communion measure and simplify our modeling procedure. We also validated pairfam’s relationship satisfaction measure in the aforementioned Mechanical Turk study against two well-established relationship satisfaction scales (Funk & Rogge, 2007; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Results indicated that this item is a valid indicator of relationship satisfaction (standardized factor loadings were .91 and .94; see Appendix S.C in the online supplemental materials for more information).

Covariates. Anchor sex (male or female) and relationship duration (coded into years) were included as time-invariant covariates. In terms of time-varying covariates, one item from the Marburg Attitude Inventory for Styles of Loving (Bierhoff et al., 1993) measured whether anchors were willing to sacrifice for their partners at Waves 1, 3, 5, and 7: “Usually I am willing to sacrifice my own desires for my partner’s desires.” Responses ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *absolutely*. Self-esteem was assessed with the mean of three items (e.g., “All in all, I am pleased with myself”) adapted from Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-Esteem Scale at Waves 1, 3, 5, and 7 for anchors and partners. Responses ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *absolutely*. Cronbach’s alpha scores ranged from .68 to .78 for anchor self-esteem and from .72 to .73 for partner self-esteem. Fear of love withdrawal was measured with the mean of three items (e.g., “I am often afraid that my partner thinks I’m silly or stupid if I make a mistake”) adapted from the Munich Individuation Test of Adolescence (Kruse & Walper, 2008) at Waves 1, 3, 5, and 7 for anchors and partners. Responses ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *absolutely*. Cronbach’s alpha scores

ranged from .62 to .68 for anchor fear of love withdrawal and from .66 to .70 for partner fear of love withdrawal. Covariate means and standard deviations are included in Appendix S.D in the online supplemental materials.

Analytic Plan

We conducted bivariate autoregressive cross-lagged latent change score modeling (McArdle, 2009), computed in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) and depicted in Figure 1. In this approach, the latent change scores are estimated by regressing future assessments of each construct on itself in the past. This path is fixed at 1 to signify perfect prediction and deviation from one’s prior score is captured in the latent change score variable. Autoregressive paths among change scores account for continuity in change across time and the effect of prior between-person differences. Intraindividual change in one construct on future intraindividual change in the other is captured in the cross-lagged paths. Covariances among the constructs examine potential codevelopment between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction. Each construct at Wave 1 was regressed on the time-invariant covariate (relationship duration) and the latent change scores and Wave 1 assessments of each construct were regressed on the time-varying covariates (anchor willingness to sacrifice and both anchor and partner self-esteem and fear of love withdrawal). Lastly, missing data in our study ranged between .20% and 30.10%, but it was largely missing at random (see Appendix S.E in the online supplemental materials for missing data analysis), supporting the use of full-information maximum likelihood (Enders, 2011).

We first examined bivariate correlations among study variables and then computed univariate latent change score models to pro-

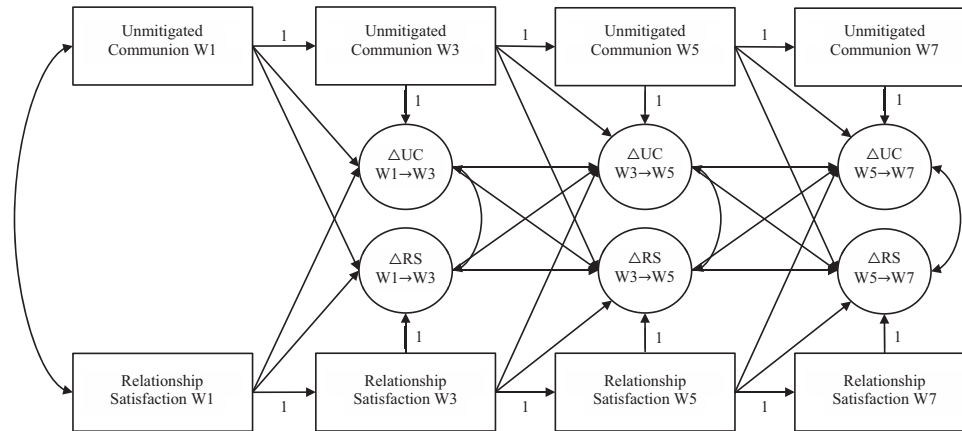


Figure 1. Bivariate autoregressive cross-lagged latent change score model for unmitigated communion (UC) and relationship satisfaction (RS). W = Wave; Δ = change.

vide descriptive information about the trajectories of each construct. We then constructed two bivariate autoregressive cross-lagged latent change score models, one for unmitigated communion with the anchor's own relationship satisfaction and the other for the partner's satisfaction. The potential moderating effect of gender was tested with multiple-group models and the application of equality constraints to corresponding parameters. If the constraints resulted in a significant reduction in model fit, as evidenced by a significant chi-square difference test, then this provided evidence that gender moderated the longitudinal links between constructs. Model fit was evaluated by the following global fit indices: the chi-square test (χ^2), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). A nonsignificant chi-square, values greater than .95 for CFI and TLI, and values smaller than .06 and .08 for RMSEA and SRMR suggest good model fit (Little, 2013).

