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## Partner Perception of Nonverbal Social Skills and its Impact on Relationship Satisfaction in Dating Couples

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PARTNER PERCEPTION OF NONVERBAL SOCIAL  
SKILLS AND ITS IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIP  
SATISFACTION IN DATING COUPLES

BY

WYNSTON D. WILSON

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS  
IN  
COMMUNICATION STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2013

MASTER OF ARTS  
OF  
WYNSTON D. WILSON

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined relational satisfaction and perceptions of the target person's social skills from the perspective of both members of the relationship. Respondents (N = 177) age 18 to 28 completed the Relationship Assessment Scale and the emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, and social sensitivity subscales of the Social Skills Inventory. Participants and partners completed a self-report assessment of her or his own social skills, other-report assessment of her or his partners' social skills, and the Relationship Assessment Scale. Multiple regression correlations were performed using participant and partner satisfaction as the dependent variables and participant and partner social skills as the independent variables. Results confirmed that individuals who are or perceive themselves to be socially skilled are more likely to be satisfied in her or his relationship. However, the data indicated that how an individual's social skills are perceived by her or his partner, has minimal to no influence on her or his partner's satisfaction with the relationship.

Significant, yet moderate relationships were found between respondents' assessment of their social skills and their relational satisfaction. Although additional analyses yielded other moderate relationships that may influence relationship satisfaction, it is difficult to determine from this data what variables would strengthen the relationship between these two variables. While the research indicates a relationship between the variables, the results in this study question whose social skills play a role in determining relationship satisfaction –the individual or her or his partner.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The successful completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the tremendous patience, unwavering dedication, and unconditional support from my thesis committee, friends, and family.

I would like to thank Dr. Brian Quilliam for his positivity and constructive commentary. I sincerely appreciate Dr. Helen Mederer for offering her invaluable contributions from a sociological perspective and Dr. Sandra Ketrow for sparking my interest in nonverbal communication. I am indebted to the humorous, loving, and wonderful Dr. Rachel DiCioccio. Through observation alone, she has taught me that without challenges there is no growth. For that I am forever grateful!

I am grateful for my brothers from another mother; Bobby Britto-Oliveira, Brandon G. Brown, Corey M. Fernandez, and Kwayah S. Makor for embarking on this journey through graduate school with me. They have cheered me on along the way; waiting for me to cross the finish line. That time has come. Homage!

Last but certainly not least, my biggest support system, my family. Words cannot describe the undying love and unconditional support they have provided me throughout my life and graduate career. I love you all!

I dedicate my thesis to my mother, my best friend, Araminta E. McIntosh. She is my greatest inspiration and I aspire to be half the person she is. No obstacle is too big for her to overcome. She has taught me that I am my greatest competitor; therefore I should always strive to be better, and never stand in my own way. Thank you for having faith in me. Love you!

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is an on-going interactional process that consists of the sending and receiving of messages between communicators. Effective communication includes how people interpret and perceive others' communication as well as their own communication. A person's interpretation and perception of other's communication serves as the measuring tool for how socially skilled they think they are in comparison to others. Our interpretations and perceptions directly affect how we communicate, which in turn affects how others communicate with us. Therefore, our ability to be expressive and sensitive to communication messages plays an essential role in determining the vitality of our interpersonal relationships. While we pay a lot of attention to our verbal messages, we unfortunately tend to underestimate the power of our nonverbal communication. Our nonverbal communication skills are central to the encoding (sending) and decoding (receiving) of messages in the communication process. Overall, our communication skills are highly specific patterns of learned observable behavior, both verbal and nonverbal, through which people influence others and attempt to meet their needs (Gesten, Weissberg, Amish, and Smith, 1987; Guerrero and Floyd, 2005). The influence of learned behavior and how it is used to meet the needs of others are prevalent in romantic relationships; in which members are interdependent of each other.



Being in a romantic relationship can be one of the most rewarding experiences of one's life. When a relationship is healthy and going well it can be assumed that the lines of communication between partners are not only open but understood. However, when the relationship is failing, poor communication between partners is attributed as responsible for dissolving the relationship. Therefore, one may assume that the quality of our communication influences the relational satisfaction in our romantic relationships.

Libet & Lewinsoln (1973) established that socially skilled individuals are likely to experience more pleasurable communication interactions than individuals that have poor social skills. The more positive an individual's communication experience, the healthier her or his physical and psychological well-being will be. Expanding on this perspective, researchers have examined communication skill and relational satisfaction in various interpersonal relationships. Multidisciplinary literature shows that skilled communicators report increased levels of relational satisfaction, whereas poor communicators report decreased levels of relational satisfaction. Furthermore, there is minimal research on how interaction between good or poor communicators affects their relational satisfaction.

### **Significance of the Study**

Miczo (2001) sought to extend this research by investigating the relationship between social skills and relational satisfaction in dating couples. He assessed the impact of respondents' social skills on their relational satisfaction, and the relational satisfaction of their partner.

Although the hypotheses were not supported by the data, Miczo's study suggested to future researchers that assessing relational satisfaction and perceptions of the target person's social skills from the perspective of both members of the relationship can be another way to examine the association between the two variables. The present study serves to extend Miczo's (2001) study, considering his suggestion for future research on the association between social skill and relational satisfaction. Further discussion on the literature that guides this study and the methodology for how this study was conducted is reviewed in the chapter that follows.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, the concepts of social skills and relationship satisfaction are discussed. Although social skills is reviewed in its entirety, the nonverbal component of social skills is slightly emphasized more than the verbal component, to highlight its role and importance in romantic relationships. Together these variables provide a framework to examine romantic partners' social skills and relationship satisfaction.

#### **Social Skills**

Nonverbal behavior has a long record of scholarly examination in sociology, psychology, and communication studies. Nonverbal behavior dates back to published work by Charles Darwin (1872, 1965) when he wrote that “the force of language is much aided by the expressive movements of the face and body (354)”. Researchers from various fields have studied nonverbal behavior to fully understand the dynamics of social interaction, and of interest to the present study, the socio-emotional aspect of it. Due to the vast literature on nonverbal behavior, some experts claim that nonverbal behavior is perceived to be more honest and potent than the words we speak (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2010).

There is a significant body of research that supports the claim that people rely heavily on nonverbal cues to express their felt emotions and to interpret nonverbal cues of others (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2010). Based on this claim, assumptions can be made that nonverbal communication is more accurate than verbal

communication because it tends to occur subconsciously and spontaneously. Since nonverbal behavior tends to occur in quick and subtle ways, it is considered to be less controlled or manipulated. Therefore, when our verbal messages do not align with our nonverbal messages, people are more likely to believe our nonverbal behavior (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2010). The communication skills that one possess to accurately encode and decode both verbal and nonverbal messages form the foundation of one's social skill level.

Social skills derives from multidisciplinary research on social and interpersonal skills (Riggio, 1986). Social skills is a construct based on two key domains of communication skills: the *emotional* (nonverbal) and the *social* (verbal) (Riggio, 1989). The nonverbal component of social skills originates from the most prominent works conducted by Buck (1979), Friedman (1980), Rosenthal (1976, 1982), and Snyder (1974). Buck's (1979) work on nonverbal sensitivity recognizes one's ability to decode a person's communication with whom one has a specific relationship. Friedman (1980) and his colleagues' work on nonverbal expressiveness suggested that nonverbal communication extends and modifies verbal communication through the way individuals express emotion through body language and facial expressions that allow us to affect others. Rosenthal's (1976, 1982) early work focused on gender differences and nonverbal encoding and decoding skill as determinants to better understand interpersonal relationships. Last, Snyder's (1974) research on self-monitoring focused on the extent to which an individual can control and manage her or his self-presentation, expressive behavior, and nonverbal affective display.

The verbal component of social skills originates from work involving communication and relational competence, social abilities, and social intelligence. In work relevant to communication competence and social skill, Spitzberg (1983) specifies that communication and relational competence has three components: motivation, knowledge, and skill. Motivation refers to an individual's desire to partake in conversation. Knowledge concerns a person's level of information regarding the topic, the context in which it takes place and the person they are interacting with. Last, skill concerns the degree to which the interactant successfully performs a particular behavior.

Both Guilford's (1975) work on behavioral intelligence and Hogan's (1969) work on empathy shed light on understanding social ability. Although the majority of Guilford's work on behavioral intelligence is nonverbal in nature, it recognized that individuals who are skilled in social response make wise social decisions, and therefore have the potential to be good behavioral evaluators (Guilford & O'Sullivan, 1975). An empathetic person can be considered a good behavioral evaluator or having behavioral intelligence. Empathy refers to the sensitivity an individual has to the needs and values of others (Greif & Hogan, 1973). Greif and Hogan define empathy as one's ability to take the role of the other, adopt others perspectives, as well as consider the implications of one's actions for the welfare of others (1973).

Furthermore, the conceptualization of social skills has its roots in the early work of Thorndike's (1937) social intelligence research that referred to a person's ability to understand and manage people. Although this line of research was short-lived due to

the difficulties in assessing the difference between social and general intelligences, it fathered the works that examine individual difference in social abilities (Riggio,1986).

