



2020

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### Recommended Citation

Smedley, Daniel K. (2020) "Links Between Commitment, Financial Mutuality, Communication, and Relationship Satisfaction," *Family Perspectives*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives/vol1/iss2/3>

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# Links Between Commitment, Financial Mutuality, Communication, and Relationship Satisfaction

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*Commitment, financial mutuality, and communication have all been linked to relationship satisfaction in couples. Financial mutuality, the symbolic joining of the financial lives of a couple, is an emerging concept that holds promise for understanding the world of couple finance. This article explores a possible model for how each of these variables may be functioning together, giving insight into how couples may achieve relationship satisfaction as they join their financial lives. Commitment and financial mutuality may influence each other in a positive cyclical pattern that leads to relationship satisfaction. Communication may increase or decrease the effect of this process.*

Recent research on the link between finances and couple relationship satisfaction has led to a recognition that finances are a key determinant (Archuleta et al., 2013; Baisden et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2018; Lebaron et al., 2019; Totenhagen et al., 2019). Relationship satisfaction is generally defined as how happy individuals are with their relationship (Baisden et al., 2018; Kelley et al., 2018; Steuber & Paik, 2014; Totenhagen et al., 2019). While relationship satisfaction can be discussed as an outcome that equally affects partners, it does not always end up applying equally to both men and women due to the dyadic nature of the study of couples, which considers the perceptions of each partner (Dew & Jackson, 2017; Hill et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2018; Lebaron et al., 2019; Mao et al., 2017; Totenhagen et al., 2019). In the area of couple well-being and financial stressors, a variety of differences have been found in perceptions of men and women. For example, compared to their wives, husbands perceive lower levels of relationship satisfaction when they are financially stressed and when their wives are financially stressed.

Interestingly, husbands seem to experience the moderating effect of communication in the relationship between their financial stress and marital satisfaction while wives may not (Kelley et al., 2018). Finally, relationship satisfaction and financial satisfaction have each been shown to fluctuate from day to day, especially for women (Totenhagen et al., 2018). Given these partner differences and the potential for daily fluctuation, researchers are finding that

communication may ease the association between couple finances and relationship satisfaction (Hill et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2017; Romo, 2015).

A couple's open communication facilitates the process of deciding to commit to one another and to engage in mutually managing finances (Curran et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2017). Open discussion may not act so much as a direct influencer of relationship satisfaction but rather as a necessary component of the process of financial mutuality that achieves relationship satisfaction. *Financial mutuality* is a term used to describe the symbolic joining of the financial lives of a couple, expressed and maintained through joint management of finances and joint banking (Archuleta et al., 2013; Mao et al., 2017; Steuber & Paik, 2014; Totenhagen et al., 2019). Financial mutuality is also the process involved in the merging of each individual's personal set of financial habits, financial values, and financial management strategies, and it may be influenced by parents' financial attitudes and behaviors or personal financial histories (Baisden et al., 2018; Curran et al., 2018). Research in financial mutuality is growing as studies find that it has a significant positive association with relationship quality (Archuleta et al., 2013; Mao et al., 2017; Totenhagen et al., 2019). Findings indicate that financial mutuality may be linked to relationship satisfaction at least partly because it not only utilizes communication but is the fruit of commitment and trust, which also have a positive association with relationship satisfaction (Baisden et al., 2018; Dew & Jackson, 2017; Romo, 2015; Skogrand et al., 2011).

Thus, research points to the fact that commitment and trust can be considered foundational precedents for action taken in any domain of a couple's relationship, especially finances. Financial matters can act as a catalyst for couples choosing to joint manage and share accounts, actions which then may reinforce commitment and trust in a circular pattern or a "virtuous cycle" (E. J. Hill, personal communication, February 28, 2019). While there are many factors that can influence couple relationship satisfaction, committed couples who communicate well and who

jointly manage finances and share bank accounts are more likely to experience higher relationship satisfaction. This literature review will first discuss the relationship between commitment and financial mutuality and then discuss how communication assists the relationship between commitment and financial mutuality.