Results

Correlations

We computed correlations among all study variables for male and female anchors (see Table 1 for focal variable correlations; see Appendix S.D in the online supplemental materials for correlations among focal variables and all covariates). Each focal construct was positively associated with itself between waves 1 to 7. Higher unmitigated communion was linked to higher relationship satisfaction most consistently for men, as well as higher partner relationship satisfaction most consistently for women. There was also a consistent positive link between anchor and partner relationship satisfaction.

Bivariate Autoregressive Cross-Lagged Latent Change Score Models

After computing univariate latent change score models as a precursor to our main analysis (see Appendix S.F in the online supplemental materials), we next computed the bivariate autoregressive cross-lagged latent change score models without covari-

ates to evaluate model fit. These initial models had some evidence of misfit; unmitigated communion and anchor relationship satisfaction: $\chi^2(4) = 46.428$; RMSEA = .089, 95% confidence interval [CI: .067, .113]; CFI = .978; TLI = .850; SRMR = .020; unmitigated communion and partner relationship satisfaction: $\chi^2(4) = 65.969$; RMSEA = .108, 95% CI [.086, .131]; CFI = .973; TLI = .821; SRMR = .025. We inspected residuals and model fit indices and found Wave 1 unmitigated communion needed to covary with the unmitigated communion change score between Waves 5 and 7, and the same covariance was needed for partner's relationship satisfaction. This change is conceptually reasonable as initial levels may be linked with changes in the future, so the covariances were added. Model fit was much improved, and the estimates from these models are presented in Appendix S.G in the online supplemental materials; unmitigated communion and anchor relationship satisfaction: $\chi^2(3) = .150$; RMSEA = .000, 95% CI [.000, .000]; CFI = 1.000; TLI = 1.013; SRMR = .001; unmitigated communion and partner relationship satisfaction: $\chi^2(7) = 3.785$; RMSEA = .000, 95% CI [.000, .030]; CFI = 1.000; TLI = 1.011; SRMR = .006.

We then added the covariates to these models. Given the complexity of the modeling, we tested whether the associations between the time-varying covariates and the latent change scores were consistent across time by constraining corresponding paths equal at each time point. The application of these constraints did not worsen model fit, unmitigated communion and anchor relationship satisfaction: $\chi^2_{diff}(20) = 22.625$, $p = .308$; unmitigated communion and partner relationship satisfaction: $\chi^2_{diff}(20) = 14.595$, $p = .799$, and were retained for all further analyses.

Prior to interpreting model results, we tested for gender moderation by computing multiple-group models. The freely estimated models were compared to one with equality constraints applied to corresponding cross-lagged pathways to determine whether setting those paths equal for male and female anchors worsened model fit. Gender did not moderate the unmitigated communion and anchor relationship satisfaction model, $\chi^2_{diff}(10) = 13.476$, $p = .199$, so we present the single-group model and include gender as an additional covariate. Constraining the cross-lagged paths to be equal did significantly worsen fit in the unmitigated communion and partner

relationship satisfaction model, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(10) = 22.678, p = .012$, so the multiple-group modeling results are presented.

These final models fit the data well and focal estimates of interest are displayed in Table 2. To present the most parsimonious final models, we tested whether corresponding parameter estimates differed over time through the application of equality constraints and conducting chi-square difference tests. These analyses showed that, across both models, many within- and cross-construct associations were consistent across time. In addition, when comparing the effects in our models with and without covariates, the patterns of significance were nearly identical. Where the models do differ (only for nine out of 69 effects), the coefficients are still very similar. The results for the models without covariates are presented in the supplement in Appendix S.G in the online supplemental materials, while the results for associations among the covariates in the final models are presented in Appendix S.H in the online supplemental materials. Before discussing each model's results for the focal constructs, a notable pattern arose in both models: A higher score in each construct predicted a more rapid decrease for itself in the future (e.g., higher Wave 1 relationship satisfaction foretold a more rapid decrease in satisfaction between Waves 1 and 3).