Studying social skills from a different perspective, Liberman (1982) assessed social skills, conceptualizing what is meant by social skills from a topographical, functional, and information-processing view. However, before we explore these views we should examine Liberman's (1982) understanding of social skills.

According to Liberman (1982), "...social skills refer to everyday conversations, encounters, and relationships that people have with each other" (63). In other words, social skills pertain to the basic nature and functionality of interaction and communication between people. Liberman agrees with behavioral scientists who dichotomized social communication into two spheres based upon interpersonal needs. In the *instrumental sphere*, social interaction serves to obtain concrete and substantial ends required for physical, material, and financial well-being. For this sphere, one assumes that interpersonal relationships function based on the performance of task and the achievement of productive goals (Liberman, 1982). In other words, the nature and quality of interpersonal relationships affect the attainment of goals and completion of these tasks. At the same time, how successfully one attains her or his goals and complete their task may also affect one's interpersonal relationship.

The *social-emotional* sphere is the second sphere that includes human interaction. Unlike the *instrumental* sphere, individuals in social-emotional situations do not aim to acquire information or tangible gains that will enhance their physical and/or economic well-being. Instead, individuals aim to meet their needs via affiliation with acquaintances, communicative interactions with friends and relatives, exchanging

emotions and experiences with intimates, and interacting with members of their immediate household (Lieberman, 1982). In terms of close relationships, social-emotional relationships are formed primarily to fulfill needs such as love, marriage, or friendship. The transactions that occur in these relationships involve information, opinions, and feelings that are not essentially targeted at attaining a goal or gaining anything tangible. Rather, transactions that occur during social-emotional interactions deal with expressions of love, hate, ambivalence, alienation, sadness, happiness, joy, and wishes (Lieberman, 1982). Through these interactions, individuals attempt to acquire intimacy and uphold friendships and family bonds.

Although each sphere serves its own purpose in human interaction and has its own respective tasks and goals, it does not mean that human or interpersonal interactions do not influence both instrumental and social-emotional functions. In other words, when a parent praises a child for successfully completing a task asked of them, Lieberman (1982) states that, "it is not the interpersonal 'other' that defines the nature of the interaction, but rather the primary function of the specific interaction for the individuals concerned" (64). However, in some interactions, one may obtain gratification of instrumental needs, while one's partner achieves high levels of social-emotional satisfaction. Lieberman (1982) provides another example "...that this can occur when a person agrees to drive a neighbor to the hospital on an emergency and receives thanks and gratitude in return" (64). In doing this deed the driver has fortified the friendship with her or his neighbor, which in turn, satisfies the driver's social-emotional needs, and the neighbor has fulfilled or met her or his instrumental needs by receiving medical care. Based on Lieberman's understanding of what social skills are

and its purpose, he believes that the best way to comprehensively assess and train social skills is to evaluate the instrumental and social-emotional spheres, and the situations that arise from them, by categorically conceptualizing social skills into three categories. These three categories are topographical, functional, and information-processing.

Topographically, social skills consist of both the verbal and nonverbal elements in interpersonal interaction. As everyday communicators, we are aware of the importance that verbal content holds when we attempt to assess other's social competence. We do so by placing verbal messages on a continuum to determine how socially skillful messages are based on articulation and word choice. That is, the individual that can convert her or his feelings into words, rather than attempting to display them is considered more socially skilled or competent. Additionally, from a topographical view, an individual who initiates requests for changes in others' behavior to gain a desired goal or who doesn't comply with unreasonable requests is deemed more socially skilled and competent than an individual who demonstrates behaviors of passivity and compliance (Lieberman, 1982). According to the topographical viewpoint, even in situations in which one may show appreciation by saying "thank you", when appropriate, is viewed to be more socially skilled than one who does not do so (Lieberman, 1982). In addition to verbal content, this view assesses the paralinguistic element of nonverbal communication that pertains to the vocal features that accompany our verbal messages, such as but not limited to, speech tempo, voice inflection, and intonation. Although this view includes both verbal and nonverbal content, it does not assess and define social skills holistically.



As stated earlier in this literature review, nonverbal communication has been extensively researched in recent years. This is because the nonverbal domain consists of multiple and complex behaviors, such as paralanguage, using our body movements, gestures, facial expressions, and eyes to create relational and emotional states. However, the functional view is an alternative way to assess social skills.

Functional view assumes that the accomplishment of goals established in both instrumental and social-emotional situations reflects competence and adaptation (Lieberman, 1982). Specifically, in an instrumental situation, an individual is considered socially skilled if she or he can satisfy their material and physical needs through instrumental role functioning. Correspondingly, an individual who can effectively meet her or his needs for conversation, companionship, nurturance, and affection through family and friendship relationships is also considered socially skilled (Lieberman, 1982). However, one major distinction between the topographical and functional view is that for the functional view, one assumes that in order for an individual to be socially skilled, one must meet both instrumental and social-emotional needs and goals without violating the rights and needs of others. To clarify this distinction, Lieberman (1982) states that, "...a nursery school child who monopolizes teacher time and toys, at the expense of peers, cannot be considered 'socially skilled' despite temporarily achieving goals" (66). This example helps to explicate the functional definition of social skills. The functional view focuses on the outcome of the interaction between "actor" and the "respondent", which is judged by how successfully the "actor" achieved her or his goals (Lieberman, 1982). However, how successfully the "actor" achieves her or his goals is also dependent on the attitudes,

feelings, and the needs of the “respondent”. The functional view explicitly implies a two-way interactive model to serve as a reference for understanding social skills.

From the functional point of view, the probability of an individual achieving her or his goal depends on how effectively the individual can accept and comprehensively make use of social norms and expectation (Lieberman, 1982).

So in order for people to attain their goals, they must be effective and competent in their ability to react and respond to others in a favorable manner, and must be able to accurately read the social interaction in which they are involved. However, this is easier said than done. Every culture has communication rules (whether explicit or implicit) that govern social behavior in most common situations (Lieberman, 1982).

Our social reality is assembled from our and other’s transacted perceptions. As a result we tend to interpret verbal and nonverbal content based on our understandings of them stemming from our experiences and personal backgrounds. Because verbal and nonverbal communication are both cultural bound and ambiguous, misunderstanding often arises. From a transcultural standpoint the “rules of the game” differ depending upon the culture to which an individual may belong. With that said, assessing social skills accurately when cultural barriers interfere would be rather difficult.

Although the topographical and functional viewpoints differ, two definitions include both views. These are the most comprehensive definitions to understanding social skills:

- 1. Social skill is the ability to express both positive and negative feelings in the interpersonal context without suffering consequent loss of social reinforcement. Such skill is demonstrated in a large variety of interpersonal contexts and involves the coordinated delivery of appropriate verbal and nonverbal responses. In*

*addition, the socially skilled individual is attuned to the realities of the situation and is aware when he is likely to be reinforced for his efforts.*

2. *Social skill is the ability to understand other people's use of elements of expression...convey impressions through appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviors...to affect behaviors and feelings of others in ways the person intends and which are socially acceptable...to influence the environment sufficiently to attain basic personal goals.*

Last, the information-processing view of social skills tends to focus on cognitive functions. This approach derived from Guilford's (1975) work on human intelligence that proposes social skills involves several elements of "behavioral cognition".

Information-processing is based out of psychologist trying to study clinical populations whose social skills suffer from cognitive diseases such as schizophrenia. Relying on Guilford's early works, researchers such as Hoepfner and O'Sullivan (1968) identified six orthogonal factors of behavioral cognition that were virtually independent of verbal comprehension (Lieberman, 1982). The six factors included and focused on abilities such as: the (1) correct recognition of gestures and (2) postures as expressions of thoughts and (3) feelings; (4) resolving contradictory information received from two modes of expression; (5) comprehending a sequence of social events; and (6) predicting the consequences of a social situation (Lieberman, 1982).

Because social skill consists of many lines of research, several perspectives have been presented. Researchers who follow and study cognitive functions to assess social skills have defined social skills based on information-processing views and in turn have created their own models. Researchers Spivack, Platt, and Shure (1976) define social skills as "interpersonal, cognitive problem solving skills" (3). Along with this

definition, they formulated six skills: problem recognition, means-ends thinking, alternative thinking, casual thinking, perspective taking, and consequential thinking.

Researchers Trower, Bryant, and Argyle (1978) established their own comprehensive information-processing model that defined social skill behavior by forming a hypothesis and a plan of action to follow. They hypothesized that social skill behavior is initiated and maintained by a main goal with sub-goals, which become unified by a particular plan of action. This plan of action can only be implemented if the “actor” first perceives the relevant characteristics of interpersonal situations, then translate these perceptions into possible courses of action, and then must decide which course of action is best. After choosing the best course of action the “actor” must implement the chosen action through a series of discrete motor responses. Similarly Wallace’s (1978) theoretical model posited that an individual is social skilled if she or he can accurately receive interpersonal stimuli, generate multiple response options, be able to evaluate the options, and choose the correct or most appropriate response in the end. These two information-processing models defined explicate how skillfully and effectively an individual can send, process, and receive stimuli.