### **The Relationship Between Commitment and Financial Mutuality**

Commitment, which includes accountability and dedication, may have a strong association with relationship satisfaction because it reinforces the process of financial mutuality (Dew & Jackson, 2017; Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019; Romo, 2015). In some cases, commitment may emerge passively. For example, many couples choose to join finances simply out of convenience or because it is a cultural or historical norm (Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019). However, commitment may more strongly emerge when joining finances is intentional (Dew & Jackson, 2017; Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019; Romo, 2015; Skogrand et al., 2011; Steuber & Paik, 2014). Committed couples who join finances are more likely to start thinking collectively and feel that they have invested in the relationship (Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019; Steuber & Paik, 2014). Such “investments” can include bank accounts, housing, children, and shared experiences (Baisden et al., 2018; Dew & Jackson, 2017; Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019; Steuber & Paik, 2014). The increasing cost of terminating the relationship naturally incentivizes the couple to increase their commitment (Steuber & Paik, 2014). When individuals in a relationship perceive that their partner has an increased commitment to the relationship, they feel stabilized and are more satisfied with the relationship (Dew & Jackson, 2017).

Couples also feel more of a sense of accountability to each other as they increase their financial mutuality, which reinforces the cycle between financial mutuality and commitment (Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019; Romo, 2015; Steuber & Paik, 2014). For example, a couple who has just been married and joined their bank accounts is more likely to feel a need to check with each other before making large purchases or hedonic (selfish) purchases (Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019; Skogrand et al., 2011). Every purchase now requires a higher degree of justification, which leads couples with shared finances to make more utilitarian purchases, or purchases that benefit both people (Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019). This effort leads couples to perceive their lives and their interests as more shared, which directly influences relationship satisfaction (Archuleta et al., 2013; Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019; Mao et al., 2017; Totenhagen et al., 2019).

Finally, dedication strengthens the cycle between financial mutuality and commitment. Dedication stems from a couple’s self-generated desires and willingness to maintain and improve the relationship. It is found in couples who are joining accounts and financial stewardships not just by convenience but because each partner is proactively striving to build the relationship (Baisden et al., 2018; Dew & Jackson, 2017; Romo, 2015). Dedication builds trust as partners learn to rely on each other’s willingness to weather rough times, which makes them more likely to want to reciprocate positive maintenance behaviors such as compromising, forgiving, and assuring (Dew & Jackson, 2017). Studies have produced strong evidence that positive maintenance behaviors increase stability and relationship satisfaction, especially for women (Dew & Jackson, 2017; Kelley et al., 2018; Lebaron et al., 2019). Showing dedication to the relationship also helps individuals to take a proactive approach, making specific efforts to manage small problems to reach larger goals (Dew & Jackson, 2017). This key aspect of dedication may be a driving motivation for working through financial problems in a responsible manner. This committed approach makes it more likely that a couple will sit down to figure out a plan for jointly managing and banking and work through financial issues as they arise (Dew & Jackson, 2017; Romo, 2015).

