

Is more neutral support behavior in couples coping with cancer associated with lower relationship satisfaction?

A cross-cultural comparison between American and German couples

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Introduction

- Many investigators have demonstrated the importance of couples' communication in predicting overall relationship satisfaction.
- More recently, investigators have recognized the significance of the partners' ability to provide support to each other when one person is struggling with individual concerns.
- Very little research has been conducted on this topic, let alone on the question of how couples ask for and provide support to each other in different countries.

Hypothesis

- Are there differences between countries involving strategies for how partners attempt to elicit and to provide social support from the other individual?
- Relationship satisfaction within country is positively related to the specific social support behavior demonstrated in a behavioral observation task.

Method

- Couples from Germany (n = 64 couples) and the United States (n = 80 couples) participated in social support interactions after the women had been diagnosed with early stage breast cancer.
- Investigators from both countries were trained together and consistently employed the *Social Support Interaction Coding System* (SSICS; Bradbury & Pasch, 1994) which was developed to quantify the nature of social support interactions between intimate partners.

Behavioral observation task

- Assessment of how each person communicates social support to their partner in a 7-minute video-taped discussion on a cancer-related topic as listener as well as discloser.

Table 1: SSICS codes for Helpee and Helper

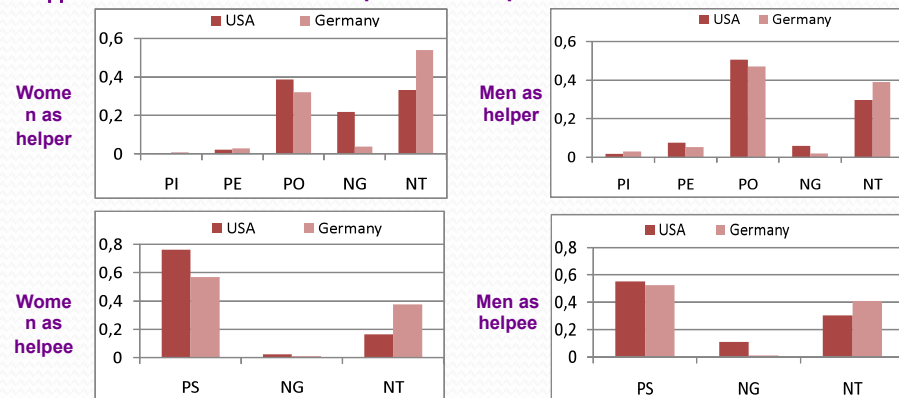
Discloser/Helpee		Listener/Helper	
Positive	Offers specific, clear analysis of the problem, expresses feelings related to the problem, asks for help or states needs in a useful way, responds positively to supporter questions or suggestions	Positive emotional	Reassures, consoles or provides genuine encouragement to spouse, conveys that spouse is loved, cared for, or esteemed, acknowledges spouse's beliefs, interpretations and feelings, encourages expression or clarification of feelings
Negative	Makes demands for help, criticizes, blames or accuses helper, expresses negative affect at the spouse, whines or complains	Positive instrumental	Makes specific suggestions, gives helpful advice or access to information regarding the problem
Neutral	Descriptive information about the problem, repeated analyses of the problem that do not further contribute to understanding	Positive other	General analysis of the problem, summarizes or encourages to continue the discussion
		Neutral	See Discloser/Helpee
		Negative	See Discloser/Helpee

Results

Sample characteristics [Means (and standard deviation, range)] and Relationship satisfaction

	Germany (n = 64)	USA (n = 80)
Age	♀ 52.1 (11.1, 30 - 76) ♂ 52.5 (10.8, 34 - 80)	♀ 52.4 (10.9, 29 - 76) ♂ 54.4 (12.6, 26 - 85)
Relationship duration	21.5 (14.5, 1 - 56)	22.7 (13.9, 1 - 56)
Relationship satisfaction (QMI)	♀ 37.7 (8.3, 17 - 45) ♂ 38.2 (7.5, 3 - 45)	♀ 38.4 (8.1, 8 - 45) ♂ 38.7 (7.1, 12 - 45)

Support Behaviors in both countries [SSICS code means]



Discussion

- The major differences involved strategies across countries for how partners attempted to elicit and to provide social support from the other individual:
 - Both women and men in Germany used *more neutral strategies* than women and men in the U.S. in *asking for support* from their partners.
 - Both genders in the U.S. provided *more positive types of support*, whereas women and men in Germany are *more neutral* in their support behavior.
 - Very few negative behaviors occurred in either country.
- These differences in communication behavior are not reflected in marital adjustment differences. Men and women in both countries demonstrate almost identical marital adjustment scores.
- It seems that German couples engage in more neutral support behavior than U.S. couples, suggesting that greater levels of neutrality are more acceptable and less dysfunctional in the German cultural context than in the U.S.