Noted social psychologist Riggio (1986) defines social skills as learned social abilities and strategies. Riggio’s (1986, 1989) conceptualization of social skills reflects the literature outlined above. Social Skills encompasses three basic skill sets – *expressivity*, *sensitivity*, and *control*, and, two key domains – *emotional*, and *social*. Riggio formulated *expressivity* in light of Friedman (1980) and Rosenthal’s (1976, 1982), that dealt mainly with the communication of nonverbal messages and the

sending and receiving of emotions. The *sensitivity* component was influenced by the work of Buck (1979) on nonverbal sensitivity. Influenced by Snyder's (1974) work on self-monitoring and the ability to role-play, the last component, *control*, regulates both social and emotional messages, and self-presentational skill (Riggio, 1986). The emotional domain is nonverbal in nature and focuses on emotional states and cues (Riggio, 1989). The social domain deals with conversations and fluency, is verbal in nature, and includes an individual's ability to engage in or initiate a conversation. With relevance to this study, the two domains and three basic skill sets that make up social skills serve as a measuring tool to understanding the dynamics of satisfaction in romantic relationships.

With respect for multiple definitions of social skills presented, the best way to understand their complexities is to realize that there is no single definition for social skills (Riggio, 1986). This stems from the varied contexts in which social science researchers have studied social skills, which in turn has created a vast array of dimensions that attempt to explain social skills further.

Riggio (1986) states that most social science researchers agree on the basics, and on certain consistencies in the varying theoretical perspectives. Although social skills is a complex and multidimensional concept, the consistency in these theoretical perspectives lies a correspondent understanding that social skills is the basic sending and receiving of information, both verbal and nonverbal.

Social skills has become an extremely useful variable in understanding cognitive and behavioral abilities. The concept has been used most widely in a collection of studies pertaining to clinical psychology, personality and social psychology, and

marriage and family literature. However, misunderstandings arise from inaccurate decoding of social skills that affect relationship satisfaction, which in turn, can influence the stability and outcome of the relationship.

### **Relationship Satisfaction**

Although the literature on relationship satisfaction fits within the broader disciplinary classification of interpersonal communication, it will be discussed in the context of close relationships. Interpersonal communication is distinguished significantly by the actual nature of the constructed relationship. That is, interpersonal relationships are generally based on the social activities in which people interact. Therefore, the social activity defines the relationship, not the actual connection or bond of the participants. Contrastingly, close relationships consist of unique and irreplaceable participants who commit voluntarily to the relationship. Participants in close relationships define the relationship specifically and uniquely, and co-construct relationship meanings. How the relationship is defined is based on how participants attend to her or his partners' social and emotional needs. The ability an individual has to successfully or accurately attend to those communication needs influences the satisfaction in intimate relationships. However, to obtain a better understanding of relationship satisfaction we must examine its origin from which it derived.

“Satisfaction” is a widely used concept that occurs frequently in macrotheories of human behavior in a variety of settings (Hecht, 1978). This construct has been used to study the causal relationships between employees in organizations, group work in task-oriented groups, and partners in close relationships. Because satisfaction has been examined in multidisciplinary research, there are multiple conceptualizations of

the term. Some earlier conceptualizations of satisfaction originated from concepts regarding need gratification, expectation fulfillment, equivocality reduction, constraint-reinforcement, and even Herzberg's Two-Factor theory.

Relationship satisfaction is one of the most examined and established topics in marriage and family studies. It has been used most widely in a collection of studies pertaining to clinical psychology, personality and social psychology, and marriage and family literature (Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998). For the present study, relationship satisfaction will be studied as it relates to dating couples.

Although multiple definitions exist, relationship satisfaction can be simply defined as the measurement of a person's feelings and thoughts about her or his marriage or similar intimate relationship (Hendrick, 1988). Additionally, relationship satisfaction also involves an interpersonal evaluation of one's attraction to the relationship (Rusbult and Buunk, 1993). Relationship satisfaction is extremely important to theorists and researchers, because it provides them with an operating tool to scrutinize both a relationship partner and her or his relationship (Hendrick, 1998). It allows researchers to measure partners' feelings about her or his relationship.

This construct has been studied across various types of relationships, and has provided the opportunity to explore various predictions of relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction helped challenge theories to better understand the complexities of this variable to determine what relationship phenomena can best predict a partners' satisfaction within her or his relationship. In order to obtain a better understanding of relationship satisfaction, we must examine its origin.

For decades, social scientist and theorists have studied close relationships to understand further the processes and cycles that partners of married and dating couples undergo (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986). Although a majority of early research focused on marital relationships, theorists realized the importance of expanding literature beyond married couples by studying other types of committed relationships. An array of theories originating from multiple disciplines has been forwarded to explain the phenomena of satisfaction in close relationships. The most notable of these theories are interdependence theory, social exchange theory, and equity theory. They have served as the primary theoretical frameworks for studying the complexities of interpersonal communication, close relationships and more relevant to this study, relationships that are romantic in nature (Dainton, 2000).

Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) interdependence theory states that relational outcomes are dependent upon the rewards and costs that relational partners experience. Concerning relationship satisfaction, this theory notes that satisfaction alone doesn't account for the stability of relationships. It suggests that relational stability can be obtained if outcomes meet or exceed any consideration of alternatives to that current relationship (Sacher & Fine, 1996). Relational stability will be unlikely if outcomes happen to fall below expectations and or alternatives. Furthermore, the theory states that through interaction and interdependence between partners the extent to which an individual is satisfied with the relationship depends on the extent that perceived rewards are higher than the perceived costs are for being in the relationship (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1994).



Both grounded in interdependence theory, social exchange and equity theory proposes that relationships are maintained by the provision of rewards from both partners (Argyle & Furnam 1983; Dainton, 2000). This theory posits that any physical, social, or psychological pleasure is classified as a reward, and that a cost is classified as anything a person dislikes, a negative reward, or an opportunity cost (Emmerson, 1976).

The basic principles of social exchange theory suggest that people choose to partake in a particular relationship because of the relationship's ability to provide a satisfactory level of outcomes (Sabatelli, 1988). Homan's (1958) defined social exchange as the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons. In other words he tried to explain social behavior as an exchange by stating that one's behavior reinforced the behavior of the other, and in turn the behavior of the other reinforces the behavior of the initiator (Homans, 1958). The satisfactory level of outcomes reflects a formula to explain rewards derived from the relationship minus the costs of participating in the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Blau (1968) defined social exchange as the voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the expectation of what is being returned and vice versa.

In addition to the literature above, Upshaw (1967) suggested that being evaluated by the person's expectation (also known as the Comparison Level [CL] in a relationship), is based on normative and cognitive orientations, and represents the expectations for outcomes that a person may feel are realistically obtainable from a relationship. The relationship between the two orientations suggests that a person may

have different levels of comparing her or his current relationship with societal relationship norms and expectations derived from their personal experience. This becomes of great importance in a relationship because the comparison level construct plays an essential role in the evaluation of relationship outcomes. Subsequently, the comparison can influence the level of satisfaction derived from the relationship.

An offspring to social exchange theory, John Stacy Adam's (1966) equity theory helps to explain certain factors of relationship satisfaction. It offers a few modifications that have great potential to understanding relationship maintenance and outcomes in intimate relationships. It was created to explain relationship satisfaction in terms of perceptions of fair and unfair distributions of resources within interpersonal relationships (Walster, Traupmann, & Walster, 1978). With respect to relationship satisfaction, Adams's (1966) equity theory suggests that individuals who feel under-benefited –and even over-benefited –will experience distress. This feeling of distress in the relationship will serve as a motive to bring equity into the relationship (Adams, 1966). Although this theory is rooted in interdependence theory, the difference between interdependence theory, social exchange theory, and equity theory is that equity theory focuses on fair distribution of benefits. That is, a person does not have to receive the equal amount of benefits in order to be satisfied. The theory suggests that as long as the contributions and benefits in the relationship are comparable in ratio, some level of relational satisfaction should be obtained (Adams, 1966; Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2011). It consists of four propositions:

1. Individuals seek to maximize their outcomes (where outcomes are defined as rewards minus costs, similar to social exchange theory).

