

The Influence of Shared Activities
in Relationships

Karl Flerlage

University of Denver

Introduction

As with many fields of psychology, the knowledge of relationships is constantly developing through more and more research that is conducted. As research continues to be published, the behaviors and dynamics of couples can be better understood, and, ultimately, couples' education and therapy can be tailored in a manner that fits people's needs. The following paper focuses on the activities couples engage in together and how these activities affect the relationship. Previous research concerning couples' activities is presented along with newly-obtained research that has been gathered by three students in a couples' therapy college course.

Previous research to be discussed includes articles published by Girme et al, Myers & Vetere, and Reissman et al. Girme et al. conducted two studies to explore how shared activities among couples help maintain positive relationships. In the first study, 196 participants involved in romantic relationships were recruited through announcements from New Zealand University. Participants were required to report on relationship quality using the Perceived Relationship Quality Components inventory, reporting specific shared activities, dedication to the activities using one to seven scales, and outcome of the shared activities using one to seven scales. The results revealed that travelling, playing sports or other recreational activities, dining, and doing hobbies together were the most common. Generally, engaging in shared activities led to higher feelings of closeness, meaning, and overall positivity in the relationship. Also, motivations for doing these activities together included spending more time together and improving their relationships (Girme et al., 2014). In the second study, longitudinal data from both members of a couple were gathered. Eighty-three couples in romantic relationships were recruited in a similar fashion to the first study. Participants were also given questionnaires similar to the first study and

then followed up three and six months after the first questionnaire. Results revealed that shared activities predicted more positive relationships, and this effect was greatest if the activities were stress free, satisfying, and increased feelings of closeness. However, a partner's willingness to engage in shared activities impacted positivity as well (Girme et al., 2014).

In the Myers & Vetere article, there were two separate studies done to test the correlation between attachment styles, stress, and psychological symptoms. The first study involved administering the Hazan and Shaver prototypes and Coping Resources Inventory to 111 students at the University of Reading. The Hazan and Shaver prototypes measures attachment styles while the Coping Resources inventory assesses how individual cope with stress. Those with a secure attachment style reported having significantly more resources for coping with stress than both anxious/ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles (Myers & Vetere, 2002). The second study recruited 125 students at the University of Reading to test the effect of psychological symptoms on attachment styles. The Hazan and Shaver prototypes and Romantic Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire measured attachment styles in the study while the General Health Questionnaire measured non-psychotic psychiatric disorders. Results on the General Health Questionnaire were negatively correlated with the secure attachment style while its results were positively correlated with the anxious/ambivalent attachment style and not correlated with the avoidant attachment style (Myers & Vetere, 2002). This suggests that relationships with secure attachments function best with less mental disorders present.

The final article to be reviewed, by Reissman et al., involves a study comparing shared activities and marital satisfaction. Fifty-three married couples were recruited through flyers at day-care centers and newspaper articles. Each member of every couple was required to select every activity they participate in together and rate these activities based on being exciting or

pleasant. Couples were split in to one of three groups: an exciting, pleasant, or control group that did no activity. Couples engaging in an activity did the one that they, together, rated the highest as exciting or pleasant. This activity was done for 1.5 hours each week for 10 weeks, and the activity was rated after each session on a five-point scale for the degree of excitement or pleasantness felt. Overall, couples in either activity group did not show greater marital on the Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale compared to the control group. However, the exciting group showed greater marital satisfaction when compared to the combined results of the pleasant and control groups (Reissman et al., 1993).

With the research of these three articles in mind, three questions were sparked based off each article, respectively: How do the number of shared activities and hobbies relate to conflict and quality within a relationship?; Are couples with similar attachment styles more likely to engage in hobbies together?; Do certain activities and hobbies help a couple feel more connected? Before attempting to answer these questions, three hypotheses were created to guide the following research. For the first question, it was predicted that couples who have more shared activities and hobbies have lower conflict and higher relationship quality. For the second question, it was thought that couples with similar attachment styles are more likely to engage in hobbies together and feel more connected. Last, it was predicted that activities that promote communication will help a couple feel more connected.

Methods

In order to test these three hypotheses, a questionnaire, created using Qualtrics, was posted on each of the three researcher's Facebook pages. The three researchers posted the same blurb explaining the general purpose of the study, and an anonymous link to the survey was posted at the end of the blurbs. Participants were limited to those over the age of 18 and who

considered themselves to currently be in a romantic relationship. One hundred and fifteen responses were received, but, after filtering out responses that were incomplete or did not meet the previously mentioned criteria, there were 85 responses that remained.

