Relationship Motivation: Applying Principles into Practice

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Motivation comprises of a complex interweave of personal choices, beliefs and interests joined with the social environment. The United States is part of a global culture that values the institution of romantic relationships and finding one's "soul mate." As a result, value, benefit and privilege are assigned to those that are in relationships and have indirectly assigned biases to those who are single (Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

Globally, most societies place a tremendous amount of pressure on people—men, women and those with non-traditional gender identities alike—to find a romantic counterpart (Charsley, 2013). Being single is often attributed to a flaw in character or a lack of effort, but considering principles of motivation such as personal choice, persistence, and values, provides a clearer picture of the underlying reasons for choosing to be single. These same principles affect whether or not a person chooses to end a relationship. Even in the face of overt abuse, some people find it difficult to leave a romantic relationship for a variety of complex reasons. Understanding the principles of motivation can help inform future research on whether the suggested steps presented in this article can actually lead people to finding healthy and fulfilling relationships.

The Principles of Motivation

Motivation either compels us to do something or not (Broussard & Garrison, 2004). Motivation can be broken down into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which can help explain many complex human behaviors, including the pursuit of romantic relationships. Intrinsic motivation is demonstrated by individuals who do something because of personal interest or enjoyment, while extrinsic motivation is based on the principal of reinforcement of one's behavior with a reward (e.g., money) (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

For starters, one's motivation to get out there to find love is shaped by some of the same factors common to all goal-seeking behavior.*Activation* occurs when an individual takes the first steps toward a goal (e.g., filling out an online profile for a dating website; Wright, 2008). It is often said that taking the first step to do something different is the most difficult. Continuing to move in the direction of one's goal is known as *persistence*(Wright, 2008). Being persistent means that an individual continues to work toward a goal even when roadblocks are encountered along the way (e.g., having a bad date, yetstill choosing to continue to date).

The *intensity* component of motivation refers to the level of energy and attention one employs to reach their goal(Wright, 2008). An individual who is determined to find a romantic relationship may approach this goal with vigor by creating an online dating profile, attending a speed dating event, and/or seeking out opportunities to interact with others.

Activation, persistence, and intensity are all influenced by one's sense of *self-efficacy*, or the confidence that an individual has about being successful at a task. Generally, the higher the level of self-efficacy (e.g., "I *will* succeed at having a great and loving relationship!") the better the chance for a successful outcome, whereas low self-efficacy is correlated with procrastination, making excuses, avoiding challenging tasks—like dating—and minimal effort (Covington, 1992).

Additionally, individuals who have better self-worth and a positive self-image are also more likely to be motivated in certain tasks (Covington, 1992). For example, individuals who believe they are competent in dating probably have better self-worth and are therefore more likely to take on romantic endeavors in general. It has also been shown that the more an individual feels they are in control (locus of control) of their own successes and failures, the more motivated they will be (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

In pursuing a romantic relationship with another person, it is impossible for the locus of control to remain with just one person because there are two (or more) people involved in that relationship. Therefore, individuals may feel less motivated to pursue romantic relationships because of the inevitable shift in control over the relationship (Gomillion & Murray, 2014).

For some single people, not taking a step to start a relationship (activation stage) may be a result of low self-efficacy, low self-worth, or a change in the locus of control as opposed to a lack of interest. The challenge of dating is more daunting for an individual who believes that they are not competent at the task and will not be successful with the process. Therefore, it is important to consider how one's perception of oneself—both in general and in the context of dating—can either promote or inhibit one's desire to find romance (Arriaga, 2013).

Where Self-Efficacy and Your Values Meet

The importance an individual places on finding a romantic partner is one of the most influential factors contributing to one's motivation to find a compatible mate. Expectancy-value theory explains that the intensity of behavior is a function of both self-efficacy, perceived competency, perception of the difficulty of the task, and the value of the goals (Eccles, Adler, Futterman, Goff, & Kaczala, 1983; Eccles, Adler, & Meece,1984; Meece, Wigfield,&Eccles,1990).Values not only affect how and why an individual enters into a romantic relationship, but how the individual operates once that relationship is established. For instance, some individuals with strong religious convictions may value the institution of marriage to such an extent that ending an unhealthy relationship seems to not be an option.