2. Groups can maximize collective rewards by developing accepted systems for equitably apportioning rewards and costs among members. Systems of equity will evolve within groups, and members will attempt to induce other members to accept and adhere to these systems. The only way groups can induce members to equitably behave is by making it more profitable to behave equitably than inequitably. Thus, groups will generally reward members who treat others equitably and generally punish (increase the cost for) members who treat others inequitably.
3. When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress individuals feel. According to equity theory, both the person who gets “too much” and the person who gets “too little” will feel distressed. The person who gets too much may feel guilt or shame. The person who gets too little may feel angry or humiliated.
4. Individuals who perceive that they are in an inequitable relationship attempt to eliminate their distress by restoring equity. The greater the inequity, the more distress people feel and the more they try to restore equity. (Walster, Traupmann & Walster, 1978)

Thus, Walster, Traupmann and Walster (1978) conceived that inequity in relationships can be distressful, but inequity even more distressing to the under-benefited individuals (this occurs when perceived contributions outweigh perceived benefits) than to over-benefited individuals (occurs when perceived benefits outweigh perceived contributions). In terms of close relationships, one may assume that partners

should be more comfortable when they feel they are getting what they deserve, and in turn, that the perceived contributions put into the relationship reflect the benefits they receive (Matthew & Clark, 1982). Perceived contributions can include both tangible and intangible things such as material items, time invested, and appropriate self-disclosure. Therefore, couples that experienced equity tend to be more satisfied with their relationship (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2011).

Taking from the principles of the three theories discussed above, one could surmise that when rewards exceed the costs in a relationship, satisfaction levels increase. Conversely, when costs exceed rewards, satisfaction levels decrease. These deltas would suggest that people choose to participate in a particular relationship because of the relationship's ability to provide satisfactory levels of outcome (Sabatelli, 1988). Despite the many differences in perspectives regarding social behavior and the orientations of reward-costs and contribution-benefits, each theory recognizes that depending on the outcomes some level of satisfactory-affect occurs.

Although each theory has its distinctive theoretical suggestions, three emphasize the basic and inherent needs that people strive to fulfill. These theories help us understand that close relationships are comprised of partners who, through their individual interpretive lens, co-construct various meanings that can be arbitrary, abstract, and ambiguous. Because our perceptions and personal experiences in committed relationships are in constant tension with the relational norms that society creates, we should understand that these constructed relationship meanings are perceptually subjective. According to Hendrick, Dicke, and Hendrick (1998) this subjective value is typically referred to as relationship satisfaction.

In attempts to study this relationship phenomenon, many social scientists conducted research dedicated to exploring multiple predictors of relationship satisfaction such as; relationship maintenance, stability, and dissolution regarding marital couples. As Hendrick et al. (1998) would describe it; scholars have taken a ‘phenomenological’ approach to better understand relationship satisfaction. In other words it is an assumption that in close relationships both the partner’s explicit behavior and one’s perception of the partner’s overt behavior may directly affect the individual’s relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998). This raises a question of what influences one’s perception of relationship satisfaction. Researchers have examined a host of constructs and their relationship with relationship satisfaction such as conflict resolution, coping strategies, love attitudes, and attachment styles.

Strong predictors of relationship satisfaction have been reported including the relationship processes of love attitudes, empathy, self-disclosure, and relational competence. All may encompass some aspect of communication skills. Therefore it can be assumed that effective communication skills (both verbal and nonverbal) are linked to relationship satisfaction not only through ongoing interaction, but that these interactions may be shaped by the affecting perceptions of the partner in the relationship (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998). One contribution of the present study in accurately evaluating relationship satisfaction is to assess how effective a person is, and how effective her or his partner is perceived to be. Although this seems easy to study, it poses the question of what comes first, self-perception or partner perception? Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick (1998) claim that:

*“Self-perceptions generally reflect our construal of the world around us, including perceptions of other people, perhaps especially of our relationship partners. Thus in general, one would expect self-perceptions to influence perceptions of partner more than one’s perceptions of the partner might influence one’s own self perceptions.”*  
(138).

Seemingly, one’s perception of the relationship partner might influence self-satisfaction more than the actual behavior of one’s partner (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998). Through ongoing interaction, both partners tend to influence the other in a cyclical pattern. Perspective-taking of social skills may relate to how relationship satisfaction is perceived in dating couples. This may be caused by partners evaluating relationship satisfaction based on their ideal expectations of the relationship and partner, and the reality of the current state their relationship is in. Satisfaction is then dependent on how successfully that person’s needs are met.

### **Social Skills and Relationship Satisfaction**

In exploring social skills and relationship satisfaction, it is evidenced that communication is the substance of our relationships. Without communication there is no relationship (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2011). Thus, the quality of our communication can be seen as a determinant of the outcome of our relationship. One’s ability to effectively send and receive messages both verbally and nonverbally can significantly affect the maintenance, or possible dissolution, of a relationship in which the communication occurs; which may produce varying levels of relationship satisfaction. Also, an individual’s perception of the others’ social skills may greatly influence levels of relationship satisfaction; suggesting a possibility that people evaluate themselves and her or his partners’ social skills differently. Although

subjective in nature, our interpretations influence our perceptions, which in turn create our social realities. How pleasant or desirable our social realities are, affect the satisfaction in an individual's close relationship.

Social skills and relationship satisfaction have been studied in similar fields, measured using different instruments, which continue to contribute to the wealth of multidisciplinary literature on both constructs. However, the more social skills and relationship satisfaction is examined, the more researchers realize the magnitude of these concepts. The present study aims to contribute to the literature on interpersonal communication, more specifically, social skills and relationship satisfaction in dating couples.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Miczo's (2001) study focused on the connection between social skills and relationship satisfaction. This study examined participants' perception of their own social skills, their partners' reported assessment of the participants' social skills, as well as both parties' relational satisfaction. For this study, Miczo (2001) had participants complete the Interpersonal Perception Task, the emotional expressivity and social expressivity subscales of the Social Skills Inventory, the Conversational Skills Ratings Scale, and the Relationship Assessment Scale. He predicted that participants' social skills would be positively related to both their own and their partners' relationship satisfaction.

His hypotheses suggested that people who are perceived as more socially skilled are expected to be happier in their relationships. Furthermore, that their partners are also expected to be more satisfied when they are in a relationship with a socially

skilled partner. However, Miczo's (2001) results did not support the relationship between social skills and relational satisfaction. He found that respondents' self-reported social skills did not contribute significantly to participants' or partners' relationship satisfaction.

Miczo's research provides the foundation for the present study. The current study explores the complexities of social skills and relationship satisfaction by examining both partners' perceptions. How do self-perceptions and other-perceptions of social skills influence relationship satisfaction? Is it possible that partners' assessments may be more important than self-assessments in determining relationship satisfaction?

Therefore, this study replicates and extends research by Miczo (2001) on the association between social skills and relationship satisfaction. This study examined the independent variable of social skills, and how social skills impacted the dependent variable of relationship satisfaction in dating couples. For this study, respondents completed the emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity and social sensitivity subscales of the Social Skills Inventory and the Relationship Assessment Scale. Although the emotional expressivity and social expressivity subscales were used to measure how respondents encode messages, emotional sensitivity and social sensitivity subscales were also employed to assess how effective respondents are at decoding emotional and social cues.

Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

- H1a: Participants' social skills will be associated positively with their own relational satisfaction.
- H1b: Participants' social skills will be associated positively with partners' satisfaction with the relationship.



H2a: Partners' social skills will be associated positively with their own relational satisfaction.

H2b: Partners' social skills will be associated positively with their partners' (the participant) satisfaction with the relationship.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Research Design**

Survey research is the most appropriate method design to conduct this study. This study used both self-report and other-report questionnaires to establish the perceptions of the participant and partner. The respondents for this study were required to be in a dating relationship, and to be at least 18 years of age. No other specified traits were necessary to be eligible for this study. A multiple regression correlation design was utilized to assess the independent variables of social skills (emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, and social sensitivity) and the dependent variable, relationship satisfaction.

Social skills was operationally defined by how subjects scored on the self-report Social Skills Inventory (SSI), which is a 90 item, 5-point likert scale (Riggio, 2003). The SSI measures six domains using six subscales and provides a total score to reflect a global level of social skill indicative of overall social competence or social intelligence (Riggio, 1989). The SSI reflects respondents' self-awareness of how they approach social interaction, manage relationships, and how they are perceived by others (Riggio, 2003). However, in this study only four subscales were used. The subscales used are emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, and social sensitivity. These particular subscales reflect respondents' ability to encode and decode emotional and social cues. The Interpersonal Perception Task (IPT) and Conversational Skills Rating scale (CSRS) that Miczo employed in his study were

excluded and replaced by the emotional sensitivity and social sensitivity subscales because neither contributed as significant predictors of relationship satisfaction.

Relationship satisfaction (dependent variable) was defined operationally by how respondents scored on Hendrick's (1998) relationship assessment scale (RAS) which is a 7-item measure. The RAS assesses a variety of relationships ranging from marital to non-marital couples (Hendrick, 1998).

### **Participants**

Convenience sampling was used for this study. Undergraduate students at the University of Rhode Island (URI) who were currently enrolled in sections of Communication Fundamentals (COM FUN) courses that took part in this study were labeled as "participant(s)". As part of the study, participants were asked to recruit their dating partner. Their dating partners will be referred to as "partner(s)" hereafter. The label "respondent(s)" is used when referring to both the participant and partner.

Five hundred questionnaire packets were administered to 250 couples. A total of 354 respondents completed and returned questionnaires. The 354 respondents consisted of 178 females and 176 males. This yielded a sample consisting of 177 dating couples. Although sexual orientation was not a variable in this study, it is interesting to note that of the 177 dating couples studied; only nine identified as homosexual dating couples (same sex female = 5; male = 4).