Before turning to the cross-construct findings, we will remind readers of our key hypotheses. First, if one partner is high in unmitigated communion, both partners will decline more gradually in their relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 1a). Likewise, if either partner is high in relationship satisfaction, one will experience a more gradual decline in their unmitigated communion in the future (Hypothesis 1b). Finally, we predicted that unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction will decline together across the same windows of time (Hypothesis 2). Turning to our results, the only consistent cross-construct finding across actor and partner models was the significant covariation between the latent change scores for unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction: A more gradual decrease in unmitigated communion unfolded in tandem with a more gradual decrease in relationship satisfaction (supporting Hypothesis 2). Inversely, more rapid de-

clines in unmitigated communion were concurrently linked with more rapid decreases in relationship satisfaction. This finding, evident in every covariance tested, provides strong support for the codevelopment of these constructs.

In the anchor relationship satisfaction model, higher levels of unmitigated communion predicted a more gradual decrease in the anchor's own future satisfaction and higher levels of relationship satisfaction foretold a more gradual decrease in future unmitigated communion, supporting hypotheses 1a and 1b. In the multiple-group model with partner relationship satisfaction, only one longitudinal cross-construct association was evident. In partial support of Hypothesis 1b, higher relationship satisfaction for the partner at a prior wave foretold a more gradual decrease in female anchors' unmitigated communion between Waves 1 and 3 and Waves 3 and 5, but the same was not true for men's unmitigated communion. We did not find support for Hypothesis 1a about an individual's levels of unmitigated communion predicting declines in their partner's relationship satisfaction. Taken together, we find the most robust support for Hypothesis 3 (3 of 3 models) and 1b (2 of 3 models), but partial support for Hypothesis 1a (1 of 3 models).

Discussion

The present study sought to determine the longitudinal associations between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction over a 7-year period, as well as whether there are gender differences in these links across time. We found that unmitigated communion and both partners' relationship satisfaction develop in tandem across the same periods of time, prior levels of unmitigated communion predict future changes in relationship satisfaction (and vice versa), and men's relationship satisfaction predicts changes in female partners' unmitigated communion. Overall, these findings highlight the unique ways in which extreme care and relationship satisfaction are connected within and across time in established romantic relationships.

Table 2

Standardized Bivariate Autoregressive Cross-Lagged Latent Change Score Modeling Results for Relationship Satisfaction and Unmitigated Communion (n = 1,340 Anchors and Partners)

Variable	Anchor rel. sat. model			Male anchor partner rel. sat. model			Female anchor partner rel. sat. model		
	$\Delta W1$ to $W3$	$\Delta W3$ to $W5$	$\Delta W5$ to $W7$	$\Delta W1$ to $W3$	$\Delta W3$ to $W5$	$\Delta W5$ to $W7$	$\Delta W1$ to $W3$	$\Delta W3$ to $W5$	$\Delta W5$ to $W7$
Predicting UC									
Prior rel. sat. level	.06 ^a	.06 ^a	.07 ^a	-.03 ^a	-.03 ^a	.03	.08 ^a	.08 ^a	.00
Prior UC level	-.61 [*]	-.51 ^b	-.50 ^c	-.57 [*]	-.49 ^b	-.48 ^c	-.63 [*]	-.50 ^b	-.50 ^b
Predicting rel. sat.									
Prior UC level	.04 ^c	.03 ^c	.03 ^c	.00 ^c	.00 ^c	.00 ^c	.00 ^c	.00 ^c	.00 ^c
Prior rel. sat. level	-.63 [*]	-.46 ^d	-.48 ^d	-.56 ^c	-.56 ^c	-.42 [*]	-.60 [*]	-.46 ^c	-.42 ^c
Covariances									
UC and rel. sat.	.10 ^f	.11 ^f	.10 ^f	.07 ^g	.09 ^g	.09 ^g	.11 ^g	.13 ^g	.10 ^g

Note. Rel. Sat. = relationship satisfaction; UC = unmitigated communion. Subscripts signify within-model paths constrained to equality. Relationship duration, anchor willingness to sacrifice, and anchor and partner self-esteem and fear of love withdrawal are included as covariates in all models, and anchor sex is an additional covariate in the anchor relationship satisfaction model. Anchor relationship satisfaction model fit indices: $\chi^2(166) = 263.702$, root mean square error of approximation = .021, 95% confidence interval [.016, .026], comparative fit index = .966, Tucker-Lewis index = .959, standardized root mean square residual = .021. Multiple-group partner relationship satisfaction model fit indices: $\chi^2(317) = 424.035$, root mean square error of approximation = .022, 95% confidence interval [.016, .028], comparative fit index = .970, Tucker-Lewis index = .963, standardized root mean square residual = .029. Results for prior change predicting future change within and between constructs are presented in the online supplemental materials.