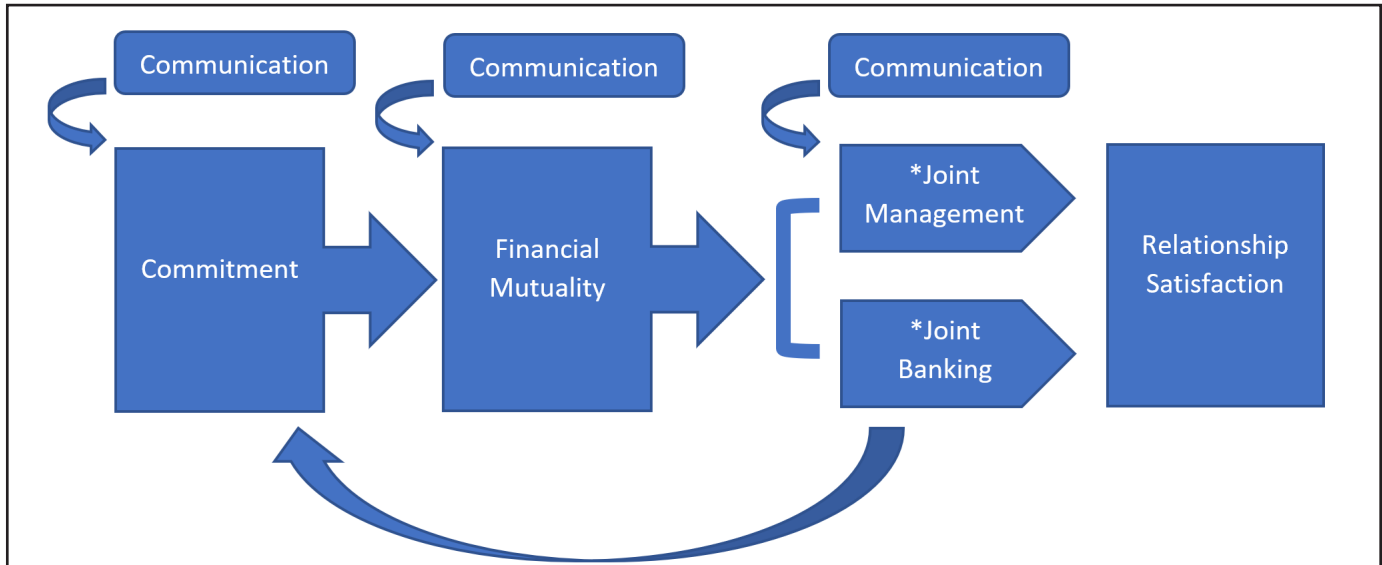
While commitment to joint management is key to better relationship satisfaction, effective couple financial management does not necessarily require both partners be equally involved but rather that they have mutually agreed on roles that fit them best as a couple (Romo, 2015; Skogrand et al., 2011). In fact, couples who decide on a default financial manager within the couple may have greater relationship satisfaction (Baisden et al., 2018; Skogrand et al., 2011). This strategy may increase relationship satisfaction because of the way it promotes trust: each partner must be confident that they can trust the default financial manager to manage bills, budgets, and investments well (Baisden et al., 2018; Skogrand et al., 2011). Further, couples who choose to designate a default financial manager will likely find the approach to be successful only if both partners have access to the family’s funds and are checking in with each other about important financial circumstances, which are two key elements of this joint process (Lebaron et al., 2019; Skogrand et al., 2011). Those couples just beginning their financial lives together may not experience increased relationship satisfaction immediately because it can take time and experience for both to trust the process and the default manager (Mao et al., 2017; Skogrand et al., 2011). While a couple’s financial management strategy may have impact on their commitment and mutuality, the ongoing nature of financial concerns and stressors in a relationship make communication a fundamental part of relational success.

### Communication as a Facilitator of the Relationship Between Commitment and Financial Mutuality

While communication has been shown to be very well connected with relationship satisfaction, it may not be a direct cause so much as it is a necessary component for the process of building commitment. Communication is integral to each instance of financial decision making (paying bills, acquiring loans, budgeting, managing debt, etc., Kelley et al., 2018; Romo, 2015; Skogrand et al., 2011). As shown in the model below, communication may act much like oil or a lubricant to help the mechanical pieces of commitment and financial mutuality run smoothly and to lead to relationship satisfaction. Note that the arrow at the bottom of the chart also illustrates how this relationship can be cyclical rather than unilateral. Because major financial decisions can lead to either relationship satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the amount and type of communication applied to this process is critical (Romo, 2015).

trauma can also distort an individual's understanding of themselves and others or cause compulsory or otherwise unhealthy financial behaviors (Ross & Coombs, 2018). When couples experience these obstacles that inhibit frequent and healthy communication, they may find that the amplifying effect that communication has on the cycle of commitment and financial mutuality may be minimized or compromised.