Most respondents identified themselves racially as White with 78.5% of sample population. Hispanics represented 9.0%, followed by Asian-Americans at 5.1%, 2.5% African-American, 1.4% identified as "Other", and .6% identified as Native American.

39.5% of the sample population, 140 respondents were 18 years old. The youngest respondent was 18 years old, and the oldest was 28.

Respondents were asked to describe their relationship history, relationship status, time in the relationship, and if sexually active with their partner. The relationship history question revealed 61.3% of the sample reported having between one to three partners in their life, had 22.9% with four to five partners, 7.3% with six to nine partners, and 4.8% had ten or more partners. The distribution of relationship status showed that 76.3% of respondents were only dating the person in this study, while 16.7% were dating this person and others (i.e. multiple romantic partners). Data on duration of the relationship indicated that 23.4% had been dating for one to three months, 23.2% for three and a half to six months, 12.4% for six and a half to nine months, 14.1% for nine and a half months to one year, and 24.9% for 1.5 or more years. Last, frequencies for sexual activity indicated that 79.7% reported as sexually active with their partner, and 17.8% reported not sexually active in their relationships.

## **Instruments**

### **Social Skills Inventory**

The instruments used for measuring social skills are Riggio's (1989) self-report and other-report measures known as the Social Skills Inventory (SSI). The SSI assesses the basic social skills that we as communicators use. It was created as an attempt to develop a general framework for understanding multiple dimensions of social skill and to report on the construction of a self-report scale or assessment tool to measure those dimensions (Riggio, 1986). The SSI reflects our ability to communicate effectively, and how skillful we are at relating to others. Riggio (1989) designed the

SSI to measure the perception of social behavior, and not the behavior itself (Riggio & Carney, 2003).

The original SSI has been revised since its debut in 1986 (Riggio, 1989). The development of the SSI originates from earlier works from social psychologists with particular interest in measuring nonverbal skills. Riggio's SSI was developed and modified based on the works of Rosenthal et al. (1979) Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity (PONS; Rosenthal et. al 1979) scale, Buck's (1976, 1983) Communication of Affect Receiving Ability Test (CARAT; Buck, 1976, 1983), Friedman's (1980) Affective Communication Test (ACT; Friedman et. al., 1980), and Snyder's (1974) Self-Monitoring Scale (SMS; Snyder, 1974). Each of these instruments attempted to measure a single dimension of communication skill. The original SSI consisted of seven dimensions (a seventh was Social Manipulation) that stemmed from two domains (emotional and social); three basic areas (expressivity, sensitivity, and control); and used a 105-item self-report questionnaire, with 15 items in each of the seven social skill subscales (Riggio, 1986). The modern SSI measures the three basic area skill sets in the two domains that create the six subscales of social skills. The subscales are: *Emotional Expressivity*, *Emotional Sensitivity*, *Emotional Control*, *Social Expressivity*, *Social Sensitivity*, and *Social Control*.

The emotional domain refers to felt emotion states and cues (Riggio, 1986). The *emotional* domain, nonverbal in nature, includes emotions pertaining to or involving attitudes and dominance (Riggio, 1989). Riggio (1989) states that the social domain is verbal in nature and deals with conversations, fluency, may include cues of engagement and initiative (Riggio, 1986). *Emotional expressivity* subscale measures

one's ability to communicate nonverbally, particularly in sending emotional messages, nonverbal expressions of attitudes, dominance, and interpersonal orientation (Riggio, 1986). *Emotional sensitivity* measures the ability to receive, interpret, and understand the nonverbal communication of others (Riggio, 1986). *Emotional Control* measures the ability to regulate one's own emotional and nonverbal displays, with the ability to convey particular emotional cues (Riggio, 1986). These three subscales combined measure the domain of emotional intelligence. *Social expressivity* assesses an individual's skill in verbal expression and the ability to engage others in social discourse (Riggio, 1986, 1989). *Social sensitivity* measures the ability to interpret the verbal communication of others and assessing an individual's sensitivity to understanding societal norms governing social behavior (Riggio, 1989; Riggio & Carney, 2003). Last, *social control* assesses skills in role-playing and self-presentation in social context (Riggio, 1989). The subscales combined assess the domain of social intelligence.

The original SSI and modern SSI differ in that the modern inventory consists of the first six dimensions mentioned above with 15 items in each of the six social skills subscales (Riggio, 1989). The modern SSI is a 90-item self-report-inventory specifically designed to measure social-emotional communications skills (Riggio, 1989). This 90-item measure concerns how respondents feel their skill level is emotionally and socially (Riggio, 1989). Each respondent is asked to respond to 15 questions per subscale using a 5-point likert scale ranging from "not at all true of me" to "very true of me" (Riggio, 1986, 1989).

The reliability of SSI shows that each scale of the SSI appears adequate for internal consistency (Riggio, 1989). The internal consistency of emotional expressivity and emotional sensitivity are the only scales that rate .62 and .67 for males, which marks low on the average total range (.62-.87) of the six subscales (Riggio, 1989). The test-retest reliability which was based on a two week interval generated scores that ranged from .81 to .96 for the individual scales, with the reliability of the total SSI being .94 (Riggio, 1989). These coefficient scores are strong, and demonstrate high internal consistency; and, they compare favorably to other social skills instruments (Riggio, 1986, 1989). However, with respect to the inter-correlation of the SSI subscales, social sensitivity and emotional expressivity have no meaningful relationship. So, with regard to the internal structure and validity of the SSI, the only weak relationship lies between the subscales; the others demonstrate positive correlations. Despite the differences in scores and correlations between other social skills instruments and within its own structure, the SSI scores high enough to be considered a strong and stable instrument. In this study emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, and social sensitivity were the four subscales used.

### **Relational Assessment Scale**

Hendrick's (1998) Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) was used to measure relationship satisfaction. It was developed as a global instrument to measure satisfaction applicable to many types of close relationships (Hendrick, 1988, 1998). Hendrick (1981) created the first version of the RAS which was a 5-item measure of marital satisfaction (Hendrick, 1981). It included items of other measures from the

earlier works of Manson and Lerner's (1962) Marriage Adjustment Inventory (MAS), Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), Snyder's (1979) Marriage Satisfaction Inventory (MSI), and Schumm's et al. (1986) 3-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS).

The modern RAS is a 7-item likert scale that assesses marital and other types of close relationships (Hendrick, 1998). It was created to measure relationship satisfaction on a global scale. It assesses general satisfaction, how well the partner meets one's needs, how well the relationship compares to others, regrets about the relationship, how well one's expectations have been met, love for partner, and problems in the relationship (Hendrick, 1998).

The validity and reliability of the RAS has been tested twice, once in 1988 and again in 1998. The RAS has strong validity in addition to correlating with the MAS, DAS, MSI, and KMSS (Hendrick, 1988) also found a correlation to the Love Attitudes Scale (LAS). To further confirm the validity of the RAS, the instrument was administered to participants in a study that consisted of 65 university undergraduates (23 men, 42 women) in the United States enrolled in either a research methods or statistics class during class time (Hendrick, 1998). It was then re-administered 6-7 weeks later (during class) and scored .85. This score demonstrates that the RAS scores and correlates relatively high with a variety of instruments that measure various types of satisfaction in different types of close relationships. Therefore, it serves as the most suitable and consistent (in terms of internal reliability) of instruments for the present study.



## **Procedures**

### **Material Distribution and Data Collection**

Participants were recruited from URI COM FUN courses in coordination with instructors, where students were invited to participate in the study. Due to COM FUN offering the most course sections to URI students, recruiting participants in these sections would yield a more diverse sample. Participants in the study were offered extra credit to maximize the number of couples needed to conduct the study. A number and letter coding system was implemented to represent each couple (e.g. 1A and 1B, 2A and 2B). As noted earlier in the *Participant* section, undergraduate students enrolled in the course were labeled as “participant” and their dating partners as “partner.” Participants completed questionnaire packets coded with the letter A. Partners completed the questionnaire coded with the letter B. The number served as a coding system to conceal the identity of the respondents. The letter system served as an identifier to distinguish which subject was the participant or the partner. Both the participant and partner questionnaire packet consisted of a consent form, the five measures being used in this study, and demographic questions concerning gender, age, race, relational history, relationship status, time in the relationship, and sexual activity. The partner questionnaire packet explained that the partner could decide if she or he wanted to complete the study. Additional instructions on how to fill out the questionnaire were included in the questionnaire packet, instructing her or him to seal it in order to ensure privacy once it was completed.