Out of the 85 participants that responded, there were 59 females and 26 males signifying that a majority of respondents were female. For race and ethnicity, a majority of respondents were also Caucasian or White ($n = 73$). Other races and ethnicities included Hispanic or Latino ($n = 7$), African American or Black ($n = 3$), Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native Hawaiian ($n = 3$), and American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native ($n = 1$). The age of participants ranged between 18 and 78 years old with the average age being about 29 years old. As the study required, all 85 participants responded as being in a romantic relationship. The survey also required participants to report on their specific relationship status as the following results reveal: having sex but not in a romantic relationship ($n = 1$), dating casually ($n = 7$), dating seriously ($n = 36$), long term committed ($n = 8$), engaged ($n = 4$), legally married ($n = 21$), other ($n = 2$), and no response ($n = 6$).

Beyond the initial demographic and relationship status questions, and assessment of relationship quality and danger signs, there were questions involving shared activities, general conflict, conflict related to the shared activities, attachment styles, and partner's attachment styles. The data of all 85 participants was analyzed using Qualtrics and Excel to answer the three research questions.

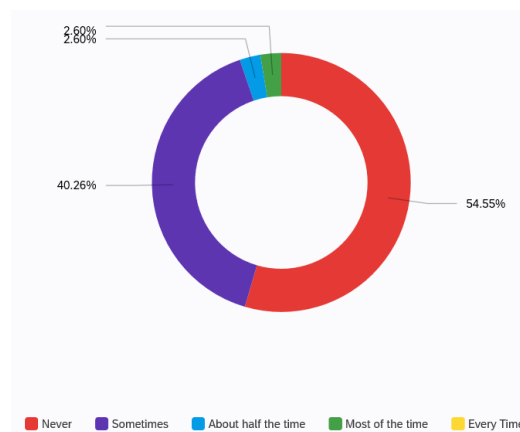
Results

Data concerning if couples with shared activities and hobbies have lower conflict and higher relationship satisfaction reveals that individuals mostly reported never or sometimes

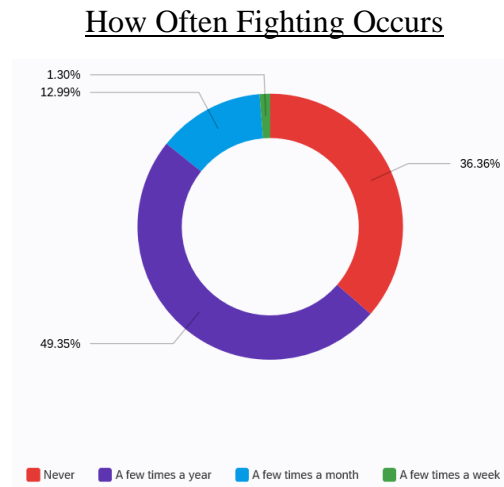
fighting within their relationships. Figure 1 shows that about half of participants, or 54.55%, reported there is never fighting with their partner and 40.26% reported there is sometimes fighting while doing shared activities. There were no responses to fighting during every activity. Looking at general conflict in Figure 2, most respondents reported engaging in conflict a few times a year or never. Finally, the number of shared activities in couples is compared to overall happy and unhappy couples (as reported by individual respondents). The average number of shared activities for unhappy couples is 1.80 while the average number of shared activities for happy couples is 4.05 as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 1

Amount of Fighting During Shared Activities



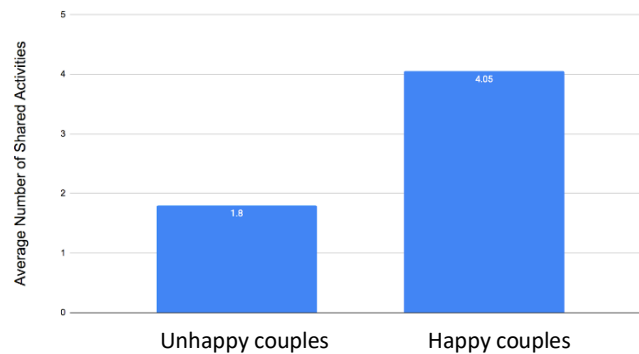
Note. Average amount of fighting during all shared activities across all participants.

Figure 2

Note. How often fighting occurs in general across all participants.

Figure 3

Average Number of Shared Activities Among Happy and Unhappy Couples



Note. The average number of shared activities between individual who rated themselves happy and unhappy in their relationship.

Regarding the second question involving attachment styles, it was found that there is a fairly even split between partners having similar or different attachment styles. As can be seen in Figure 4 and Figure 5, a majority of participants reported themselves and their partners as having a secure attachment style; the data shows 51.32% of participants as having a secure attachment

while 46.05% of partners have a secure attachment. The second and third most common attachment styles for participants and their partners are avoidant and anxious/ambivalent, respectively. After comparing the results between the partners in each couple, it turns out that 34 couples have the same attachment style while 38 couples have different attachment styles.