Though some negative interactions can have detrimental effects on the relationship, couples can choose to include a high ratio of more positive financial communication. Positive communication may include openness, frequently checking in, tailoring communication to the needs of the spouse, focused problem solving, compromising, resolving conflict, and positive affect (Hill et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2018; Romo, 2015; Skogrand et al., 2011). Positive communication has been found to decrease marital uncertainty, help prevent divorce, and increase overall



Despite this need to communicate, many couples find that communication is hard to incorporate, and they choose not to, which can decrease their relationship satisfaction (Hill et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2017; Romo, 2015). On the other hand, as couples communicate more often—and in healthy ways—they may increase their relationship satisfaction. Various obstacles keep couples from choosing to communicate well. Talking openly about finances can be considered “taboo” due to ineffective financial education and parents who keep their finances from their children (Romo, 2015). Because of this cultural taboo, couples may try to solve financial issues without communicating and without resources, relying instead on their past financial experiences (Baisden et al., 2018; Curran et al., 2018; Romo, 2015). A lack of communication for any reason can be worsened by a lack of basic financial and communication skills (Curran et al., 2018; Romo, 2015; Totenhagen et al., 2019). Past

satisfaction (Romo, 2015). It can moderate the negative effects of financial stress on marital quality (Kelley et al., 2018) and the negative effects of financial dissatisfaction on marital stability (Hill et al., 2017). In sum, there are many ways in which healthy communication is positively associated with relationship satisfaction, but more thought could be given to how this association may exist because of the way in which communication reinforces cycles of commitment and financial mutuality and increases relationship satisfaction.

It is worth considering that couples with many financial differences may have a longer road to financial mutuality than those who already have many shared values, making the role of communication even more critical (Baisden et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2017). This does not necessarily mean that having separate finances is a poor approach

or that a couple cannot work through their differing financial views to come to mutuality; the process just may require more effort and sustained communication (Mao et al., 2017). Therapists and researchers have suggested that couples who want to grow and maintain financial mutuality should discuss their financial relationship very early on *and* throughout the length of their relationship, then devise a plan for maintaining an open, positive type of communication when they discuss financial matters (Curran et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2017).

## Conclusion

While commitment, financial mutuality, and communication have all been associated with relationship satisfaction, this review of recent literature sheds new light on how these variables may be functioning together. Commitment can initiate financial mutuality, creating a positive cycle between the two that ultimately leads to greater relationship satisfaction. Communication is a necessary part of the cycle of commitment and financial mutuality and increases the effect of this cycle on relationship satisfaction (Archuleta et al., 2013; Baisden et al., 2018; Curran et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2017; Romo, 2015).

While much evidence points to the strength of this model, the concept of financial mutuality is relatively new, and

researchers are continuing to investigate how it is defined and how it is expressed. As it is currently defined, financial mutuality is primarily based on how the joining together of finances can create unity that bolsters the relationship (Mao et al., 2017; Steuber & Paik, 2014) because it can be symbolic of beliefs about the orientation of relationships (Skogrand et al., 2011). While the joining of bank accounts was used in some of the studies considered here as an indicator of mutuality, it may not always be so intentionally symbolic. Joining accounts or resources may be strictly a matter of convenience, or a way in which couples exercise a sense of personal autonomy in their relationship (Baisden et al., 2018; Garbinsky & Gladstone, 2019; Skogrand et al., 2011). Additionally, there are many strategies to financial management besides having a default manager that could symbolize financial mutuality not discussed here (Skogrand et al., 2011). Research should continue to explore what other ways a couple symbolizes or expresses financial mutuality besides joint management and joint banking. The roles of commitment and communication could be helpful influences to be considered with any new mechanisms that are explored.

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