Questionnaire packets were administered to all participants, and completed on a volunteer basis. Students who were not eligible to participate due to being underage, having no relationship status or choosing not to participate, were offered an alternative

but equivalent extra credit assignment. Students interested and eligible to participate in the study were asked to recruit their partners to participate in the study, and were given the corresponding questionnaire packets to take to their partner. Participants completed their questionnaires in class to increase the return rate. There was no specific time limit to complete the questionnaire. However, an oral disclaimer for participants and a written disclaimer for partners suggested the questionnaire as something they should complete quickly; using the rating that first came to mind. The participant was instructed to return the partner's sealed and completed questionnaire to her or his instructor at the next class session. The purpose for having respondents fill out the survey independently was to eliminate the influence on responses from each other, ensure privacy, and not cause undue stress in the relationship.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collected for this study was analyzed using a multiple regression correlation design to assess the relationship between the social skills independent variables; emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, social sensitivity, and the dependent relationship satisfaction variable. Multiple regression was the appropriate correlation design to use for this study because it distinguished which subscales were significant predictors of relationship satisfaction. Overall, social skills scores were determined for both the participant and the partner by summing the scores of the four subscales. Relationship satisfaction scores for the participant and the partner were determined by summing the scores of the seven items on the relational assessment scale.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Hypothesis 1a

Hypothesis 1a stated that participants' social skills would be associated positively with their own relational satisfaction. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the relationship between the dependent variable, relationship satisfaction and the four independent variables measuring social skills. The four self-assessments of social skills include: emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, and social sensitivity. A significant regression equation was found for participant relationship satisfaction and participant social skills ( $R^2 = .07$ ,  $F(4,169) = 3.37$ ,  $p = .011$ ). The sample multiple correlation coefficient was  $.27$ , indicating that approximately 7% of the variance of participant relationship satisfaction in this sample can be explained by social skills. On page 38, Table 1 reports that only emotional expressivity was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). Emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, and social sensitivity did not contribute to the multiple regression model. Data results supported hypothesis 1a.

#### Hypothesis 1b

Hypothesis 1b predicted that participants' social skills would be associated positively with their partners' relationship satisfaction. Partner relationship satisfaction was the dependent variable and participant's self-assessment of the social skills predictor variables –emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, and social sensitivity were the independent variables. A multiple linear

regression was calculated and the regression equation was not significant ( $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(4,165) = 1.47$ ,  $p = .212$ ). Therefore hypothesis 1b was not supported.

#### Hypothesis 2a

Hypothesis 2a stated that partners' social skills would be associated positively with their own relationship satisfaction. Partner relationship satisfaction was the dependent variable and the predictor variables were partner self-assessment of their social skills: emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, and social sensitivity. A multiple regression was calculated to test their contribution to the dependent variable, and resulted in a significant regression coefficient ( $R^2 = .13$ ,  $F(4,165) = 5.88$ ,  $p = .000$ ). As reported in Table 2 on page 38, partners' emotional expressivity and emotional sensitivity were significant; indicating that partners' relationship satisfaction is positively and significantly related to their assessment of their emotional expressivity and emotional sensitivity. The sample multiple correlation coefficient was .35, suggesting that approximately 13% of the variance of partners' relationship satisfaction is being explained by social skills. The partners' assessment of their own social expressivity and social sensitivity did not contribute to the multiple regression model. Data results thus supported hypothesis 2a.

#### Hypothesis 2b

Hypothesis 2b stated that partners' social skills would be associated positively with participants' (their partner) relationship satisfaction. Participants' relationship satisfaction is the dependent variable and the predictor variables are partners' self-assessment of their own social skills: emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, social expressivity, and social sensitivity. A multiple linear regression was run and

did not produce a significant regression equation ( $R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(4, 169) = .982$ ,  $p = .419$ ).

Therefore, hypothesis 2b was not supported.

Table 1.Hypothesis 1a Reports Beta Scores	
Participant Self-Report of Relationship Satisfaction	
Social Skills	Beta Scores
Emotional Expressivity	.23*
Emotional Sensitivity	.10
Social Expressivity	.01
Social Sensitivity	-.05

\* $p < .05$

Table 2. Hypothesis 2a Reports Beta Scores	
Partner Self-Report of Relationship Satisfaction	
Social Skills	Beta Scores
Emotional Expressivity	.25*
Emotional Sensitivity	.32*
Social Expressivity	-.11
Social Sensitivity	-.13

\* $p < .05$

Additional analyses examined couple satisfaction and self and other reports of social skills. Overall, participants reported a moderate level of relationship satisfaction ( $M = 26.4$ ), similar to partners who also reported a moderate level of relationship satisfaction ( $M = 27.7$ ).

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients were computed to assess the relationship between participants' self-reports of their relationship satisfaction and partners' self-reports of their relationship satisfaction. There was a moderate positive correlation between the two variables ( $r(169) = .40, p < .001$ ), indicating a significant relationship.

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients were computed to assess the relationship between self-report and other-report of social skills. A weak positive correlation was found for participants' self-reports of their social skills and partners' assessment of participants' (their partner) social skills ( $r(151) = .30, p < .001$ ). Interestingly, there was a moderate positive correlation between partners' self-report of their social skills and participants' assessment of partners' social skills, ( $r(155) = .46, p < .001$ ). Therefore, partner's assessment of the participant's social skills, reflects to some extent the participant's self-assessment of her or his own social skills.

Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients were computed to assess the relationship between respondents' sexual activity and relationship satisfaction. Data did not reveal a significant correlation between the two variables ( $r(337) = -.041, p = .455$ ).

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Previous research has established that there is a relationship between socially skilled individuals and relationship satisfaction. However, assessing the influence that partner perception of social skills has on relationship satisfaction needs to be investigated further. This study sought to further understand the relationship between both relational partners' perceptions of social skills and the relationship satisfaction of the dating couples. Discussion of the results and implications of the study, and the limitations, and directions for future research are to follow.

This study used self-report surveys to collect the perception of respondents' social skills, their partners' social skills, and their relationship satisfaction. Multiple regression analysis and Pearson Product-Moment Correlations were used to analyze the data. Although only two hypotheses were supported, the results indicated an interesting relationship between social skills and relationship satisfaction that suggest further research.

Hypotheses 1a and 2a examined the association between a respondents' relationship satisfaction and perceptions of their own social skills. Data analysis presented a significant positive relationship between the two variables. These results support the findings in Miczo's (2001) study that suggest that the more skilled individuals believe they are socially, the more satisfied they are in their relationship. Although hypothesis 1a and 2a were supported, the results revealed a nuance between

the two hypotheses. In hypothesis 1a, emotional expressivity was the only significant social skills variable. This suggests that participants skilled at expressing felt emotional states experience higher relationship satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2a revealed emotional expressivity and emotional sensitivity as the significant social skills variables influencing relationship satisfaction; indicating that when partners are skilled at emotional expressiveness and being emotionally sensitive, they experience greater relationship satisfaction. This suggests that partners felt more satisfied in their relationship when they believed they were not only able to express their emotions successfully but were successful at being attentive to the other person's subtle emotional cues. Burgoon and Bacue (2003) state that people who are socially skilled are more effective at encoding emotional cues which make it easier for others to decode emotional cues. Furthermore, people skilled in emotional expressiveness are able to establish and maintain satisfaction in close relationships (2003). Interestingly, neither the participants' nor partners' skill in social expressivity and social sensitivity related to relationship satisfaction. Data analysis suggests that participants' own social ability to engage in social interaction and to understand the social behavior of their partners' has no effect on the perception of relationship satisfaction. Data show that one's emotional expressivity is pivotal to maintaining one's satisfaction in relationships.

Hypotheses 1b and 2b examined the association between respondents' relationship satisfaction and perception of their partners' social skills. Data analysis reported no significant relationship between the two variables. Although disappointed that hypothesis 1b and 2b were not supported, the results are similar to the findings



reported in Miczo's (2001) study. The results of hypothesis 1b and 2b indicate that participant and partner relationship satisfaction were not significantly influenced by the other person's social skills level. These findings suggest an interesting commentary on romantic relationships. Contrary to the assumption that our significant other's social skills play a major role in our own relationship satisfaction, these results do not confirm this assumption. The results of this study only support the notion that how we assess our own social skills impacts our satisfaction with the relationship.

Due to these findings, additional analyses were employed to understand better the relationship between social skills and relationship satisfaction in dating couples. Utilizing correlations, participant and partner relationship satisfaction was examined. Data yielded a moderate positive relationship between social skills and relationship satisfaction ( $p = .40$ ).

Frequency data may have possible explanations for how couples are both relatively satisfied with their romantic relationship. First, of the 354 respondents, 39.5% were 18 years of age followed by 29.4% reporting being 19 years old, for a total of 68.9% of the sample population. Therefore, more than two-thirds of the sample was young adults. Having such a young population might be one way to explain the results. Additionally, more than two-thirds of the respondents reported having one to three dating partners in their relationship history. Inexperience in dating may be considered to speculate that a person may lack the ability to identify expectations that they feel they need or have very basic expectations to be fulfilled in order to ensure higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Even though the results showed moderate levels of relationship satisfaction, 39% of the respondents reported

being in stable relationships over one year. These data suggest that college students under 20 tend to be more satisfied in their relationships than older college students, because their dating goals differ based on age and dating experience (Zimmer-Gembeck & Petherick, 2006). Inexperience in dating does not mean that younger college students purposely set goals for relationship dissolution, but that they set goals that are more self-gratifying, while older college students tend to form steady romantic relationships that match their long term dating goals, and hence make their relationships more satisfying (Zimmer-Gebeck & Petherick, 2006). This information implies that there are other predictors of relationship satisfaction other than age and relationship history.