Figure 4



Note: Self-reported attachment styles across all participants.

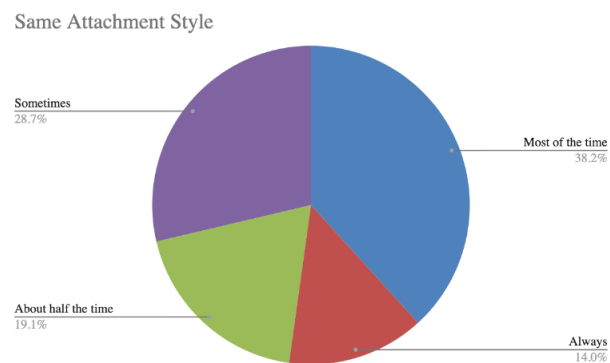
Figure 5



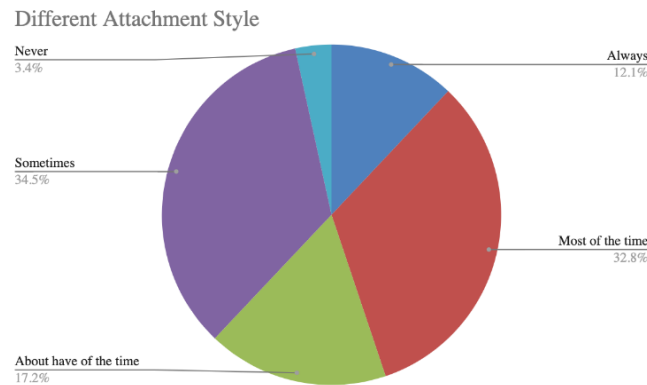
Note: Self-reported partners' attachment styles across all participants.

To answer the question of whether couples with similar attachment styles are more likely to engage in hobbies together, the couples with same and different attachment styles were compared to how often they engage in activities. Those with the same attachment style did not report “never” for engaging in shared activities, but 3.4% of the couples with different attachment styles did report never engaging in shared activities (Figure 7). In addition, the percentage of those who reported “always”, “most of the time”, and “about half the time” for how often they engage in shared activities was higher for couples who share the same attachment style. Only “Sometimes” had a higher percent for couples with different attachment styles.

Figure 6

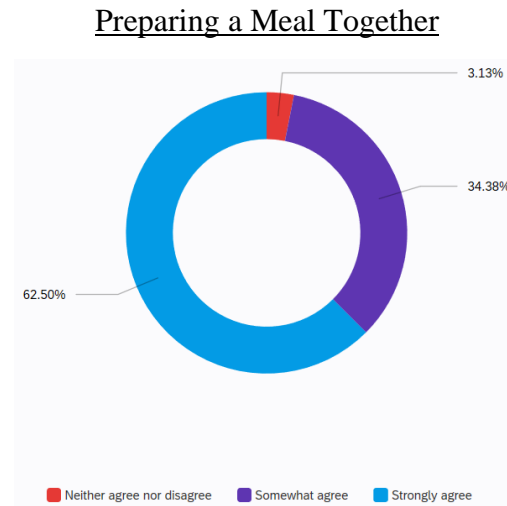


Note. How often couples with same attachment style engage in shared activities.

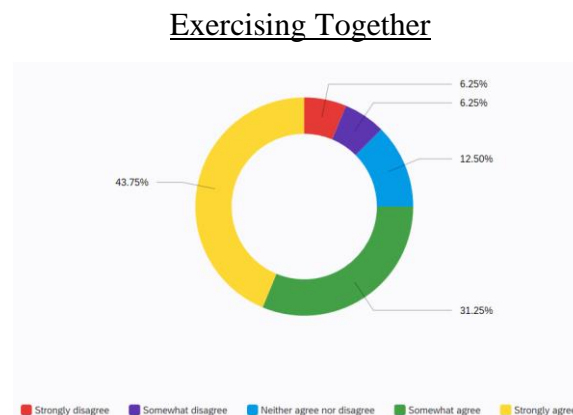
Figure 7

Note. How often couples with different attachment styles engage in shared activities.

To discover if certain shared activities lead to increased satisfaction in a relationship, participants reported on if they feel closer to their partner after a given activity on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Figure 8 reveals that preparing a meal together generated the highest percentage of positive responses with 62.50% of respondents choosing “strongly agree”, 34.38% choosing “somewhat agree”, and no respondents disagreeing. The activities with responses for “somewhat disagree” and “highly disagree” were going to a movie/show together (6.26%), going to a concert together (10.53%), exercising together (12.5%) (Figure 9).