Individuals with higher self-efficacy tend to have increased motivation and success on the task they are engaging in (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). In other words, the more confident an individual is and the more highly that individual values the construct of a romantic relationship, the more that person will persist and apply effort towards achieving this goal. Even if one does not believe one will be successful at dating (low self-efficacy), they may still find themselves in the dating scene. This occurs only if the degree of motivation has a greater influence on a person's behavior than their perceived ability. Individual interest leads to persistence at a task, closer attention, ability to focus, and increased learning and enjoyment (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

However, goals can be important to an individual for different reasons, and much of this difference has to do with whether that individual is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. When someone does something because they enjoy it, is interested in it, or finds it pleasurable, this is called intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A person who enjoys forging new relationships in dating, or who places a lot of value on starting their own family is intrinsically motivated and therefore will be more persistent and intensive in their pursuit of a romantic relationship.

When an individual does something because they are seeking a reward (e.g., financial security, praise/validation, etc.) or is trying to avoid punishment, this is called extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).A good example of someone who is extrinsically motivated to be in a relationship is someone who enters a relationship solely motivated by monetary gain as opposed to interest in developing an interpersonal relationship. People who enter the dating scene motivated primarily by extrinsic rewards tend to not be as persistent at the task because many extrinsic rewards will diminish overtime and it has been shown that reducing rewards decreases intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001). Understanding whether the motivation underlying an individual's romantic pursuits is intrinsic or extrinsic can help one understand their value system as to why the relationship was sought out and even influence the type of relationships one may want to seek for the future.

Putting Principles into Practice

It is important to consider how understanding all the components of motivation defined above (e.g., activation, persistence, etc.) could inform future research studies on relationship motivation. A preliminary literature search addressing motivation in relationships demonstrated that there is limited research on the subject. Mental health providers, such as social workers and psychologists, who assist individuals seeking a romantic relationship, can incorporate the following four steps in treatment planning and providing clinical intervention.

Step One: Understand What the Client's Values and Goals are in Relation to a Romantic Relationship

Encouraging the client to write down their goals and mission statement may be a good way to process and organize what it is that the client really wants from a relationship.

Understanding the client's intrinsic motivation (e.g., the enjoyment of being in a partnership) and extrinsic motivation (e.g., financial security that comes from a union) can help create a clearer picture of how the client can achieve their relationship goals.

Step Two: **Examine Whether or Not the Client Believes They can be Successful at Starting a New Relationship**

Having the client highlight their personal strengths by journaling could help bolster the client's self-efficacy. As mentioned before, the more an individual believes they can accomplish something the more motivated and successful they will be at the task (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). Everyone has strengths that are often overlooked, so making the effort to identify them may positively affect the client's expectation of success in romantic relationships as well as other domains in life (Saleebey, 1996).

Step Three: **Develop a Positive Language Database or Mantra with the Client**

Again, journaling can be helpful here as well (Hiemstra, 2001). In this case, help the client remember positive events in their life and make a list of positive self-statements. It may also be helpful to come up with a mantra: a short statement or word that aids in concentration, focus or direction. A mantra could simply be the word "love" or the statement "I deserve to find happiness." Phrases like these can positively affect the client's self-efficacy and therefore increase the client's motivation.

Step Four: **Help Clients Seek Out an Environment that Supports their Goals**

It's important to ask clients what they may want from a partner and in what environment they are likely to meet that person. If your client is hoping to find a partner who shares similar religious or spiritual beliefs, then help the client brainstorm on where they are most likely to meet someone with these shared beliefs (e.g., church).

Step Five (Optional): **Assist Clients in Identifying Internal Roadblocks that May be Inhibiting Their Potential Relationships in Individual Therapy**

Helping clients to explore the underlying reasons associated with their motivation may hold the key to unlocking their future in love and in life.

Conclusion

This article suggests future research could examine the effectiveness of these outlined steps. It is proposed research participants could be given a series of self-report measures examining their relationship status, views, and motivation prior to being taken through the steps. After the mental health provider has taken the clients through the steps, these measures could be re-administered. The steps would be deemed successful not just if the client considers themselves to be in a happy romantic relationship, but also if their motivation to pursue a relationship has improved according to the scores on the self-report measures. Considering that many individuals across the globe desire some form of a romantic relationship at some point in their development, having an evidence-based or evidence-informed intervention to help clients achieve this goal could be beneficial for the mental health field and the overall lives of clients.

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