A second correlation between self and other reports of social skills was also discovered. Surprisingly, a weak positive relationship was found ( $r = .30$ ). This could be that respondents may have an inflated sense of self, yet a modest rating of their partner. That is, self-bias may influence assessing one's own social skill by slightly exaggerating our social skill ability. However, when assessing other's social skills, there is a tendency to be more critical. This may reflect the 46.6% of respondents reporting being in their relationship for six months or less at the time of this study. The duration of time spent for a relationship may affect the ability a person has when assessing their partner's social skill. This could mean that the length of a relationship may determine the skill level a person has in successfully interpreting their partner's communication. This suggests that the less time spent in the relationship, the less accurately a person can decipher their partner's social skill. Consequently, it is

possible that self-reported social skills may not be as relevant as other-reported social skills. Miczo (2001) concluded this in his study as well.

A third correlation was conducted between the couples reported sexual activity variable and respondents' relationship satisfaction. Data revealed that 79.7% of the sample population reported being sexually active with their partner. The high percentage of sexual activity reported by respondents was not correlated with relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.041$ ). Interestingly, these data show that sexual activity has no influence on relationship satisfaction. A possible explanation of this lack of association could be the age of the respondents, and how they value sexual intimacy. Importance of sexual intimacy may be indicative of the high percentages of the young and inexperienced respondents in this study.

Although this study uncovered new and interesting factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction, the relationship between social skills and relationship satisfaction is relatively moderate. The next section discusses the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

### **Limitations & Directions for Future Research**

The first limitation influencing the results of this study centers on the use of self-report instruments. Employing self-report measures can potentially lead to data that is bias and unreliable. Although self-interpretation and perception is valuable, respondents may lack the introspective knowledge and awareness to answer the questions accurately. This means that although a respondent may think they are being honest, how they view themselves may be inaccurate and skewed from their actual behavior. Also, respondents' responses can be biased depending on the question being asked. They may have a natural tendency to respond in a certain way regardless of

what the question is attempting to assess. Additionally, research relies on the honesty of its respondents. Even though questionnaires were anonymous, certain questions may have made them feel uncomfortable causing them to answer inaccurately. For example, the sexual activity question may have made respondents insecure or uncomfortable. While the questionnaires were anonymous respondents can still be concerned with how they appear. Self-serving bias suggests that respondents will answer questions in the way they deem socially appropriate rather than answering honestly. Despite the potential issues in using self-report information, the instruments used in this study are reliable. However, using other-report measures may be a more accurate predictor of relationship satisfaction.

Another study limitation is a product of the type of sample that was used. Convenient sampling was the technique used to recruit participants. Participants were recruited from Communication Fundamentals (COM FUN), an undergraduate course that offers the largest number of sections at the University of Rhode Island. Frequency data shows that the sample consisted of primarily 18 and 19 year olds. The lack of age range may have been a factor in dating experience and its impact on relationship satisfaction and the ability to accurately assess other's social skills. Data indicated that there may be an association between age and relationship maturity whether that includes dating experience and or length of current dating relationship. Including an older and more relationally experienced population might better illuminate the role of social skills in determining relationship satisfaction. This shows that the sample is not representative of the entire population. A direct consequence of this is having skewed results. When there is a sample bias, it limits generalization,

therefore making inferences about an entire population. This could mean that there is a possibility that if the current study were replicated, significant differences in results may occur. Future research could use a stratified sampling method to target specific subgroups of a population.

A third limitation of this study deals with the data collection procedure. It was necessary to collect the perceptions of both members of the relationship, but because participants were asked to recruit their partners, collecting data from the participant's partner was difficult to monitor. Participants were asked to deliver and collect their partner's questionnaire packet. Partners were not supervised when collecting the questionnaire packets so there was a risk of participants completing their partner's questionnaire and providing inaccurate information. Also, this limitation questions partners' motivation for completing the questionnaire. That is, because there was no incentive for partners to participate in this study, it is difficult to ascertain their motive for completing the questionnaire. This may explain the substantial amount of data missing from partner questionnaires, rendering a portion of the couple data useless. Therefore, requiring participants to invite their partner to fill out the questionnaire simultaneously, in different rooms, would allow for a more controlled environment.

A final limitation of the study deals with the size of the sample. A sample size of 177 couples brings into question the statistical power of the sample. Although statistical significance was found between social skills and relationship satisfaction, the relationships between the two variables were relatively moderate. A correlation of .40 is on the cusp of being a more modest and robust correlation. A larger sample size

could have increased the statistical significance of the association between relationship satisfaction and social skills, strengthening the results of this study.

Other suggestions for furthering research on the association between social skills and relationship satisfaction should consider the following: dating goals, emotional and social control subscales of the SSI, individual/gender differences in social skills, narcissism, and/or monogamy.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to advance the literature and discussion of social skills and relationship satisfaction. The researcher assessed the relational satisfaction and perceptions of the target person's social skills from the perspective of both members of the relationship. His results confirmed that individuals who are or perceive themselves to be socially skilled are more likely to be satisfied in their relationship. However, the data indicated that how an individual's social skills are perceived by their partner has minimal to no influence on their partner's satisfaction with the relationship.

Significant, yet moderate, relationships were found between respondents' assessment of their social skills and their relational satisfaction. Although additional analyses yielded other moderate relationships that may influence relationship satisfaction, it is difficult to determine from this data what variables would strengthen the relationship between these two variables. While the research indicates a relationship between the variables, the results in this study question whose social skills play a role in determining relationship satisfaction –the individual or her or his partner.

## APPENDICES

Appendix A  
*Social Skills Inventory*  
Riggio (1986, 1989, 2003)

<b>SECTION B: YOUR ASSESSMENT OF YOUR SOCIAL SKILLS</b>
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**Directions:** For **Section A** there are **sixty (60)** statements that indicate an attitude or behavior that may or may not be characteristic or descriptive of you. Read each statement carefully. Then, using the scale shown below, decide which response will most accurately reflect your answer and **write** the number in the direct left blank space of the statement.

Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. Mark only one response for each statement. It is important to try to respond to every statement.

**1** = Not At All Like Me **2** = A Little Like Me **3** = Like Me **4** = Very Much Like Me  
**5** = Exactly Like Me

- \_\_\_ 1. It is difficult for others to know when I am sad or depressed.
- \_\_\_ 2. When people are speaking, I spend as much time watching their movements as I do listening to them.
- \_\_\_ 3. I enjoy giving parties.
- \_\_\_ 4. Criticism or scolding rarely makes me feel uncomfortable.
- \_\_\_ 5. I talk faster than most people.
- \_\_\_ 6. Few people are as sensitive and understanding as I am.
- \_\_\_ 7. It takes people quite a while to get to know me well.
- \_\_\_ 8. My greatest source of pleasure and pain is other people.
- \_\_\_ 9. When depressed, I tend to make those around me depressed also.
- \_\_\_ 10. At parties, I can immediately tell when someone is interested in me.
- \_\_\_ 11. I love to socialize.
- \_\_\_ 12. I would much rather take part in a political discussion than to observe and analyze what the participants are saying.

- \_\_\_13. I have been told that I have expressive eyes.
- \_\_\_14. I am interested in knowing what makes people tick.
- \_\_\_15. I prefer jobs that require working with a large number of people.
- \_\_\_16. I am greatly influenced by the moods of those around me.
- \_\_\_17. I usually feel uncomfortable touching other people.
- \_\_\_18. I can easily tell what a person's character is by watching his or her interactions with others.
- \_\_\_19. I always mingle at parties.
- \_\_\_20. There are certain situations in which I find myself worrying about whether I am doing or saying the right things.
- \_\_\_21. I often laugh out loud.
- \_\_\_22. I always seem to know what peoples' true feelings are no matter how hard they try to conceal them.
- \_\_\_23. I usually take the initiative to introduce myself to strangers.
- \_\_\_24. Sometimes I think that I take things other people say to me too personally.
- \_\_\_25. Sometimes I have trouble making my friends and family realize just how angry or upset I am with them.
- \_\_\_26. I can accurately tell what a person's character is upon first meeting him or her.
- \_\_\_27. I am usually the one to initiate conversations.
- \_\_\_28. What others think about my actions is of little or no consequence to me.
- \_\_\_29. My facial expression is generally neutral.
- \_\_\_30. One of my greatest pleasures in life is being with other people.
- \_\_\_31. When telling a story, I usually use a lot of gestures to help get the point across.
- \_\_\_32. I often worry that people will misinterpret something I have said to them.
- \_\_\_33. I rarely show my anger.



