

Can flexible expectations towards a partner regulate relationship satisfaction? Testing the assumptions of the interdependence theory in an experimental and longitudinal paradigm.

How do expectations shape our intimate relationships, and to what extent does relationship satisfaction rely on what we receive from our partner versus what we expect from them? Is it better to have high expectations, or is the absence of expectations rather the key to happiness? Do we, and should we, adjust our expectations based on how we assess the likelihood of them being met by our partner? Opinions on this matter are divided, not only among laypeople but also among the most renowned and respected experts in the field of intimate relationships.

It seems that the best theoretical basis for answering these questions is the interdependence theory, developed by John Thibaut and Harold Kelley in 1959. Thibaut and Kelley proposed that satisfaction with an intimate relationship depends on two factors: the outcome (the sum of rewards and costs experienced in the relationship) and the comparison level (the standard considered as satisfactory). If the outcome of our relationship equals or exceeds our comparison level, we are satisfied with the relationship; if the outcome is lower, our satisfaction decreases. The interdependence theory predicts that the comparison level changes throughout the course of a relationship. When we experience an excellent relationship, our comparison level rises, and as a result, our satisfaction decreases. Decreasing expectations increase the likelihood of them being met and consequently, increases satisfaction. The interdependence theory assumes that the comparison level changes during the relationship. When we encounter an excellent relationship, our comparison level rises, and in consequence, our satisfaction comes down. Conversely, decreasing expectations raise the chances of meeting them, and consequently increases satisfaction.

Surprisingly, although assumptions about changing expectations are fundamental elements of the interdependence theory, they have never been adequately and thoroughly verified. Research on this aspect of the interdependence theory is scarce and has a significant disadvantage – due to its correlational nature, it does not allow for conclusions to be drawn about the dynamics of changes and the mutual influence of expectations and satisfaction. Therefore, the aim of the project described in this application is to fill this gap by conducting a series of studies monitoring the change of relational expectations and tracing its sources and effects.

The project consists of four studies utilizing experimental and longitudinal methods. In longitudinal Study 1, we will monitor changes in the level of expectations, satisfaction, and partner perception over a two-year period. By applying a dynamical systems approach, in which each variable is simultaneously treated as both a predictor and an outcome, we will be able to trace the mutual interactions of all variables included. Subsequent experimental studies will examine the direct influence of expectations on the partner's satisfaction and perception (Study 2), the impact of partner perception on satisfaction and expectations (Study 3), and the impact of satisfaction on partner expectations and perception (Study 4).

The project results will provide answers to many important questions about the functioning of close relationships. Firstly, we will determine whether expectations towards a partner change over time and, most interestingly, whether they serve as regulators of the level of satisfaction in the relationship. A longitudinal study will reveal whether, according to the theory of interdependence, periods of higher satisfaction are followed by an increase in expectations towards the partner, ultimately leading to a decrease in satisfaction. Conversely, it will uncover whether low levels of satisfaction result in lower expectations, which ultimately have a positive effect on satisfaction. Additionally, we will ascertain whether all partners benefit from these regulatory mechanisms or if only those who are more committed to the relationship are involved. It seems that obtaining this knowledge, regardless of whether the assumptions of the interdependence theory are confirmed or refuted, will make a valuable contribution to the field of close relationship psychology and therapeutic practice.