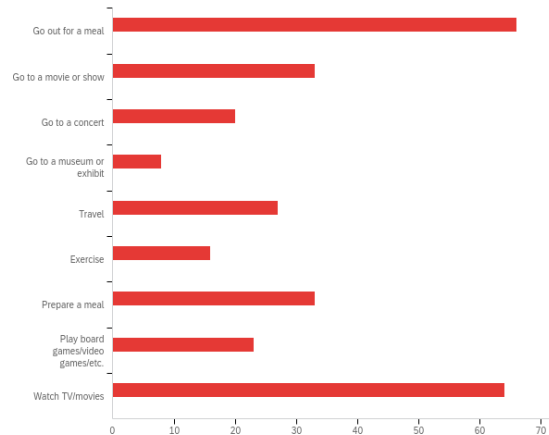
Figure 8

Note. Degree of feeling closer to partner after preparing a meal together.

Figure 9

Note. Degree of feeling closer to partner after exercising together.

An unrelated, interesting finding is how many participants reported engaging in each shared activity listed on the questionnaire. Going out for a meal and watching TV/movies together showed the highest involvement while going to a museum or exhibit and exercising together showed the lowest involvement in Figure 10.

Figure 10Number of Participants Who Participate in Each Shared Activity

Note. Number of respondents that selected each activity most commonly done with their partner.

Discussion

For the first question, it was hypothesized that couples who have more shared activities and hobbies have lower conflict and higher relationship quality. The results somewhat support this hypothesis. After comparing the amount of conflict during activities, general conflict, and number of shared activities, there was no relationship between conflict levels and number of shared activities. On the other hand, relationship quality seemed to be positively correlated with how many activities partners share. Unhappy couples had 1.80 shared activities while happy couples had 4.05 shared activities which is a drastic difference. As found by Girme et al., sharing activities lead to higher feelings of closeness, meaning, and positivity in a relationship (2014). The second hypothesis was that couples with similar attachment styles are more likely to engage in hobbies together and feel more connected. This was also somewhat supported. Couples with the same attachment style were more likely to engage in shared activities than couples with different attachment styles. For example, 38.2% of those with the same attachment style reported

sharing activities most of the time, and 32.8% of those with different attachment styles reported sharing activities most of the time. Furthermore, only the couples with different attachment styles reported never sharing an activity. The hypothesis was not supported in the sense that there was no correlation between couples with the same attachment style and feeling more connected (degree of happiness). Myers and Vetere did note that couples with a secure attachment style reported having significantly more resources for coping with stress than both anxious/ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles. This may lead securely attached couples to feel more connected (2002). Last, it was predicted that activities that promote communication will help a couple feel more connected, and the data does support this. Preparing a meal together had the highest number of positive responses with 96.88% of participants agreeing that it made them feel closer to their partner. It can be argued that preparing a meal together promotes communication because of the coordination and cooperation involved to work in a kitchen together and contributing to the same dish. However, the activities with negative responses, which were watching a movie/show, going to a concert, and exercising, involve both partners focusing on a certain stimuli that take away from communication with each other. It is difficult to compare these results to the research done by Reissman et al. as they separated activities in to self-defined exciting and pleasant activities. As a reminder, it was found that the exciting group showed greater marital satisfaction when compared to the combined results of the pleasant and control groups (1993). Given that exciting and pleasant activities were subjectively measured, it is impossible to know if preparing a meal together led to greater marital satisfaction in their study.

Many studies include biases and other limitations that make it difficult to generalize the results to a wider population, and this one is no exception. There were many more females than males, and a majority of heterosexuals, that responded to the survey which creates a heavy bias.

The same goes for race and ethnicity because a majority of participants were Caucasian or white. Demographic bias may also be seen with the average age; although conclusions can be drawn for a younger population, given that participants were 29 years old on average, results cannot be generalized to the entire age range. These are issues that arise when a survey is administered to a very narrow audience; in this case it was the Facebook friends of three college students. It is likely that a majority of the researchers' Facebook friends are of similar age to the researchers. Further limitations in the study include the bias of self-reporting. Participants were required to self-report their partner's attachment style instead of receiving honest results from the partners themselves. This may be causing an inaccuracy in the data because participants could incorrectly report their partner's romantic attachment style. Additionally, it should be noted that the data can establish correlations but not causation. There are countless uncontrolled factors, many of which have not been mentioned above, that can contribute to the results of the study, and it cannot be assumed that one variable directly causes another variable.

By conducting this study, the influence of activities within couples became apparent. Having the same attachment style as a partner and having more shared activities is positively correlated with relationship quality. Also, activities that promote communication may be related to feeling closer to a partner. In the future, it would be helpful to expand and improve on this study in several ways. For example, administering the survey to a more diverse population would allow the data to be more generalizable, and administering the survey to both members of a couple, as Girme et al. did in their second study, would provide more comparable results.

References

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