* $p < .05$.

Codevelopment of Unmitigated Communion and Relationship Satisfaction

Our most robust finding was that unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction codevelop alongside one another, such that declines in unmitigated communion were linked to simultaneous declines in both partners' relationship satisfaction across each and every wave of the study. These results suggest that as partners move through their relationship, any shifts they experience in their self-exclusionary care and relationship satisfaction are strongly connected developmental processes. One potential reason that unmitigated communion diminishes concurrently with satisfaction may be due to the high degree of interdependence that characterizes romantic partnerships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), especially as partners become more committed to their relationship and perceive their own identities as less distinguishable from each other (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). As partners begin to merge their identities, needs, and goals as their relationship unfolds, they may engage in less self-neglecting care over time because they inevitably pursue their own needs (at least to some extent) through supporting those of their partner. Thus, for highly interdependent partners, self-exclusionary care may partially transform into self-affirming care over longer periods of time. It is also plausible that a cognitive shift takes place as partners begin to integrate their identities; that is, individuals may perceive their care as being less self-exclusionary because they are invariably meeting some of their goals by supporting their partner. Thus, high degrees of interdependence between romantic partners may account for why we see contemporaneous declines in unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction.

Evidence for Bidirectionality Over Time

Our next key finding was that higher prior levels of unmitigated communion predicted a more gradual decline in one's relationship satisfaction, and higher prior levels of relationship satisfaction stabilized declines in one's unmitigated communion. These findings provide the first evidence of bidirectionality between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction over time, extending prior cross-sectional work that primarily conceptualized unmitigated communion as a personality trait that drives interpersonal outcomes (e.g., Amanatullah et al., 2008; Helgeson & Fritz, 1998, 2000). One reason why unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction might buffer each other from steeper declines over time might be because our sample consists of couples in longer term relationships (i.e., over 9 years on average) at baseline and continuing partnerships across the 7-year study period. Compared to couples in shorter term relationships, partners in long-term, committed relationships may be more motivated to work through potential issues linked to extreme provisions of care to preserve their investments in the relationship. Indeed, Le et al. (2018) found that relationship duration moderated the link between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction, such that this positive link was stronger for those in longer term relationships. It is possible that couples characterized by high degrees of unmitigated communion and who experienced more severe personal or relational distress were simply more likely to break up and were not captured in our sample. These findings suggest that we may have isolated a unique subgroup of couples where extreme

care and relationship satisfaction are protective, rather than detrimental, for each other's development. An avenue for future work may be to explore links between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction in newer relationships to see if these positive associations are still present.

Work on prosocial motivation and relationship quality provides another lens through which to interpret the bidirectional links between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction. In a series of daily and weekly studies on roommate dyad relationships, Canevello and Crocker (2010) found that having high compassionate goals toward a roommate (e.g., striving to be supportive and constructive) was associated with being more responsive (e.g., demonstrating warmth, value, and understanding) to a roommate's needs and perceiving more responsiveness from them, in turn predicting even higher compassionate goals in the following days and weeks. In line with Canevello and Crocker's (2010) "upward spiral" (p. 102) of positive reciprocal links between prosocial goals and behaviors, our work demonstrates a similar link between unmitigated communion and satisfaction in established romantic partnerships. Given that individuals high in unmitigated communion ground their identities in their ability to support their partners' needs (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998), providing this level of care may not just be rewarding to them, but necessary to maintain happiness in their relationship.

Boundary Conditions on Unmitigated Communion

In light of our key findings, however, we want to caution against a tale of a uniformly positive "upward spiral" of self-exclusionary care and relationship satisfaction in romantic partnerships. Additional research is needed to establish boundary conditions under which the positive link between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction becomes weaker or severed. In the current research, we focused on nonclinical couples who were generally quite satisfied in their relationships. However, much of the research on unmitigated communion that found negative implications of this care behavior focused on couples coping with acute or chronic health problems (e.g., Helgeson, 1993, 2003; Piro et al., 2001). In these circumstances, any preexisting levels of unmitigated communion may be taken into overdrive, and the general quality of support provided by (or even for) individuals high in unmitigated communion may be poorer due to strains on partners' emotional or physical resources. As such, the link between unmitigated communion and both partners' relationship satisfaction might be different in the context of acute or chronic illness versus in environments with fewer uncontrollable stressors.