- \_\_\_34. I can instantly spot a "phony" the minute I meet him or her.
- \_\_\_35. When in discussions, I find myself doing a large share of the talking.
- \_\_\_36. While growing up, my parents were always stressing the importance of good manners.
- \_\_\_37. I often touch my friends when talking to them.
- \_\_\_38. I dislike it when other people tell me their problems.
- \_\_\_39. At parties I enjoy talking to a lot of different people.
- \_\_\_40. I can be strongly affected by someone smiling or frowning at me.
- \_\_\_41. I am able to liven up a dull party.
- \_\_\_42. I sometimes cry at sad movies.
- \_\_\_43. I consider myself a loner.
- \_\_\_44. I am very sensitive of criticism.
- \_\_\_45. I dislike being the center of attention.
- \_\_\_46. I am easily able to give a comforting hug or touch to someone who is distressed.
- \_\_\_47. I enjoy going to large parties and meeting new people.
- \_\_\_48. It is very important that other people like me.
- \_\_\_49. I rarely show my feelings or emotions.
- \_\_\_50. I can spend hours just watching other people.
- \_\_\_51. I am unlikely to speak to strangers until they speak to me.
- \_\_\_52. I get nervous if I think someone is watching me.
- \_\_\_53. Friends have sometimes told me that I talk too much.
- \_\_\_54. I am often told that I am a sensitive, understanding person.
- \_\_\_55. I tend to be the "life of the party."
- \_\_\_56. I'm generally concerned about the impression I'm making on others.

- \_\_\_57. I never shout or scream when angry.
- \_\_\_58. When my friends are angry or upset, they seek me out to help calm them down.
- \_\_\_59. I could talk for hours on just about any subject.
- \_\_\_60. I am often concerned with what others are thinking of me.

<b>SECTION B: YOUR ASSESSMENT OF YOUR PARTNERS' SOCIAL</b>
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**Directions:** For **Section B** there are **sixty (60)** statements that indicate an attitude or behavior that may or may not be characteristic or descriptive of your partner. Read each statement carefully. Then, using the scale shown below, decide which response will most accurately reflect your answer and **write** the number in the direct left blank space of the statement.

Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. Mark only one response for each statement. It is important to try to respond to every statement.

**1** = Not At All Like My Partner **2** = A Little Like My Partner **3** = Like My Partner  
**4** = Very Much Like My Partner **5** = Exactly Like My Partner

- \_\_\_ 1. It is difficult for others to know when your partner is sad or depressed.
- \_\_\_ 2. When people are speaking, your partner spends as much time watching their movements as they do listening to them.
- \_\_\_ 3. Your partner enjoys giving parties.
- \_\_\_ 4. Criticism or scolding rarely makes your partner feel uncomfortable.
- \_\_\_ 5. Your partner talks faster than most people.
- \_\_\_ 6. Few people are as sensitive and understanding as your partner.
- \_\_\_ 7. It takes people quite a while to get to know your partner well.
- \_\_\_ 8. Your partners' greatest source of pleasure and pain is other people.
- \_\_\_ 9. When depressed, your partner tends to make those around me depressed also.
- \_\_\_ 10. At parties, your partner can immediately tell when someone is interested in me.
- \_\_\_ 11. Your partner loves to socialize.

- \_\_\_12. Your partner would much rather take part in a political discussion than to observe and analyze what the participants are saying.
- \_\_\_13. Your partner has been told that they have expressive eyes.
- \_\_\_14. Your partner is interested in knowing what makes people tick.
- \_\_\_15. Your partner prefers jobs that require working with a large number of people.
- \_\_\_16. Your partner is greatly influenced by the moods of those around them.
- \_\_\_17. Your partner usually feels uncomfortable touching other people.
- \_\_\_18. Your partner can easily tell what a person's character is by watching his or her interactions with others.
- \_\_\_19. Your partner always mingles at parties.
- \_\_\_20. There are certain situations in which your partner finds themselves worrying about whether they are doing or saying the right things.
- \_\_\_21. Your partner often laughs out loud.
- \_\_\_22. Your partner always seems to know what peoples' true feelings are no matter how hard they try to conceal them.
- \_\_\_23. Your partner usually takes the initiative to introduce themselves to strangers.
- \_\_\_24. Sometimes your partner thinks that they take things other people say to them too personally.
- \_\_\_25. Sometimes your partner has trouble making their friends and family realize just how angry or upset they are with them.
- \_\_\_26. Your partner can accurately tell what a person's character is upon first meeting him or her.
- \_\_\_27. Your partner is usually the one to initiate conversations.
- \_\_\_28. What others think about your partners' actions is of little or no consequence to them.
- \_\_\_29. Your partners' facial expression is generally neutral.
- \_\_\_30. One of your partners' greatest pleasures in life is being with other people.

- \_\_\_31. When telling a story, your partner usually uses a lot of gestures to help get the point across.
- \_\_\_32. Your partner often worries that people will misinterpret something they have said to them.
- \_\_\_33. Your partner rarely shows their anger.
- \_\_\_34. Your partner can instantly spot a "phony" the minute they meet him or her.
- \_\_\_35. When in discussions, your partner finds themselves doing a large share of the talking.
- \_\_\_36. While growing up, your partners' parents were always stressing the importance of good manners.
- \_\_\_37. Your partner often touches their friends when talking to them.
- \_\_\_38. Your partner dislikes it when other people tell them their problems.
- \_\_\_39. At parties your partner enjoys talking to a lot of different people.
- \_\_\_40. Your partner can be strongly affected by someone smiling or frowning at them.
- \_\_\_41. Your partner is able to liven up a dull party.
- \_\_\_42. Your partner sometimes cries at sad movies.
- \_\_\_43. Your partner considers them self a loner.
- \_\_\_44. Your partner is very sensitive of criticism.
- \_\_\_45. Your partner dislikes being the center of attention.
- \_\_\_46. Your partner is easily able to give a comforting hug or touch to someone who is distressed.
- \_\_\_47. Your partner enjoys going to large parties and meeting new people.
- \_\_\_48. It is very important to your partner that other people like them.
- \_\_\_49. Your partner rarely shows their feelings or emotions.
- \_\_\_50. Your partner can spend hours just watching other people.
- \_\_\_51. Your partner is unlikely to speak to strangers until they speak to them.

- \_\_\_52. Your partner gets nervous if they think someone is watching them.
- \_\_\_53. Friends have sometimes told your partner that they talk too much.
- \_\_\_54. Your partner is often told that they are a sensitive, understanding person.
- \_\_\_55. Your partner tends to be the "life of the party."
- \_\_\_56. Your partner is generally concerned about the impression they are making on others.
- \_\_\_57. Your partner never shouts or screams when angry.
- \_\_\_58. When your partners' friends are angry or upset, they seek your partner out to help calm them down.
- \_\_\_59. Your partner could talk for hours on just about any subject.
- \_\_\_60. Your partner is often concerned with what others are thinking of them.

Appendix B  
*Relationship Assessment Scale*  
 Hendrick (1988) and Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick (1998)

<b>SECTION C: YOUR ASSESMENT OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION</b>
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**Directions:** For **SECTION C** there are **seven (7)** statements that indicate an attitude or perception that you may have about how satisfied you are with your partner and your relationship. Read each statement carefully. Then, using the scale shown below, decide which response will most accurately reflect your answer and **circle** the letter in the direct left blank space of the statement.

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>Poorly</b>		<b>Average</b>		<b>Extremely well</b>

Please indicate your level of satisfaction by circling A or B or C or D or E for every statement.

1. How well does your partner meet your needs?  

A	B	C	D	E
Poorly		Average		Extremely well
2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?  

A	B	C	D	E
Unsatisfied		Average		Extremely satisfied
3. How good is your relationship compared to most?  

A	B	C	D	E
Poor		Average		Excellent
4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?  

A	B	C	D	E
Never		Average		Very often
5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations:  

A	B	C	D	E
Hardly at all		Average		Completely
6. How much do you love your partner?  

A	B	C	D	E
Not much		Average		Very much
7. How many problems are there in your relationship?  

A	B	C	D	E
Very few		Average		Very many

Appendix C  
Demographics

**SECTION D: DEMOGRAPHICS**

Finally, please provide some information about yourself. Please pick appropriately.

**GENDER:** Male\_\_\_ Female\_\_\_ Other\_\_\_

**AGE:** \_\_\_\_\_years

**RACE:**

African-American	Asian-American	Native American	
Hispanic	White	Other (Please specify)	

**Relational History:**

How many dating partners have you had in your lifetime?

\_\_\_1-3 \_\_\_4-5 \_\_\_6-9 \_\_\_10+

**Relational Status:**

\_\_\_Dating Only This Person \_\_\_Dating This Person and Others \_\_\_Engaged

\_\_\_Engaged and Living Together \_\_\_Cohabiting \_\_\_Married

**How long have you been dating your partner?**

\_\_\_1 – 3 months \_\_\_3.5 – 6months \_\_\_6.5 – 9months \_\_\_9.5 – 1year

\_\_\_1.5years+

**Are you sexually active with your partner?** Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_

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