In addition to stressful contextual circumstances, partners' relational dynamics and personal motivations may provide further grounds under which the positive link between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction becomes disrupted. Research on power and goal pursuit in couples revealed that lower power individuals tend to prioritize and even "take on" the goals of their higher power partner as their own (Laurin et al., 2016). Given that individuals high in unmitigated communion already prioritize their partners' needs at the expense of their own needs, being the lower power partner in their relationship may mean adopting their partners' goals to an even more extreme level. As a result, the combination of providing self-neglecting care that does not feel freely chosen may detract from their satisfaction. The link between

unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction may also shift depending on one's motivation. Studies have found that individuals report higher relationship quality when they make sacrifices for their partners for approach goals (i.e., to pursue positive outcomes), but lower relationship quality when they sacrifice for avoidance goals (i.e., to avoid negative outcomes; e.g., Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). Similarly, if individuals are engaging in extreme care for approach goals (e.g., to make a partner happy), then they may experience better relationship satisfaction compared to those doing so for avoidance goals (e.g., to prevent relational conflict). Future research should continue to explore the interpersonal (e.g., power dynamics) and intrapersonal (e.g., motivations) characteristics that underpin unmitigated communion to delineate the ways it may be linked with relationship satisfaction over time.

Gender Differences in Care and Satisfaction

Lastly, in terms of gender differences, we found that when men reported higher relationship satisfaction at prior waves, their female partners reported more gradual declines in their future unmitigated communion. In other words, when he was relationally satisfied, she continued to give to him at more extreme levels.¹ These findings align with original conceptualizations of unmitigated communion as a trait found primarily in women (Helgeson, 1994; Helgeson & Fritz, 1998). If women are socialized to be more hypervigilant to cues of their partners' relationship satisfaction, then this could sustain extreme levels of care that may otherwise normatively decline as time goes on. But why did we not observe the same effects for women's satisfaction on men's future unmitigated communion? While our results show that men engage in generally similar levels of unmitigated communion as women, it is possible that men's extreme care is motivated more by intrapersonal versus interpersonal factors. To illustrate this point, Horne and Johnson (2019) found that men's provision of emotion work in their romantic relationships (e.g., expressing understanding, active listening, self-disclosing) was only associated with their female partners' relationship satisfaction when men also reported being highly autonomous. Men's unmitigated communion may therefore be less responsive to their female partners' levels of satisfaction in the relationship and more readily influenced by their own autonomous goals and decisions, one of which could be taking on the role of an involved care provider. These findings provide further impetus for research on the motivations behind unmitigated communion and how partners' gender roles may shape these motivations.

Limitations

Our study had limitations to note. First, given the broad scope of pairfam, many of the variables are condensed from larger scales and assessed with only one or a few items. Although it would be fruitful to see if our findings replicate with more comprehensive measures of our focal constructs, our extensive validation of the pairfam measures (see supplement) suggested that the items performed comparably to those from established scales, although the single items are undeniably less reliable than full-length scales. Relatedly, some of our covariates were at the lower end of reliability (i.e., Cronbach's alpha below .70) at certain waves. Future

work would benefit from more precise measurement of all constructs. Third, we only had anchor participants' self-reports of unmitigated communion in the present study. Where possible, researchers should consider assessing both partners' self-reported unmitigated communion, as well as behavioral assessments of partners' unmitigated communion to corroborate (or point out unique differences in) these assessments. Finally, while our study was strengthened by its large sample size and multiple assessments of both romantic partners, the generalizability of our findings is limited given some homogenous features of our sample (i.e., living in Germany with mostly German ethnic origins) and subtle demographic differences in our continuing partner subsample.

Conclusion

This is the first study to document longitudinal links between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships. Our results suggest that unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction codevelop, but they also tend to bolster each other in ways that protect them from steeper declines across time. Furthermore, although men's relationship satisfaction seems to buffer normative declines in women's unmitigated communion, the same is not true for women's relationship satisfaction and men's unmitigated communion. Although important boundary conditions that may disrupt the positive link between unmitigated communion and relationship satisfaction need to be teased apart in future research, our findings may shed light onto the question of why people continue to give even when it is personally costly to themselves: Provisions of extreme care seem to elicit and become reinforced by positive relationship cognitions for the care provider and their partner over time.

¹ As presented in the supplement, this effect still held in the model without covariates, but more nuance in gender differences unfolded: women's unmitigated communion predicted changes in men's relationship satisfaction, and women's relationship satisfaction also predicted changes in men's unmitigated communion. Overall, we opted to include results from analyses with covariates in our manuscript because they offer a more conservative test of our research questions, but results should be interpreted cautiously here in particular given these subtle discrepancies.

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Received July 10, 2019

Revision received October 30, 2019

Accepted November 3, 2019 ■